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Chapter 10

Is There a Theology of California?

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In a previous chapter,¹ I argued in favor of a localist approach to the work of systematic theology, and in particular to claim that such a thing was desirable in this particular locale, California. That chapter was an exploration of methodological possibilities, and in order to help expand the borders of what was plausible or at least conceivable in the area of California theology, I chose to engage in one extended case study from a parallel discipline: literary regionalism. The concreteness of literary experience and expression, the range and richness of California writing, was a great help in giving “a local habitation and a name” to the notion of a Californian theological imagination.

Now, while presupposing and (I hope) obeying the methodological constraints I put in place before, I would like to take a further step along that path by actually sketching out the broad outlines of a theological project that is recognizably Californian. And instead of enlisting literary studies as a dialogue partner, this time I would like to begin by engaging the field of philosophy.

The Higher Provincialism as a Golden State of Mind

I do not know who the most important California philosopher may be, but one figure does stand out as being both historically significant and self-consciously Californian: Josiah Royce (1855–1916). Indeed, if we are asking how a thinker can be formed by regional loyalties, Royce is the author of a classic, short work on the subject. His 1902 essay, “Provincialism,”² takes up this very question. Royce chooses the word “provincialism” for what we might now call “localism” or even, perhaps, “diversity.” He admits that in the essay he uses the

¹ “California, Localized Theology, and Theological Localism,” Chapter 2 of the present volume.

² Josiah Royce, “Provincialism,” in *Race Questions, Provincialism, and Other American Problems* (New York: Macmillan, 1908), 55–108. Though the book was not published until 1908, the essay itself was first delivered in 1902.

word provincialism “in a somewhat elastic sense,” as referring to “any social disposition, or custom, or form of speech or of civilization, which is especially characteristic of a province.” He puzzles briefly over whether a province can be precisely defined, but concludes that as long as a region is less than a nation and has some sense of cohesion, it deserves the name: “For me, then, a province shall mean any one part of a national domain, which is, geographically and socially, sufficiently unified to have a true consciousness of its own unity, to feel a pride in its own ideals and customs, and to possess a sense of its distinction from other parts of the country.”³

Royce was not only one of the most important theorists of this emphasis on the local, but he was also self-consciously Californian. As early as 1886 he wrote a history of the first few decades of the state of California,⁴ and returned to the theme several times in shorter writings.⁵ The same 1908 volume that featured his essay on provincialism also contained an interpretation of “The Pacific Coast,” which Royce noted was “that particular form of provincialism to which I, as a native Californian, personally owe most.”⁶

Seeking greater clarity on the nature of this provincialism which he was commending, Royce gave a fuller definition of it as:

an abstract term, to name not only the customs or social tendencies themselves, but that fondness for them, that pride in them, which may make the inhabitants of a province indisposed to conform to the ways of those who come from without, and anxious to follow persistently their own local traditions. Thus the word ‘provincialism’ applies both to the social habits of a given region, and to the mental interest which inspires and maintains these habits.⁷

Royce freely admitted that in certain phases of cultural development, provincialism was a negative impulse. In the Civil War, for instance, sectional loyalties and divisions needed to be subordinated to national, patriotic, and even federal unity. But by the opening of the twentieth century, according to Royce, things had changed. America had by this time a spiritual, indeed a metaphysical, need to cultivate local goods. “My thesis,” he argued, “is that, in the present state

³ Royce, “Provincialism,” 61.

⁴ Josiah Royce, *California, from the Conquest in 1846 to the Second Vigilance Committee in San Francisco: A Study of American Character* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1886).

⁵ For a discussion of all Royce’s historical work, see Earl Pomeroy, “Josiah Royce, Historian in Quest of Community,” *The Pacific Historical Review* 40 (1971), 1–20.

⁶ Royce, in *Race Questions, Provincialism, and Other American Problems*, vi.

⁷ Royce, “Provincialism,” 58.

of the world's civilization, and of the life of our own country, the time has come to emphasize, with a new meaning and intensity, the positive value, the absolute necessity for our welfare, of a wholesome provincialism, as a saving power to which the world in the near future will need more and more to appeal."⁸

It seemed to Royce that American life had already reached such a state of technological and cultural organization that a great, bland uniformity was beginning to set in. "I should say today that our national unities have grown so vast, our forces of social consolidation have become so paramount, the resulting problems, conflicts, evils, have been so intensified, that we ... must flee in the pursuit of the ideal to a new realm."⁹ It worried him that "we tend all over the nation, and, in some degree, even throughout the civilized world, to read the same daily news, to share the same general ideas, to submit to the same overmastering social forces, to live in the same external fashions." This was sure to "discourage individuality," he warned, "and to approach a dead level of harassed mediocrity."¹⁰ A nation the size of America was simply too large for individual action to make any difference, or for actual people to feel a part of. Royce used very evocative language to describe the way this outsized leviathan, too vast to be proportioned to any human scale, threatened human values. "The nation by itself, apart from the influence of the province, is in danger of becoming an incomprehensible monster, in whose presence the individual loses his right, his selfconsciousness, and his dignity. The province must save the individual."¹¹ He called on his readers to embrace and cultivate a sense of local community in order to stave off the generality of a monolithic national or cosmopolitan culture:

I hope and believe that you all intend to have your community live its own life, and not the life of any other community, nor yet the life of a mere abstraction called humanity in general. I hope that you are fully aware how provincialism, like monogamy, is an essential basis of true civilization. And it is with this presupposition that I undertake to suggest something toward a definition and defence of the higher provincialism and of its office in civilization.¹²

This "higher provincialism" was difficult for a philosopher to articulate in 1902. It is interesting that another powerful voice was calling for it, more imaginatively, at the same time: G.K. Chesterton's short novel on the subject,

⁸ Royce, "Provincialism," 62.

⁹ Royce, "Provincialism," 97.

¹⁰ Royce, "Provincialism," 74.

¹¹ Royce, "Provincialism," 98.

¹² Royce, "Provincialism," 67.

The Napoleon of Notting Hill, was published in 1904. Today we have any number of regionalist or localist writers and public philosophers. Much of Royce's description of the higher provincialism sounds like one of Wendell Berry's southern agrarian manifestoes, as when Berry describes a healthy small town as an extended membership that is "the center of its own attention."¹³ Here is Royce on the benefits of life in a backwater town:

A country district may seem to a stranger unduly crude in its ways; but it does not become wiser in case, under the influence of city newspapers and of summer boarders, it begins to follow city fashions merely for the sake of imitating. Other things being equal, it is better in proportion as it remains selfpossessed—proud of its own traditions, not unwilling indeed to learn, but also quite ready to teach the stranger its own wisdom.¹⁴

There is even a subterranean Royce influence on some of the great movements of social change in the course of America's twentieth century: Martin Luther King Jr related his civil rights ideals explicitly to the Roycean conception of "the beloved community" of mutually-connected interpreters, a kind of modified cosmopolitanism that is only possible as an expression of the higher provincialism.

More could be said about Royce's musings on the higher provincialism, especially as it bears on the actual history of California's self-awareness as a region. But I invoke him here just to suggest one philosophical angle on the value of a regional sensibility in even the most abstract of intellectual undertakings.

As for an application of such a higher provincialism, or a localization, of theology to the subject of California, that task is perhaps best thought of as somewhere between "A Theology of California" and "Theology from California." Those two phrases would encapsulate the two main emphases of such a project. The former, "Theology of California," indicates bringing theological reflection to bear on this entity which is California, to offer a theological account of its existence and character. The latter, "Theology from California," indicates that we're doing theological reflection about the usual subjects (for example, God, creation, providence, humanity, sin, redemption, church, eschatology, and others) in this particular location, intentionally cultivating resources that are Californian.

¹³ http://www.newsoutherner.com/Wendell_Berry_interview.htm (accessed December 15, 2013).

¹⁴ Royce, "Provincialism," 79.

California Accents in the Traditional *Loci* of Systematic Theology

Systematic theologians work with a standard set of topics, *loci communes*, which follow a traditional dogmatic order set more or less by the logical connections among the doctrines. These *loci* are not the peculiar property of any of the denominations or traditions within Christian theology, but are a shared heritage among all the churches and confessions that take up the task of theology. Particular confessional groups have disagreements among themselves regarding the content of some of these *loci*, but the list and its ordering are relatively uncontroversial. A theological mentality or school of thought, if it has the kind of purchase that actually pervades an entire system rather than merely requiring a special consideration of one of the doctrines, can be expected to show up in all or at least most of the *loci* of systematic theology. In the remainder of this chapter, I would like to assemble a few materials for working out California theology in each of these *loci*.

The Doctrine of Revelation

The question of how God takes the initiative to make himself known to human creatures is fundamental for any theology. The doctrine of revelation is sometimes subdivided between general revelation and special revelation. General revelation is said to be the way God reveals himself in universally-available structures of creation. California, with its exaggerated consciousness of the natural world, is sometimes inclined to hear the voice of God in nature, but that god who speaks through the landscape and weather of the Pacific Coast is notoriously nonspecific. Such a god is usually simply “the universe,” a deity some Californians talk about with a flatness that would make even Spinoza yearn for something more specific. The problem perhaps lies in the very category of “general revelation,” which presupposes that whenever created things testify of God, that testimony is to be understood as God’s own indirect speech, that is, revelation. Perhaps Christian theology in Californian categories would have incentive to call into question some of the received opinions about general revelation, and permit the emphasis to fall once again on special revelation, God’s word in Scripture. Materials for a Californian treatment of special revelation would call on many disciplines, but what would be especially interesting is a history of Bible interpretation in California, including how Scripture has been taken to support or challenge imperialism, Manifest Destiny, and westward expansion.¹⁵

¹⁵ Working on the doctrine of revelation also includes a number of methodological decisions. On these, see Chapter 2 of this present volume discussing theological localism and

The Doctrine of God

The aspect of the doctrine of God that matters most for a localist project is the idea of naming toward God analogically from experience. All cultures do this, and all cultures tend toward diffuseness and idolatry in doing so. Yet the basic movement of thought is perhaps unobjectionable and certainly unavoidable. Liberal theological method is already fully employed in speaking of a God of California culture, or in “naming toward the transcendent mystery” from this particular place. Such theologies will find the god they seek, as they always have. For Christian theologians who affirm that God can only be known where he has revealed himself authoritatively in Christ through the Scriptures, the whole project of theological localism is admittedly less urgent. But as California continues to develop as a self-conscious regional entity, theologians working here will increasingly speak and write as Californians, with or without self-awareness.

The Doctrine of Creation

Kevin Starr has noted how a certain awareness of the natural world is a constant theme in California intellectual, artistic, and cultural life:

A streak of nature worship—sometimes mawkish and sentimental, sometimes neopagan in its intensity, and, toward the millennium, frequently Zen-like in its clarity and repose—runs through the imaginative, intellectual, and moral history of California as a fixed reference point of social identity. A society that had consumed nature so wantonly, so ferociously, was, paradoxically, nature’s most ardent advocate.¹⁶

The respect for the natural world sits uneasily with a sense of the human role in shaping and using natural resources. In a state that has manipulated its water supply more impressively and productively than Rome or Holland, a theology of stewardship is crucial. Indeed, the point is that one or more such theologies are already operating unacknowledged. Probably every time the word “paradise” is invoked to describe the place, something eschatological is being conjured. California is usually called a paradise because of its great natural beauty, and its literature and culture are marked by an ecological awareness that runs from

the choice between the method of correlation on the one hand and kerygmatic theology on the other.

¹⁶ Kevin Starr, *California: A History* (New York: Random House, 2005), xiii.

John Muir's early conservationism (which he developed with constant use of religious metaphor, in gorgeous latter day King James English) to the host of recent Buddhist and New Age spiritualities. A theological account of creation developed in Californian terms is an obvious desideratum.

The Doctrine of Providence

The State of California came into being, as part of the US, under the influence of the strange doctrine of Manifest Destiny, as the dream of westward expansion and the vision of an empire "from sea to shining sea" pressed for realization. California's self-understanding has always been involved with a secularized doctrine of providence, and the conviction that God or the gods wanted this very development to happen. That secularized providence is indistinguishable from a latent cultural eschatology, whether developed in terms of "Continent's End" (the title of a Jeffers poem) or an acceleration toward the end of history.

The Doctrine of Anthropology

"What is California man, that thou art mindful of him?" the provincial theologian may ask God. For some observers, the human project seems to be particularly on display and at stake in California. If California is "America, only more so," and America is a focusing and radicalizing of most Western traditions and many Eastern ones, then the proper study of Californian mankind is man. As Josiah Royce pointed out in his "Pacific Coast" essay, a particular mindset is formed in California: "intimacy with nature means a certain change in your relations to your fellowmen. You get a sense of power from these wide views, a habit of personal independence from the contemplation of a world that the eye seems to own."¹⁷ This habit of personal independence is often manifested in an acute self-consciousness that what humans secrete is culture, and that they do it in order to further their purposes. If the modern project can be thought of as a self-fashioning enterprise, then it has entered a self-aware state in California, where selves fashion themselves on purpose to carry out their work. Some philosophers (for instance, Jaspers) have argued that the sort of self-transcendence that generates the urge toward self-fashioning is not in fact a modern trait, but goes back to that global meta-event known as the axial age. If so, the axial age may be thought to be taking a final turn at the leftmost edge of America.

¹⁷ Royce, *Race Questions, Provincialism, and Other American Problems*, 202.

The Doctrine of Sin

Polish-Lithuanian poet Czeslaw Milosz has hinted at a demonology of California, attempting to name the malevolent territorial spirits that have operated here from ages past. We do not need to embrace Milosz's demonology in order to develop a distinctly Californian doctrine of sin. Outsiders viewing California could easily fill in the elements of our hamartiology, and often do so. Joan Didion, without calling it sin, has explored this territory at some length, and has linked it to an equally anonymous notion of salvation. Josiah Royce, in the first truly critical history of California, considered the state to have developed its own unique original sin as a province: seizing political control of the land in an act of violence and sham legitimacy, when ownership and consolidation of the territory was all but inevitable anyway.

The Doctrine of Salvation

Several factors enter into the complex doctrine called soteriology. First there is a vision of the good life, an account of what properly flourishing human life should look like. Then after an account of how it is jeopardized or lost, there must be an account of the cost of its retrieval. For California, this story may take several forms, from the ecological to the political. When considered as a political question, the cost of restoring the good life can be seen in classic fictional discussions of justice like *The Oxbow Incident*, or in the news stories of Rodney King attempting to stop the Los Angeles riots with the hapless question of cheap atonement: "Can't we all just get along?" California's urban areas have given the clearest proofs since Aeschylus that the furies of a grieved and victimized people must be recognized rather than shrugged aside.

The Doctrine of Church

Has California actually evolved new forms of religious life? Does the old-world parish model of church ministry work here? What was the pattern of missions settlements and frontier settlements? Christianity was brought here with a definite intention for it to exert a civilizing influence; how has it done so? The *Christian* religion has enjoyed less official establishment in California than it has in most other parts of the US, being less integrated into city centers, educational institutions, and public life. What has been the effect?

The Doctrine of Eschatology

In the doctrine of the final things, it is clearer than elsewhere that California has generated disparate and contradictory materials for theological construction. There is on the one hand a paradisiacal vision of final blessing indistinguishable from the boosterism built into California's self-understanding, and on the other hand a persistent dystopianism and sense that this is where everything comes to die. From Robinson Jeffers's vision of "Continent's End"¹⁸ to Nathanael West's apocalyptic mob scenes in *Day of the Locust*,¹⁹ visions from the book of Revelation seem already to have made themselves at home on California's soil.

Theologies of the Californias?

What Royce graspingly called individuality we now know as diversity, and we have more of it than he could have imagined. Our radical diversity makes "a theology of California" pretty ambiguous. Some might say that, whereas Royce thought that America had so much national unity that we needed to cultivate provincialism, the situation a century later is reversed. We may have worn out our unifying structures. But about the benefits of a higher provincialism, an awareness of the blessings of the region, he was surely right. Framing a theology of California presupposes that there is such a thing as a single California, and it may be more reasonable to apply the tools of localism and the strategies of regionalism to the whole range of overlapping, irreducible, and finally diverse Californias: what we seek and find may be theologies of the Californias.

¹⁸ "Continent's End," in Robinson Jeffers, *Selected Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 4.

¹⁹ Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust* (New York: Modern Library, 1998).