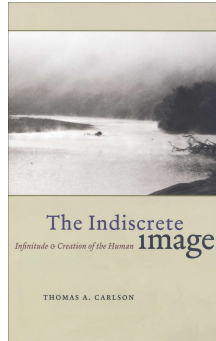


○ REVIEW OF THOMAS A. CARLSON, *THE INDISCRETE IMAGE: INFINITUDE AND CREATION OF THE HUMAN*

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Thomas Carlson's book is in some respects a sequel to his *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago, 1999), but I have not read that book and that did not seem to impair my reading of this one. Which is not to say that this book is an easy read. Indeed, it is a demanding book, requiring not only familiarity with ancient, modern, and postmodern theology and philosophy – as well as studies in the relation between contemporary technology, science, and culture – but also patience with sentences that ramble on far longer than even this one does. Nevertheless, this book well repays both the effort and the forbearance of the reader.

Carlson's book consists of six chapters, each of which plays out in detail different variations on a single central theme. That theme is that there is no 'human nature' as such, or that what defines us as human is precisely our lack of essential properties. Humans are, as Carlson notes on several occasions, 'neotenic,' perpetual children (pp. 4, 26, 78, etc.), and as a result we lack definition. The 'indiscrete' human being images an indiscrete God, and this is apparent particularly in human creativity. Because of the freedom that is another name for human indiscretion, and to compensate for this deficiency – for it is both a benefit and an insufficiency – we create traditions and technologies. Indeed, contrary to the claims of both religious conservatives and technology enthusiasts, there is no fundamental conflict between tradition and technology; for every tradition is an established technology, and technologies define the growth and form of tradition (a few examples: language, clothing, cooking). Carlson recognises that technology produces negative effects as well as positive ones, but he notes that traditions and beliefs about human nature also have their pluses and minuses, and often with the same result. The task is therefore not to choose between tradition and technology, but to understand fully the possibilities of both; especially now that humans have achieved immense technological powers, such as cloning, stem cell manipulation, and the extension or replacement of human body parts through prostheses and human thought and consciousness through computer and other networks.

In chapter one, Carlson introduces this theme of human indiscretion as human creativity, or 'negative anthropology,' as he also calls it. Martin Heidegger's well-known analyses of the relation between Dasein, representation, and technology are discussed and evaluated in light of relevant views from Mark Taylor, Michel Serres, and Katherine Hayles, as well as Pico della Mirandola. Particularly interesting are his brief discussions of Jorge Luis Borges's story, 'Everything and Nothing,' and Julio Cortázar's story, 'Axolotl.' Chapter two explores in more depth the pros and cons of Heidegger in comparison to Søren Kierkegaard's views on technology, with added insights from Jean-Luc Marion. In chapter three, Carlson argues that there is a fundamental connection between negative anthropology and Christian mystical theology as derived from Origen and Gregory of Nyssa in early Christianity and continued and developed further in the medieval and early modern writings of John Scotus Eriugena, Nicholas of Cusa, and Giordano Bruno.

Chapter four continues and deepens Carlson's examination of Marion's views, contrasted especially to those of Jean-Luc Nancy and again (now more extensively) Serres, as well as Pico and the theologians discussed in the previous chapter. Chapter five offers an analysis of James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, drawing upon Umberto Eco, Jacques Derrida, and Thomas J.J. Altizer, and with special reference to Giambattista Vico and Marshall McLuhan. Carlson describes the *Wake* as a text that both invokes and rewrites traditions in what is now widely seen as a cybernetic dream and celebration of an 'electronic humanity' (p. 183). Finally, chapter six returns again to the opening theme with further consideration of the dangers involved in both technology and tradition through examination of Robert Harrison's book, *The Dominion of the Dead*. The opportunities offered by the 'possible worlds' (p. 194) that come to birth through scientific knowledge come at the cost of new ethical challenges that result from the godlike powers that humans have gained. The book also includes brief 'Opening' and 'Closing' statements – in which Carlson first introduces and then recapitulates his argument – as well as extensive footnotes, a bibliography, and a subject/name index.

Carlson's arguments are well-developed and fascinating, but even as they open up a radical rethinking of both tradition and technology and deep questioning of any claims about 'human nature,' they foreclose alternatives that deviate from a perspective which might still be called Christian. Even though this book is not primarily about God or religion, reflections of and on God appear throughout it, and the profoundly religious notion of the human being, no matter how indiscrete, as the unique 'image' of a deity is crucial to the book as a whole. Although Carlson makes it clear that this deity is also indiscrete, both unnameable and incomprehensible, and the god of the *via negativa* of mystical practice and thought, implications are apparently inevitable. God is repeatedly described as creator, and according to Eriugena this God is conscious, even self-conscious (pp. 87, 90), like its human image. Self-consciousness may well be essential to indiscretion. Is God then personal? Carlson does not say so, but can there be self-consciousness without personality? Cusa understands human thought as 'endless movement into the divine' (p. 110), and while this offers an illuminating way to think of the advances of science and technology, it also considerably narrows our understanding of both divinity and humanity.

Apart from occasional excursions into historical, philosophical, or literary detail (in many respects the best parts of this book), Carlson's overall thesis is framed throughout in abstract and universal language. He is talking about all of humanity, every human being. Yet even if we grant that the human is 'indiscrete,' surely this does not entail that the word loses every specificity

of reference. One looks in vain here for any consideration of feminist, queer, or post-colonial concerns about 'the human.' All of these differences disappear. Likewise there is no hint of any non-Christian perspective, or interest in differences or relations between the religions. Indeed, despite frequent lip service to diversity, multiplicity, and polysemy, Carlson's argument finally favors convergence over divergence. Again speaking of Eriugena, Carlson states that

the scripture in which God reveals himself opens the way to an endless variety of possible readings, where *one meaning leads to the next* within an endless exegetical *transitus* toward the absolutely simple and inaccessible ground of all meaning... (p. 87, emphasis added).

Although 'endless variety' might suggest midrashic polysemy, this semiotic multiplicity is finally captured and funnelled (allegorically?) into the 'absolutely simple' and hence unitary (see p. 87, n. 25) divine reality. The incomprehensible, indiscrete deity is finally *monos theos*, and subject to the perils of exclusivist monotheism (see Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*). We are left with a postsecular understanding of postmodernity and posthumanity in which some voices have little part and others are excluded altogether. Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Lacan appear in Carlson's book only in passing, and Sartre, Foucault, Deleuze, and Baudrillard not at all. These are not decisive, but symptomatic. Although Carlson's perspective is an immanent one, it is not a materialist one.

This book does not directly concern the Bible. Carlson rarely cites and never discusses biblical texts, and like most theologians he generally treats the Bible uncritically (contrast his stimulating reading of Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* in chapter five, and even though he says there that 'the writer's Babel/babble of the *Wake* is also a kind of Bible' [pp. 160-161]). Nevertheless, despite and in contrast to his reference to 'scripture in which God reveals himself' (noted above), Carlson's analyses invite reconsideration of the Bible as a meaning-machine that interacts through vast networks (themselves rather indiscrete) with numerous other meaning-machines. As new technologies arise, older technology is itself redefined and reassigned to different functions, or it fades away. These machines extend consciousness and help to define human purpose and identity, not however in a movement converging upon divine unity, but instead in a movement defined much more by Joycean 'chaosmos' (p. 160). In a world that looks increasingly like some cyberpunk story come to life, we need to start thinking hard about the places available to human beings in it all (as anyone who has seen *Blade Runner* or even *Lars and the Real Girl* will tell you), and that inevitably entails serious reconsideration of the ongoing role of the Bible in human cultures and technology. This book deserves the attention of any biblical scholar who is interested in this question of the future of the Bible.