X Marks the Spot: Crosshatching Life/TeXt

by

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One can easily cast this book aside—if one is looking for a quick fix. It “is contrived to be read up, down, backwards and at diagonals as well as across.” Its off-putting deconstructive style does not make for easy reading. Its ellipses, close reasoning, and dense weave of citations from world literature, Asian and European philosophy, Buddhist and Christian theology produce a more complicated teXt than some readers may want to negotiate. But if one reads *On Deconstructing Life-Worlds* meditatively, with a mind open to the uneXpected twists and turns that often baffle human rationality and eXperience, Magliola’s cosmopolitan wordplay and original thinking will reward one with many insights and delights.

In her “Preface,” Edith Wyschogrod mentions that Magliola’s previous work, *Derrida on the Mend*, had broken new ground for Christian theology and inter-religious dialogue through its eXploration of the intersections between Derrida and Nagarjuna. The author’s even earlier book, *Phenomenology and Literature*, had been equally ground-breaking for intersections between Heideggerian philosophy and literary criticism. *On Deconstructing Life-Worlds* builds from these foregoing publications; it also enters into an entirely new project of “postmodern life-writing.”
The historian Gerda Lerner has written, "My craft and my profession are inseparable from the road I have come and the life I have led." Magliola could say the same. Life's text marks this text more patently than any of his previous publications. Lerner, to link life and scholarship, has organized her essays in *Why History Matters* so that they "move in rough sequence from the personal to the professional" (Demos 20). Magliola, for his part, has structured his disparate essays by way of a "fourcornered logic" that produces one big crosshatching:

**PART ONE**

(1) His old life

(4) Differentialism: Buddhist-Christian dialogue/Trinitarian theology

**PART TWO**

(2) His new life (dissolutions and conversions)

(3) Double-Binds: Derrida (early/late) and Buddhism

What crosshatching does is to place under erasure; it "constitutes samenesses' by way of differences." Part One X-es out "logocentric conventions;" Part Two does the same-with-a-difference. In Part One—the life-writing—both life and text move on by a series of "connections and garbles, punctuated ... by chance and blindness and dissociated effects." A "ludic thread" runs through the "assymetries and loops and rifts" that reflect life's "opaqueness," with little "factual context." In Part Two—a "formal
disquisition on the philosophies/religions... both assumed and produced in Part One"—Magliola marvelously appropriates Derridean traces "in terms that cut-across Buddhist ones" and "enable some points of Christian theology to be differently rethought." Yet here his style remains for the most part within "logocentric conventions."

Magliola’s life and text are truly interdisciplinary. His fertile reading in literatures East and West cross-fertilizes his life-experiences. Literary text enlightens/darkens life-text, and life-text decodes literary text. However, the citations and allusions from a broad range of literatures and sacred scriptures which enliven Part One nearly fade away in Part Two. There, more dominant is the theoretical "differentialism" which developed out of the painful "falling-apart... of putative holisms" in his personal, religious, and professional lives and out of his studies of Carmelite prayer, Zen practice, Jacques Derrida’s philosophy, the Judeo-Christian scriptures, and the Buddhist Madhyamika tradition. Magliola’s intense search ultimately led him back to a deeper Catholic faith through the unlikely path of deconstructive practice that many label as "nihilistic." Out of his life-writing, then, he is able to propose a meditative practice for those in similar binds, an ethics of reconciliation, a gracious approach to cross-cultural life and inter-religious dialogue, a mystically fresh and mind-expanding trinitarian theology.

In Part One, a half-dozen hexagrams from the I Ching "mark several points in the text" without much commentary. These generally introduce significant movements of his inner life. The first, "HeXagram 36: Darkening of the Light," signals Magliola’s entry into a Jesuit seminary and the consequent "dark night" which he experienced. Later, "HeXagram 23: Disintegration" (prefacing a weight regimen), "HeXagram 21: Biting Through" (introducing his first publications), and "HeXagram 58: Joyousness" (found in raising his three children and becoming a Carmelite tertiary) follow each other in quick succession. "HeXagram 47: Oppression" marks his departure from his mismatched marriage and American university life for Taiwan. Much later, "HeXagram 50: The Cauldron" marks the facing of his shadows within the context of Chinese culture.

There is humor, lyricism, and poetic energy in Magliola’s life-writing. His mystic experience in prayer as a teenager he calls "a beginner’s piddling." Still pained at having to give up his dream of priesthood, he asks God, "How could you? Swoosh your cleaver, You crosshatcher of hearts!" Still smarting from his failed relationship with his wife, he expresses deep love, joy, and pride in their three children, "the beautiful Easter-flowers of our own long Long Lent." A comical putdown of university solemnities looks like computerese: "bk...conf...arts... prs@intl.conv...cochr:doct.prog.phil... &lit... stud.eval.tching v.gd...promo."
assoc.prof.' ...rah!-rah!...rah-rah! rah-rah...bray...bray...bray...bray...bray...bray...pouf! pouf!

Much good writing (and support in his life) also flows from his literary appropriations. With Apollinaire’s “La Paon,” Magliola mischievously unveils the derrières of his W.A.S.P. Ivy League professors who presumed that their peacock strut was fulfilling a “national role.” Poe’s “Bells, bells, bells, bells” becomes “Bills, bills, bills, bills” as his growing family enters the mortgaged American dream. When their marriage frayed at the edges, Robert and Rose rolled “down the hill together” like Donald Barthelme’s “Balloon Man and Pin Lady.” A citation from Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland about the Tortoise who taught “Reeling and Writhing” parodies the “Old Boys’ Network” that controls book publication. To present a major falling-apart in his life indirectly, Magliola appropriates a passage from Herman Melville’s Moby Dick where Pip, after surviving his harrowing eXperience in the sea, talked a divine sense that looked like madness to his shipmates. On the saddest days of Magliola’s intense search in Taiwan, he made his own Lao Tzu’s famous lines: “Heaven and Earth are ruthless; / For them [all things] are but as straw dogs.”

A splendid interpretation of Flannery O’Connor’s “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” (127-30) brings Part One to a conclusion. In Magliola’s reading, the story reveals “the mysterium of God-as-Chiasm.” The “‘Freak-show’” hermaphrodite, who becomes linked to Christ exposed/hidden in the Blessed Sacrament, is an “emblem of God’s Divine out-and-indwelling.” Christians, “called to Christ’s differential way,” to be one as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one, “must build their unity by way of ‘difference’, not ‘sameness’.” The hermaphrodite, in his/her double-bind of yin and yang, “does not ‘dispute’” God’s creation. Through the workings of the story, s/he reveals God as Bind/Double-Bind and signs God’s Love for “the world’s suffering Displaced.” We are all “out-of-place.” Logocentrism, which tries to put everything in its place, is not God’s teXt.

In a boldly Derridean and postmodern meditation on Christ crucified, Magliola demonstrates that the cross decenters. He notes the marks on Jesus: the “cleft in the side, the four punctures, the back hatched-in-blood, the hatched xxx-crownet on the brow.” Magliola also describes his becoming a Carmelite tertiary with wonderfully succinct, deconstructive images. On the scapular that he now wears front and back, the motto “Zelo zelatus sum pro Domino Deo nostro” shows “only s/m” of the word sum [Latin: I am]; the u lies hidden in a fold. The old and cracked painting of Ancient/Postmodern Mary presents “[h]er Brown Robe... criss-crossed with jagged lines my soul can feel.”

At midpoint, Magliola writes of an awakening during his ninth year in
Taiwan that planted in him the seeds out of which this present text has grown. He awakened from the expectation that justice “would perceptibly make the events in my Life-World fairer, more equitable, or even God’s apparent dealings with me fairer, more equitable.” Most significantly, he woke to the realization that Binds and Double-Binds constitute the only phenomenological descriptions that make sense-for-me out of my life” and out of history’s “unspeakable injustices.”

Following this insight, Magliola’s life/text can now be seen as “a meandering or ‘errant’ going-on of binds and double-binds.” “[R]elative closure” sometimes happens, but the binds or double-binds “reassert themselves,” in both private and public history. Whether Bind contains “the logic of the Catch-22” or “the logic of the Möbius-strip” (a twist where desire thwarts its own fulfillment), it can be eXpressed by the two directions in which his “rational mind” and “Christ-faith” pulled him: “It was a Bind that put my personhood on a Cross.” There he could identify with Gerard Manley Hopkins when he says, “Christ’s ‘work was done by being broken-off undone,’ that is, by being thwarted.”

When Magliola was searching for a “more radical approach to life” than that offered by current rationalistic Western theologies or the watered-down philosophies of modern American culture, he found it in Derridean deconstruction. It is important to realize that this was never just “a fashionable trend” for him, but rather an “authentic way of doing philosophy” and his means of survival. When Magliola came to study the Buddhist Madhyamika school, which “deconstructs personal identity and indeed any holistic formula,” he found that Derridean deconstruction confirmed non-centric Buddhism.
Out of this intersection, Magliola moved into the development of his own deconstructive theology “to serve religious practice.” This should not be forgotten. Magliola’s interest is not in abstract formulation for its own sake, but in religious thought that is life-giving because it is grounded in meditation and truthfulness to life-experience. He is convinced that deconstruction can help rebuild the Church-in-Change through its eXposure of the inadequacy of the true against the Divine reality. An appropriation of Derridean thought can deflate the arrogance of a speculative theology too quick with its absolute answers. Thus, Magliola’s work with Derrida has turned more and more from literary and philosophical hermeneutics to religion.

By now it should be quite apparent that this book can be of special interest to many different kinds of readers. Out of the painful eXperience of his own seminary life and his contact with Buddhist “orthopraXis,” Magliola advances some recommendations that deserve contemplation by church leaders and seminary directors (15-19). Out of his dissatisfaction with the entrepreneurial approach that has overtaken American academic life, Magliola writes a commentary that deserves reading by academics in all situations (57-63). Theologians would do well to consider Magliola’s critique of how various Western theologies current in the past few decades fail to feed faith and praXis (69-71). An eXtended comparison of American and Chinese culture in Taiwan (80-94) should be required reading for ethnocentric Americans, but will also reward reading by students of culture in general.

In particular, Magliola offers a specific method of meditation (112-27), a form of “mystic non-rational/off-rational prayer,” that is likely to appeal to a broad range of readers. The practice is based upon his belief that “whatever beneficent ‘sameness’ comes from Buddhism and Christianity is constituted precisely by their mutual difference as religions.” Under certain conditions presented quite concretely, theists and non-theists can meditate together. Moreover, Magliola reveals his all-embracing loving-kindness by suggesting various “ROUTAGES” for the (philosophical) materialist, the dual-practitioner (one who takes benefit from the differences between Buddhist and Christian meditation forms), and the Christian (120-27).

Though under erasure, traces of the life-writing that fill the first two-thirds of this book shine through at many points in the four essays of Part Two, where Magliola takes up the issues of “Double-Binds” in Derrida and in the Buddhist Madhyamik tradition, the “problematic of ‘negative theology’” raised in Derrida’s “Dénégations,” a “keynote teXt” in the current Buddhist-Christian dialogue, and the Christian doctrine of the Blessed Trinity in the light of Derridean and Buddhist thought.

In Section i, “(Derrida’s) Double-
Binds and the Prasangika-Madhyamika,” Magliola argues that Derrida’s notions of “logocentrism” and “differentialism” approximate the famous Nagarjunaist “doctrine of the Two Truths.” However, Derrida’s text lacks, in Magliola’s opinion, the “wisdom which is ‘other-than-from-reason-alone’ . . . [which] can only come from (1) non-clinging and (2) meditative practice.” In this essay, Magliola also marks the philosophical and theological motivations for his “East-West work,” useful for further assessment of his project.

In Section ii, “Double-Binds and (Derrida’s) ‘Dénégations,’” Magliola disagrees with those who simplistically see in “Derrida’s most direct engagement yet with ‘negative theology’” a clear movement towards belief in God. While indicating how Derrida has changed in his attitudes towards traditional negative theology, Magliola also points out the difficulty of retrieving Derrida’s intention with these changes, especially because of the ways in which he “subverts” and double-binds his own text. Magliola’s conclusion is that in “Dénégations,” Derrida is probing “the equivocating status of the fourth lemma” and seems to side with “[o]scillation. Between neither this—nor that.” As Buddhism has been doing for a long time.

In Section iii, “Differentialism and the Buddhist-Christian Dialogue,” Magliola argues that the important Buddhist-Christian dialogian Masao Abe is not attending to Buddhism’s “radical difference from traditional Christianity/Judaism.” Moreover, he is advancing a version of Yogacara too commodious of the logocentric “Absolute” and of “oneness” just when “Western history is entering a deconstructive moment.” To oppose Abe’s “displaced holism,” Magliola returns to the “paradox of the double-bind” presented in his life-writing. In conclusion, Magliola writes: “Already there are, perhaps, deconstructionists who begin to know that in the negative overlap, devoid happenings [“empty” but ‘there’] go-on.”

This conclusion and Magliola’s analysis of Abe’s understanding of the Christian God take on new significance in Section iv, “Differentialism and Trinitarian Theology.” To my mind, this essay is the most brilliant and original offering of the entire book, not to be ignored by anyone seriously committed to Christian faith. With one stroke from Derrida, another from Conciliar theology—both “for ‘pure negative reference’”—Magliola crosshatches “some Conciliar definitions of the Most Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit.” He thus discovers that “the theology of the Blessed Trinity” hatches “a Divine Glitch” which “figures as a Clue to how God and the world go-on.”

Magliola has gained from Derrida an unflinching trust in the positive power of “logic-under-erasure, i.e., logic self-deconstructing (not self-destructing),” once it abandons all “defense-mechanisms.” He also believes that
Christianity must be willing to “test everything,” as St. Paul says in I Thes. 5:21, even that which it finds “uncomfortable.” In this spirit, he looks “right here/there in the Christian tradition” and concludes that “Christianity’s Blessed Trinity is not holistic, but goes-on quite otherwise.” He states further that “pure negative reference has been ‘crypted’ into Christian theology for a long time,” but “has never really been decoded in terms of deoidness.”

In the Unity of the Triune God, “Persons relate in terms of pure negative reference. Somehow the Father (for exaExample) is purely not the Son” and “what they ‘would’ share has instead gone over to the Unity.” In the Conciliar model, “[t]he kenoses raising the Divine Unity are devoid, and the Unity and the Three Persons are not interchangeable.” This operates crosswise to Masao Abe’s holistic model of the Triune God (Unity = Trinity) (\(-A = +A\)). As for how the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son “as from one principle,” Magliola argues that the Derridean “Signified-Signifier dyad Which-is-always-already-Three operates as the best clue (towards understanding the Processio) that 20th century philosophy has hatched.”

The “wonderfully Divine ‘glitch’” that Magliola locates “in the Conciliar theology of the Triune God” is that the ‘one principle’ would appear to be a fourth Person.” While Christian “theology has long insisted that this Active Spiration (of Father and/with Son) . . . is virtual, not real,” the Councils have been just as insistent that “the Passive Spiration [of the Holy Spirit] is real.” Magliola thinks that “the equivocating status [of the Active Spiration] works more like a Derridean double-bind, and is very fruitful when taken as such.” The Active Spiration can be considered as Double-Bind by way of its negative overlaps: virtual, “and thus not a Person;” not part of the Unity shared by all; “neither Personhood nor Divine Unity,” and “thus a privileged clue to the Difference between them. That is, to the Difference ‘within’ the Triune God. Somehow, in negative overlaps and non-holistically does the happening of God perpetually go-on.”

Magliola goes on to remind us that even in traditional theology the Divine Person cannot be equated with our notion of human person. Here his “differential theology” makes another contribution to our understanding. Karl Rahner and Raimundo Pannikar have already remarked on the Christian need for “a theology of the ‘impersonal’ in God.” Magliola responds by explaining in concise, clear prose how the imPersonal, the Personal, and the impersonal/personal intertwine within the Triune God.

Differential theology proposes that “God is better served by the notion of alterity than stasis.” This confirms the vision of the differential mystics that “the Burning Bush, unquenchable, is all afire for sure, but all atange at the same
time.” Drawing upon this Divine Model in his last words, Magliola indicates its relevance for our daily living and for inter-religious dialogue. Only by marking and respecting our differences shall we too become one—and so “help to heal the world.”

Originals can easily enough be rejected as eccentrics because they disturb our pieties and challenge us to re-think our positions. In On Deconstructing Life-Worlds, Magliola has shared with us his love of God and of Learning, his passion for justice, his devotion to the Church despite its crucifixions, his reconstruction of life-experience to find unmeaning. Now that he has given us such a stimulating, grace-filled entrée into the theology of Binds and of the Blessed Trinity, I would like to see what would happen if he would turn his attention to the theology of Joy and of the Risen Christ. In any case, by entering into the kind of Thinking and Non-Thinking proposed here, we readers can perhaps find borders opened that we had presumed closed. Thus, the differential God may become more visible in this fractured world.

A few further remarks may still be in place. In a second edition of this book, it would be desirable to create a Glossary of Sanskrit terms. Although Magliola translates each Sanskrit word on its first appearance, for the non-specialist that is not really sufficient. There is an Index, however, and it is quite useful, especially in tracing the many disseminations that scatter through the text. The attractive cover design also invites reflection: cracked images of Christ and Buddha, traces of each superimposed upon the other yet both remaining clearly distinct, bordered in unmixed Christian crimson and Buddhist saffron.

Some Chinese reviewers of this book have wondered whether the unusual Chinese character that appears at its end (191) is a creation of the author himself. I am informed that the source for this Chinese Ch’ an character is Isshu Miura and Ruth Fuller Sasaki’s The Zen Koan (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1965), 67, 82. It is composed of the character for “strength” inside an “enclosure,” here representing the Tathagatha-womb. Nowadays, this character is used exclusively in Japanese Zen and represents the shout of satori (Ka! or Ga!), for Buddhism the “Great Death to Egoism.” A fitting shout with which to close this book.

Work Cited