

DONATELLA IZZO

Opening Remarks

First of all, I wish to welcome all of you on behalf of Centro Studi Americani and of AISNA (the Italian Association of North-American Studies). And I wish to thank all our distinguished guests for finding the time to squeeze us into what we know to be very busy schedules, and all of the students present here, who have chosen to attend this seminar at a time that we know to be possibly the busiest and most hectic one for students at Italian universities – a choice that we take as a sure sign of their dedication to American Studies, and perhaps also in some way a compliment paid to the outcome of our efforts in putting together this program. And, talking about efforts, I wish to thank the whole Board of AISNA, and particularly professor Giorgio Mariani, the AISNA secretary, and professor Daniele Fiorentino, who jointly proposed the topic for this year’s seminar and acted as its scientific committee. And I wish to thank Dr. Karim Mezran, the Director of Centro Studi Americani, for his unfailing support and enthusiasm, as well as for the contribution of his competence in this specific field. And finally – or rather, last but not least – I wish to thank the director of cultural programs, Giusy De Sio, and the staff of Centro Studi Americani for their invaluable and ever smiling contribution to the actual organization of the Seminar.

The original inspiration for this Seminar came from an issue of *PMLA*, published in May 2005, which among other things featured a long, thoughtful, and provocative essay by Bill Brown and a number of responses to it. The essay, titled “The Dark Wood of Postmodernity (Space, Faith, Allegory),” was an astute

reading of Fredric Jameson's well known analysis of the Bonaventure Hotel in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* as an allegory of the perceptive and cognitive bewilderment induced by postmodernism. In drawing a parallel and in tracing an actual intellectual continuity between Jameson's reading of postmodernism in the light of the totalizing narrative of Marxism, and Dante's allegorical wandering from the "dark wood" to Heaven in the light of an equally totalizing Tomistic Christianity, Brown sought to unveil the enduring presence of the premodern in the modern and the postmodern, as "a case study in wondering whether it is not so much secularism as an internalization of religion ... that renders faith unperceptible (which is to say transcodable)" (747). In other words, Brown used his analysis of Jameson's allegorizing as a vantage point to critique the prevalent narrative of modernity and modernization as inevitably coincident with secularization, by showing how this narrative has assimilated, rather than superseded, religion as a metadiscourse. As Brown notes, most commentators, and notably Slavoj Žižek, have insistently suppressed the religious dimension of the events of September 11, 2001 and transcoded this dimension into secular terms as the mere displacement of economic and political issues, thus showing the difficulty of much contemporary thought in adequately accounting for political and social phenomena that contradict its a priori and foundational distinction between religion and reason, religion and politics, religion and the state.

On the other hand, a number of contemporary episodes in the social, the cultural, and the political sphere converge in suggesting that religion, far from being a residual formation, is (as Rey Chow notes in her response to Brown) "part of the *current* (rather than past or primitive) state of humanity" (785) – and not just in the Islamic countries as represented in the West's recurrent strategies of "othering." One needs only recall the role of religion in the United States elections of 2004, or, on a different but in some ways even more troubling plane, the recent declarations of the

manager, the general manager, and the owner of the Colorado Rockies (a baseball team in the National League West), who in last Wednesday's issue of *USA Today* unanimously stated their shared conviction that God "is using us in a powerful way," and that the games they are winning "aren't just a coincidence. God has definitely had a hand in this." And even in Europe, the French debate on the Islamic veil, or the Italian struggles over family policies, gay marriage and adoption, medically assisted procreation, and the ethics of scientific experimentation, all testify to the powerful re-emergence of religion as a social and political factor whose impact cannot be just ignored or disclaimed.

Perhaps, then, we should, however belatedly, undertake the task of deconstructing the binary religion/secularization, and inquire whether religion may not be the abjected Other in the discourse of modern humanities – the repressed, devalued Other in the teleological narrative of the emergence of enlightened secularization (that is, tolerance, democratic co-existence, self-questioning humanism) from the darkness of religious fanaticism. A narrative that forecloses the question of religion in secular, and particularly in leftist thought, ignoring the extent to which the emergence of secularism needs itself to be historicized (see Stathis Gourgouris, quoted in Chow, 875). Intellectual contributions as diverse as Jameson's *A Singular Modernity*, Žižek's *On Belief*, Michel Onfray's *Traité d'athéologie*, Rey Chow's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, or Joan Didion's "Mr. Bush and the Divine" (the latter, incidentally, soon to be published in Italian in the American Studies journal *Acoma*), all bear witness to the current effort of taking up religion again as an issue to be seriously engaged in contemporary critical thought. In his 1983 book *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Edward Said offered a well-known distinction between "secular" and "religious" criticism, a distinction which, though predicated on the same binary that we should attempt to deconstruct, may be of use here. To Said, "religious" criticism was the criticism that

deferred to organized dogma and to the authority of orthodoxy and established discourse. If, on the other hand, secular criticism is, in Said's words, "always situated; it is skeptical, secular, reflectively open to its own failings" (26), then, one might argue, opening our thought to our failure to address religion is, paradoxically, an urgent task if we want to become more secular. The Seminar we are opening today is meant as a small step in that direction.

WORKS CITED

- Brown, Bill. "The Dark Wood of Postmodernity (Space, Faith, Allegory)." *PMLA* 120.3 (May 2005). 734-50.
- Chow, Rey. "Epistemologically Disenfranchised?" *PMLA* 120.3 (May 2005). 874-5.
- . *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Columbia UP, 2002.
- Didion, Joan. "Mr. Bush and the Divine." *The New York Review of Books* 50:17 (6 November, 2003).
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991.
- . *A Singular Modernity. Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. London and New York: Verso, 2002.
- Onfray, Michel. *Traité d'athéologie: Physique de la métaphysique*. Paris: Grasset, 2005.
- Said, Edward. *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1983.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *On Belief. (Thinking in Action)*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.