INTRODUCTION
Rethinking the Medieval Legacy for Contemporary Theology

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There is no lack of problems, both theoretical and practical, facing contemporary Christian theology. Of all the sciences or disciplines theology is perhaps the most vulnerable to the challenges brought about by social and historical changes because it has to speak about all things according to the logic of God or, as Aquinas put it, sub ratione Dei. Any significant changes in any significant area of human life are eo ipso challenges to theology because they pose questions about the ultimate significance of human dignity, human solidarity, and human destiny. There are no significant human questions that are theologically indifferent and neutral.

In responding to these questions, however, Christian theology has the cumulative wisdom of the millennia and centuries of experience in Christian communities to draw on. Theology is not left to the individual resources of the isolated theologian, no matter how great these might be, or to his or her individual roles, no matter how important these often are. To a degree far surpassing all other disciplines theology is an endeavor of a believing community with its supra-individual norms and funds of teaching, reflection, and insight. The role of a living tradition in a broad sense is absolutely decisive even if
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its authoritative definition will always remain controversial. The historical community as a community of shared tradition provides the context for the origination, testing, and reception of all theological developments.

The contemporary world has been raising many issues and challenges to which no serious theologian can remain indifferent, from evolution to ecology to social justice to interreligious understanding to the problem of “horrendous” suffering to the possibility of authentic existence and the possibility of knowing God at all. We also know how theologians have been responding to these challenges over the past century. Most often theological responses have been based on accepting new insights from current philosophies and the social and natural sciences and applying a systematic suspicion to the entire tradition of the believing communities. Tradition as such is often regarded as the chief source of oppression and violence. No one today would defend the tradition in its entirety against the legitimate criticisms and demands of contemporary humanity. It is no wonder that much contemporary theology seeks to be new as distinct from the traditional and to be liberating as distinct from the oppressive.

Given the long-standing self-understanding of Christianity as a living community of tradition, this trend in much contemporary theology is worrisome at least for two reasons, lack of self-criticism and loss of Christian identity. First, it is uncritical mindlessness to ignore the fact that contemporary discoveries and insights also come loaded with peculiarly contemporary prejudices containing their own ideological sources of oppression and violence. We are compelled to critically reflect on the sheer provincialism and shortsightedness of many contemporary intellectual fashions and trends before we theologians rush to “deconstruct” the Christian tradition in light of them. An intellectual movement comes on the horizon with claims to novelty, totality, and radicality and fades into the dustbin of history after a thorough deconstruction by another new movement about thirty years later. It is time that we should all be more sensitive to the historicity of our ideas and the inevitable ideological temptations they conceal.

Second, the first requirement of Christian theology as Christian is not novelty or originality; the originality of a theology may testify
to the creativity of the theologian but not necessarily to its Christian identity. A theology may be quite original, but it may also cease to be Christian at all. The Christian identity of a theology lies in its fidelity—which must be creative, if you will—to the enduring tradition of the Christian community, whose founding insights and commitments have developed and enriched themselves through the centuries. Some theologies are found more enduring in their Christian insights and appeal than others, and ideas with a certain universality of such insights and appeal are called “classics” (Tracy). Which of the competing contemporary theologies will prove classical and join the living tradition of the community is precisely for history to tell. For Christian theology the age of the Fathers is one such “classical” period insofar as it is through them that most of the Christian doctrines, still accepted by mainstream Christianity, took their definitive shape, from the Trinitarian to the Christological to the doctrine of sin and grace.

I have been wrestling with the concrete problems of praxis, liberation, and globalization as posed by contemporary social changes while also sensitizing my theological eyes through social and political theories that have exposed these problems. I have discovered the ideological character and shortsightedness of much modern thought while also rediscovering the wisdom of the classical tradition, from the Cappadocians and Augustine to Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa. Returning to the insights of the classical tradition did not mean shedding all the valuable insights I have learned from modernity or abandoning the theological sense of problems facing the contemporary world. Modern criticism has made it impossible to accept any tradition including the classical without some dose of suspicion. The classical tradition has made it impossible to accept modernity with its anthropocentric arrogance. It was quite natural, therefore, to pose the question, What are some of the insights of the classical tradition that will help us to cope with our very contemporary problems, fully knowing that those insights have to be discerned and developed in order to prove their relevance to the very concrete problems of our time?
Limiting myself to the Middle Ages, I thought to myself, what if I organized a conference on the theme “Rethinking the Medieval Legacy for Contemporary Theology” for the purpose of retrieving and developing some of the medieval theological and spiritual resources as aids for coping with the challenges facing contemporary theology. What can we learn from medieval theology, spirituality, and culture for theological work today? I sent out a call for papers on this rather general topic to some of the most respected theologians writing today. I left each free to choose any contemporary issue he or she finds compelling as well as any medieval insight that is fruitful in dealing with that issue. The only condition was that participants produce a genuine encounter between an important medieval insight and a compelling contemporary issue. Six distinguished theologians accepted my invitation, with whom I matched six outstanding graduate students from the Department of Religion of Claremont Graduate University as respondents. The result was the exciting conference held at Claremont Graduate University on April 16–17, 2010.

Readers will readily agree, I think, that the problems chosen for discussion are among the compelling ones of our time. How should we conceive of the relation between the recipient of an organ and its donor? Will the medieval theology of perichoresis and communion of saints provide a clue? How should we deal with so many of the horrendous evils that exist today? Will the medieval theology of divine friendship help? What do we do with the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation, with its often scandalous tendencies to debunk all traditional theological interpretation? Will medieval exegesis, with its four senses of scripture and its practice of reading scripture with the tradition, provide a way out? Are the possibilities of authentic human existence limited by radical facticity, individuality, and finitude, as Heidegger claims, or are they radically open as all finitude is subject to the possibilities of creation out of nothing? Will the rediscovery of a theology of creation in Aquinas help us overcome the crisis of Heideggerian authenticity of existence? Nothing seems more urgent for peace today than the mutual theological understanding of Christianity and Islam, yet a genuine theological encounter—not just political or cultural—seems rare. Will the theological struggles of
Aquinas and Cusanus shed some light on our theological understanding of Islam today? Out of the desire to have a God both intelligible and loving on human terms, many theologians speak of him in univocal terms and continue to commit ontotheological simplicities. Will a renewed appreciation of Aquinas’s analogical approach to divine names provide the virtuous middle of hope without falling into the extremes of presumption and despair in the human claim to know God?

To be more specific, let me turn to the issue of organ transplants. Is the human person identical with the brain so that other organs like the heart are merely dispensable parts that may be replaced without further ado? Is the boundary between one person and another the same as the boundary between their material bodies? Is it imaginable to think of one person as dwelling in another person, suffering for the sake of another, and sharing a communion with another even when dead? Can organ transplants be understood as something more than the replacing of an old material part with a new one, as something embodying a communion of the donor and recipient in which one lives in the other and suffers for the other?

In the first essay, titled “Exchanging Hearts: A Medievalist Looks at Transplant Surgery,” Barbara Newman responds with insights drawn from the traditional Catholic doctrine of perichoresis, mutual indwelling or coinherence, first applied to the Trinity and later transferred to the mystical body of Christ and the communion of saints, thereby shedding new light on the moral and ontological relationship between donor and recipient in organ transplants, especially heart transplants.

Against the prevailing contemporary assumption that the person is identical with the individual, Newman proposes a perichoretic anthropology based on the theology of the Trinity in which the three divine persons share one divine nature and dwell in one another. The divine person is supremely permeable in that each person is indwelt by the other two: to be a divine person is to be within one another. The Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father. This indwelling extends to the mystical body: Christ dwells in the members of his body, and they dwell in Christ. As created in the image of the Trinity,
the human person is likewise porous, permeable, and dwells in other persons. To be personal is to be interpersonal; one becomes a person only in, with, and through other persons. Unlike the self-sufficient atomistic individual of the Enlightenment, the Christian views human persons as being one body in Christ and individually as members of one another (Paul).

Newman suggests that organ transplants can be better appreciated on the model of Christ giving himself for the life of the world physically on the cross and sacramentally in the Eucharist, in which the communicant enters into a profound union with the self-giving Christ. It is a mode of profound coinherence of two persons through the sacrifice of one for the life of the other. The medieval practice of praying and suffering for the sinners in purgatory is another example of the intimate communion between the living and the dead in which pains and guilts can also be shared among the members of the mystical body. Many people feel guilty receiving an organ from another person who often has to die in order that that organ can be given. Those who consent to donation of organs do so in the hope of bringing life out of death and honoring the spirit of the deceased donor—profoundly religious motives. Newman argues that these feelings and hopes can be sublimated into profound religious experiences when interpreted in light of the theology of coinherence and communion that governs the mystical body of Christ.

In her essay, “Friendliness, Divine and Human,” Marilyn McCord Adams begins with a survey of the significance of friendship as a social institution in the ancient world and its philosophical development through Cicero and details its theological application as a model for thinking about the Trinity in Richard of St. Victor, about Christ’s relationship to the church in Aelred of Rivalux, and about God’s astonishing unilateral love of unworthy sinners in Julian of Norwich. The high point of Adams’s essay is her application of the model of friendship to her own foremost concern of recent years, the problem of God and “horrendous evil.” How is it possible to claim divine friendliness and goodness to those suffering horrendous evils? What theological sense can we make of such evils in the world?
According to Cicero’s classical account friendship requires willing and not willing the same things (idem velle, idem nolle), which in turn requires knowing the same things. Regarding God’s project in this world, this would require the same knowledge of good and evil. However, we cannot expect to achieve God’s knowledge of good and evil because we are incapable of seeing God face-to-face or the divine goodness while alive in this world and capable of appreciating the true nature of evil, horrendous evils, only gradually in a pedagogy of growing experience and maturity from the lessons of the paradise lost through Abraham’s experience of faith in an incomprehensible God to Job’s encounters with evil to Jesus’s training of the disciples in maturity through the scandal of the cross and resurrection.

Horrors, for Adams, are beyond both human recognition and control because they are the systematic by-products of the material world. Millions of people suffer horrendous calamities all their lives, which makes it impossible for many to believe in God and leads many to even hate God. In response Adams takes two suggestions from Julian of Norwich. First, just as Julian believed that sin is necessary in this world, yet that God loves us despite our sin and will make everything all right in the eschaton, Adams analogously suggests that horrors are necessary by-products of the material world, yet that participants in great horrors are not beyond God’s love, God’s will and power to help and transform them into worthwhile lives fit for heaven. Second, God would impute his friendliness to his Son Christ to all his creatures, especially participants in great horrors, and see him in every human being. Just as Christ’s divine and human knowledge of divine goodness enabled him to deal with the evil of his passion and death, many saints were sustained in their suffering because of their knowledge of divine goodness. Adams suggests that the radical experience of the great virulence of evil by horror participants more closely approaches God’s knowledge of evil than does our ordinary experience of evil and shares in God’s knowledge of evil. God imputes friendliness to these as well in the full knowledge that such horrendous suffering was a necessary part of God’s project in this material world. Like Julian, Adams thinks that God will make it up
to all of us for all that we have suffered and thank us, like a grateful friend, for participating in his project in the world. Divine love will award greater honors to those who paid higher prices for that project. This would require for horror participants many stages of therapeutic transformation and purification before they can be fit for the realm of God.

Adams ends with the daring thought that in the eschaton all will be glad to have lived their lives on earth in light of God’s perpetual friendly love that compensates everyone for their suffering, not glad for the harms we have done, but for what God has made of them and for our role in the divine project, offering all that we have been in a friendly gesture to the divine Friend.

Christian theology has been challenged not only by new advances in medical technology and increasing sensitivity to colossal evils but also from within by the claims of the historical-critical method. By its dismissal of all interpretation of scripture going beyond the intention of the author in his or her historical context and by an exclusive appeal to purely naturalistic assumptions, this method has been playing havoc with all the traditional interpretations based on faith and revelation, threatening the very survival of such foundational Christian beliefs like Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity. It is to these problems that Kevin Madigan responds in his essay, “Can Precritical Biblical Interpretation Cure the Ills of the Critical?,” by gleaning lessons from the medieval exegetical experience. He first analyzes the self-understanding of the historical critics and the many serious objections that have been raised to their practice and presuppositions, then goes on to retrieve some of the insights of the premodern, precritical medieval approaches to the Bible and its many different senses, and concludes by arguing that the precritical medieval approaches can cure some of the ills of the historical-critical method, at least in some of its extreme claims.

For Madigan, the distinctive contribution of medieval exegesis lies in two things, the recognition of a plurality of meanings in a biblical text and the exegetical practice of reading the Bible with the tradition. John Cassian was most influential in highlighting the four senses of scripture, literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical, for me-
dieval hermeneutics. The first deals with the history of God’s re-
demptive activity, the second with the articles of belief, the third with
ethical behavior, and the fourth with one’s eternal destiny. Jerusalem,
for example, can refer to the earthly city in its literal sense, to the
church in its allegorical sense, to the soul in its moral sense, and to the
heavenly city in its anagogical sense. This method, of course, was ap-
plied in a flexible, not a mechanical, way. What is important here is
that no medieval interpreter ever thought that the meaning of a bibli-
cal text was limited to the intention of the author or the reception by
the original audience in its original historical context. This pluralistic
approach to exegesis was a way of retrieving the inexhaustible mean-
ing of scripture and making it relevant to different historical situ-
atations, especially in preaching, where the allegorical or moral mean-
ing may be more significant than the original literal or historical
meaning. This does not mean that a text could be interpreted in any
arbitrary way. In some way the multiple senses of scripture had to be
grounded in the literal. Still, biblical texts do have multiple meanings
as intended by God and human beings. Furthermore, medieval exe-
getes read the Bible “with the dead,” that is, in conversation with pre-
vious interpreters and commentators on scripture, drawing on them
freely, often verbatim. They took the tradition of biblical interpreta-
tion as an authoritative guide, as more than a mere collection of indi-
vidual opinions.

Can this sort of “precritical” hermeneutics cure the ills of the
“critical”? Limiting himself only to those historical critics who claim
the historical sense as the only imaginable or true sense of the text,
Madigan argues that precritical medieval hermeneutics can cure the ills
of the historical-critical method at least in two regards. First, against
the critical method, we can say that religious communities do have the
right to insist that the biblical text has an excess or surplus of meaning
and multiple senses, as the Jewish and Christian tradition of herme-
neutics has always recognized. Second, against the critical method,
reading the biblical text with the dead—in light of the tradition of in-
terpretations and commentaries of the past, not in the sense of slav-
ishly accepting their conclusions, but in the sense of taking them se-
riously as sources of potential meanings and relevant questions—can
save us from many of the unnecessary restrictions and sterilities of the historical-critical method. Madigan does not mean to say, however, that we have to reject it altogether. Properly criticized and limited, it can be used as a control to keep our religious exegetical imagination honest and limited within certain boundaries.

Another contemporary challenge to Christian theology has come from Heidegger, who held that possibility is higher than actuality but who radically limited Dasein’s possibility of being to the contingent facticities into which it is already thrown, to which it is already attuned, and within which it projects its own possibilities, and ultimately to death, the radical possibility of its own impossibility. Restricted to the temporal and worldly limits of one’s own existential situation, Dasein’s possibilities are totally temporal, contingent, individual, and finite and do not allow for anything radically new, a new way of existing in a different world altogether, not merely living differently in its world, a nonworldly, eschatological way of being. This radical challenge to the possibility of Christian faith is here met by the essay, “Possibile Absolutum: The Theological Discovery of the Ontological Priority of the Possible,” in which Ingolf U. Dalferth traces the history of the meaning and significance of the modality of possibility from Aristotle to Heidegger and criticizes Heidegger in light of the “revolutionary” significance of the changes in the meaning of possibility brought about by the medieval theology of creation, especially that of St. Thomas.

Since Aristotle, what is possible is based on the actual and ultimately on the actuality of the world taken as given. The medieval theology of creation and divine omnipotence put this priority of the actual radically in question. As a creature of divine omnipotence the world loses its ontological necessity and becomes the realm of the possible rooted in the creative power and will of God. What is at stake in the doctrine of creation is not what is conditionally possible, that is, given the existence of this or that reality in the world, but what is absolutely possible, in the absence of the world itself. The theology of creation provides a radically new paradigm of possibility, the absolutely possible, possibile absolutum, locating that possibility in the only actuality relative to absolute possibility, that is, God, since it is
still true that possibility must be founded in an actuality. What is possible is everything made possible by God, the impossible everything made impossible by God. The distinction between what is actual and what is possible no longer depends on the given structure of the existing world but only on God’s will, which makes some things possible and other things impossible in the world as his creation.

What is possible and what is not depends on the power at issue. What is possible and impossible for human power is different from what is possible and impossible (e.g., change, sin) for divine power. What, then, is possible for God? What is meant by divine omnipotence, by the thesis that God can do “all” things? For St. Thomas, God can do all things that are logically possible, that is, all things that do not involve the contradiction of subject and predicate (e.g., “a man is a donkey”), which defines what is absolutely possible because it is not relative to or conditioned by the actual possibilities of the created world. Not everything that is logically possible, however, is *factible* or makeable. It must also be something that reflects the nature of the divine agent and something, therefore, that God can will without contradicting his own nature. God can do or make all things that do not involve a logical contradiction, are contingent, and can be willed without contradicting the divine nature. What is possible or makeable is no longer relative to the possibilities of the existing world but only to divine omnipotence who can do or make all things that are not contradictory to the intrinsic nature of the subject and predicate involved or to the nature of the divine agent. This is the theological discovery of the absolutely possible and the ontological priority of the possible over the actual as far as this world is concerned. For Dalferth, “this is nothing short of an ontological revolution, and it opens up a new and deeper understanding of God.”

This also means that there is no need to absolutize Dasein’s possibilities of being in the radically finite and contingent structure Heidegger attributes to it. Such a structure is not self-explanatory or self-grounding; it is itself contingent on conditions outside its control, possibilities put in its way from outside, conditions prior to itself, both its own thrownness and its projective understanding, conditions that has made Dasein what it is and to which it only responds. It is not
its own creation in any absolute sense. If the possible need not be limited to Aristotle’s actual world, neither need it be limited to Heidegger’s factual possibilities of a Dasein thrown and projecting into a contingent world.

One of the signs of the times is the imperative for mutual understanding and dialogue between different religions, in particular, between Christianity and Islam. The medieval world is a far cry from this globalized one, and it would be anachronistic to expect direct, positive lessons of interreligious hermeneutic from the Middle Ages that will speak to the interreligious problems of our time. Given the history of conquests and crusades since the seventh century, one can easily imagine the degree of hostility, prejudice, and ignorance still existing between the two religions in the high and late Middle Ages. Still, in a conference dedicated to the theme of the medieval legacy to the twenty-first century, the question remains inevitable: Do the medieval have anything positive to teach us in the matter of interreligious understanding?

In his essay, “Can We Talk Theologically? Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa on the Possibility of a Theological Understanding of Islam,” Pim Valkenberg responds precisely to that question. In a comprehensive textual study he attempts to decipher at least some “faint prefiguration” of something like a genuine theological encounter with Islam. Valkenberg begins by recognizing that Aquinas does not engage Islam at the theological level because he does not see a theological common ground between Christianity and a false prophet. Still, Aquinas does engage Islam on grounds of natural reason by defending the Christian faith in the Trinity, the Sonship of Christ, and Christ’s continuing presence in the Eucharist against prevailing Muslim objections and arguing that Christian faith is not irrational. His primary interest was apologetic, not a positive understanding of the other, for which we turn to Nicholas of Cusa.

Nicholas of Cusa’s approach to Islam is found in two works, De pace fidei and the Cribratio Alkorani. In De pace fidei, written in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Constantinople in 1453, he pleaded for unity and peace among religions. Cusanus argues, in a way reminiscent of many pluralists today, that no human being can compre-
hend the infinity of God and that human beings seek God in different rites and call him by different names. Behind differences among religions there is only one faith, *una religio in rituum varietate*. This realization should lead us to peace and harmony among religions on the basis of what unites us.

In his later work, the *Cribratio Alkorani*, written in 1461, Cusanus does not abandon the old polemical tradition seen in Aquinas but also provides a much more positive approach to Islam, employing a *pia interpretatio*, or “faithful” interpretation, that puts the best possible theological construction on the more scandalous passages in the Qur’ān as forcing Christians to have a better understanding of their own faith, especially the incomprehensibility of God. Valkenberg highlights two hermeneutic principles in *Cribratio Alkorani*: “Interpret the Qur’an as intending to give glory to God without detracting from Christ,” and “whenever possible, work with the interpretations that the wise among the Muslims assign to the Qur’an.” The first rule opens up the possibility of a Christian interpretation of the Qur’ān that does justice to the monotheism common to both religions without jeopardizing the constitutive role of Christ for Christians. The second rule contains the beginning of the awareness that the Qur’ān might be the revealing Word of God for Muslims and that we cannot do justice to the religious function of the Qur’ān without taking seriously the history of Muslim interpretations. These two, for Valkenberg, constitute the basic principles of a Christian theological reading of the Qur’ān and the most important lesson we should learn from the medieval theologians for a genuine theological encounter with Islam today.

In the final essay in this volume, “The Humanity of Theology: Aquinian Reflections on the Presumption and Despair in the Human Claim to Know God,” Anselm K. Min assesses contemporary philosophical theologies according to the virtue of hope, finding some guilty of despair because they fail to hope for what they can know about God, others guilty of presumption because they claim to know more than they can really know about God. Virtue lies in the middle, and we can fail to attain virtue either by deficiency or by excess. We can claim to know too little about God or too much about God. In
this sense atheism, agnosticism, and fideism are despairing theologies claiming to know less than human beings can know about God, and rationalism in all its varieties is a presumptuous theology claiming to know more than human beings can ever know about God.

By what standard do we distinguish between too little and too much, between despair and presumption in the matter of knowing God? What constitutes the virtuous middle in our knowledge of God? Drawing on the theology of St. Thomas, Min presents the metaphysics of human knowledge as a hylomorphic being, indicating the nature and limits of human knowledge, followed by a discussion of how such limits apply to the human knowledge of God and how all human predication of divine names has to be analogical, not univocal. He closes with the illustration of five ways in which contemporary philosophical theologies deviate from the norm of human knowledge either by deficiency or by excess, either by despairing to attain even the knowledge that is possible within the limits of human knowledge or by presuming to know God beyond such limits.

It is not easy to observe the nature and limits of human knowledge with respect to God by observing the moments of analogical predication, with all the tensions inherent in them. Min locates the greatness of St. Thomas in his systematic sensibility and his fidelity to this humanity of theology against all the temptations to despair through agnosticism and fideism and to presumption through rationalism and intuitionism.

Thus far I have given a brief, preliminary anticipation of what this book is about. I am more than impressed by the insightful explorations of the medieval legacy as resources still so fruitful and even essential to the many theological problems we face today. Each essay, I am sure, also raises further issues for continuing dialogue.

As should be clear by now, this is not a book on medieval theology as such, its exegesis and commentary in its own historical context. There are many books of this kind we can turn to. Nor is this a book on contemporary theology as such, its constructive task and its many challenges. We also have many books of this kind with which we can engage in dialogue. This is rather a book that seeks to bridge the two worlds by rethinking medieval theology for the surplus of
meaning it may yet contain that is relevant to contemporary issues, retrieving its as yet unexplored possibilities as resources for the contemporary theological task. To be sure, the work of retrieval presupposes sound exegesis or proper interpretation of the medieval resources we are trying to mine. I believe the contributors of this volume provide a sound, at least plausible, interpretation of the texts they are exploring, but the point of this volume is to go beyond such exegesis to explore and develop the medieval resources for the task of contemporary theology. Does the result shed light on the contemporary issues to which the volume seeks to respond? Does it also challenge some of our contemporary assumptions? Whether this volume succeeds in this task is for the readers to judge.

AS THE CONFERENCE organizer it is now my delightful duty to thank all the participants for making the conference so worthwhile and productive. In addition to the contributors who gladly accepted my invitation to present, I owe a very special debt of gratitude to the respondents, the six graduate students of Claremont Graduate University, Marlene Block, Duncan Gale, Nathan Greeley, Fabrizio D’Ambrosio, Bruce Paolozzi, and Brad Rubin, whose discerning responses contributed much to the intellectual excitement of the conference. I also thank my colleagues for chairing the sessions: Esther Chung-Kim (Claremont McKenna College), Stephen Davis (Claremont McKenna College), Joseph Prabhu (California State University, Los Angeles), Karen Torjesen (Claremont Graduate University), and Nancy van Deusen (Claremont Graduate University). Bruce Paolozzi, my research assistant, deserves special thanks for doing the preliminary editorial work, as does Shane Ackerman, my new research assistant, for help with the index.