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ABSTRACT

The essay begins by examining the identity of tradition, arguing that traditions as contemporarily conceived cast themselves as an end rather than as a means. This takes place through a consideration of the writing of MacIntyre before turning to a non-philosophical interpretation of tradition as a kind of theological decision centred around the question of a power principle (symbolised by the name of God). This opens up to an explanation of the concept of weaponized apophaticism, which describes the way in which traditions cast themselves as an end through a process of theological claims to authority that are ultimately made all the more powerful through a process of deferral. The essay then concludes with a discussion of gnosis as a kind of non-tradition, a generalised form of tradition which escapes being mistaken or “hallucinated” as an end because of gnosis’s being cast as prior to origin. Tradition is revealed in its identity (as means, not end) through gnostic refusal, which ultimately illuminates the consequences and meaning of what we are terming the first axiom for a non-theology to be completed in a future project.

KEYWORDS: post-secular, secular, non-philosophy, non-theology, tradition

Against Tradition to Liberate Tradition: Weaponized Apophaticism and Gnostic Refusal

Anthony Paul Smith

“Son point de départ est Dieu, son point d’arrivée est la sans-limite.” - Suhrawardi

The First Axiom of Non-Theology

Philosophers always feel that they are finally done with religion. Whether they think they have neutralised it by placing it within the limits of reason alone or they’ve deconstructed it through the principles of laicity and philosophical universalism religion always seems to return, if witnessed only by the fact that philosophers seem to constantly be accusing one another of being theologians. It perhaps says something that, though this charge functions as an allegation in the realm of philosophy, there are others who very proudly take on this title. There are still those who call themselves, in public even, theologians. Of course, religion and theology are not synonymous and between them there is a real separation. But theology is at least concerned with the materials manifest in religion, meaning that theologians concern themselves with the practices and beliefs of peoples, who direct their lives maybe to illusion but also to experiences and experiments in what it means to be a human being, to be a creature. It would be misguided and haughty to deny that, thus

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far, all of these experiments have failed on the grand scale. We ought not to hold up any of these attempts at living as if immortal, to living as truly free, instead of just surviving or living as a slave in this World. They are not the answer. And all too often the theologian comes along and idealises some aspect of religion, some idea within it, and projects it? over the whole phenomenon, trying to veil the concrete, actually-existing form. Perhaps then the epithet “*theologian!*”, shouted by one philosopher with extended forefinger pointing to the other, is deserved in those moments when it means “idealist”.

But then again, if this simply is a particularly brutal epithet for those thinking through idealist forms, then perhaps philosophers would do well to put their swords away lest they perish by them. For what François Laruelle has argued in his critique of philosophy is that philosophy too projects an idea over the Real. Philosophy is all too often, almost invariantly idealistic in its approach. Philosophy – even those philosophies of difference of the twentieth-century – always raises the idea to the position of the Real, forgetting that prior to the idea is always an underlying Real, an underlying identity, in-person, that will always be a stumbling block and offence to that idea. Laruelle summarises his criticism of philosophy from Plato to Deleuze and Derrida succinctly in his *Philosophies of Difference*, which deserves to be quoted at length here for the reader:

“Thus all contemporary philosophy of Difference offers despite everything a strangely Platonizing spectacle: the interminable procession of the most communal entities, Being, Nothingness, Desire, Power, Language, Text, raising themselves up from the ground of experience each in turn like shades at once bloodless and laden with chains, trying to lift themselves in infinite file towards a mirage of the One where they would believe themselves capable of being regenerated and saved from empirical hell as if at a wellspring of life. It is truly a bizarre and certainly quite ‘philosophical’ merry-go-round, philosophical because it is simultaneously ascending and descending and playing itself out finally in a circle and in a place. As if these larvae wished, by their hesitations, their stumblings, their skiddings, the allure of their approach continually spoiled, to abandon the weighty forms of being or non-being in order to yield and sink into their limit, to abandon their determined forms of existence, to prove to themselves that they still exist when in truth they only exist as fleeting larvae on earth. They seek the One precisely because they have not found it, and they will never find anything but their own hallucination. They neither find nor become anything other than what they already are: them-‘selves’. They possess no more than tautological life, but they still do not know that *tautological existence does not exhaust the real*, that Being, Nothingness, Desire, Text, Power, etc., all this is absurd and these tautologies are unnecessary. They have their aims, hatreds and desires, but they continue to be unaware that if they possess meaning relative to one another and truth relative to themselves and as a system of them all, all of this taken together — and *taken*

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together, the system itself included as well, which cannot now exceed or escape itself and its destiny — is as absurd and unnecessary as a tautology. *For the One, the World is a redundancy.*¹

This seems to me the most succinct and poetic summary of the deflationary aspect of Laruelle’s non-philosophy. Philosophy always confuses itself with the Real by way of treating its concepts as maximal, as all-encompassing of reality. Philosophy, through its philosophers, fails to see that it is itself part of the Real, that it too is material. But Laruelle’s early deflationary project serves a productive purpose: to create theory freed of this short-coming. I have already written much regarding this project and its move from criticism to production, especially in relation to religion where I have taken up explicating and developing Laruelle’s own promise of a non-theology.

This non-theology is the focus of this essay and so builds off a number of other essays of mine, most directly “What Can Be Done with Religion?: Non-Philosophy and the Future of Philosophy of Religion”.² In addition to suggesting how non-theology can be used to protect non-philosophy from certain theological temptations inherent in its focus on the real, non-theology is also used as a name for a non-philosophical unified theory of religion and philosophy, where religious materials are made relative to the Real and used to construct new theories. The practice of non-theology, I claim, operates on two axioms: 1) the Real is foreclosed to authority and tradition and 2) what is true(-without-truth) in theology is what is most generic and thus what is most secular (though this must necessarily modify the usual meaning of the term “secular”). This essay is concerned with explaining the first axiom, leaving the second to be developed later. As such, it is not an essay directly on Laruelle, it is not primarily a work of explication as some of my other essays have been, but the development of a nascent theory using means taken from Laruelle’s non-philosophy. So I will continue to reference Laruelle, as well as some others, but nothing here is written under the name of Laruelle or is directly about Laruelle. For what Laruelle has done with non-philosophy is to open up the possibility of thinking differently, of thinking as if a stranger in a land that is not one’s own.

1 François Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference: A Critical Introduction to Non-Philosophy*, trans. Rocco Gangle (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), p. 179. [Translation slightly modified to emphasise elements at play in this essay. Some emphasis mine.]

2 Smith 2010

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The essay begins by examining the identity of tradition, arguing that traditions as contemporarily conceived cast themselves as an end rather than as a means. This takes place through a consideration of the writing of MacIntyre before turning to a non-philosophical interpretation of tradition as a kind of theological decision centred around the question of a power principle (symbolised by the name of God). This opens up to an explanation of the concept of weaponized apophaticism, which describes the way in which traditions cast themselves as an end through a process of theological claims to authority that are ultimately made all the more powerful through a process of deferral. The essay then concludes with a discussion of gnosis as a kind of non-tradition, a generalised form of tradition which escapes being mistaken or “hallucinated” as an end because of gnosis is cast as prior to origin. Tradition is revealed in its identity (as means, not end) through gnostic refusal, which ultimately illuminates the meaning and consequences of what we are terming the first axiom for a non-theology to be completed in a future project.

The Identity of Tradition as Means

Let us return to that notion of thinking as a stranger in a land that is not one’s own, thinking a stranger thought and from that position ask the question, “What is a tradition?” From a non-philosophical perspective this seemingly ontological question must be recast, for to discover the identity of what has become a quasi-transcendental we have to bring it back to earth, down to the level of the creature and ask “What does a tradition do?” It is my contention in this essay that a tradition is a product of creatural labour which has no intrinsic end or telos, but is simply put to creatural ends.³ However, a tradition becomes a quasi-transcendental, or an end unto itself, which ends up harassing the very creatures upon whose existence it depends. To expand on this claim I will turn to MacIntyre’s conception of tradition and the way in which tradition has become the source of authority in philosophical theology through an operation I have termed “weaponized apophaticism”. Allowing this weaponized apophaticism come into vision is a way of uncovering the identity of tradition as a simple means, as well as the way tradition is hallucinated as an end unto itself.

³ I use the term creatural here to refer to this production not being a simply human production, but one that includes all the nonhuman elements one finds within ecology. See Smith 2013, especially 218-220, for a fuller treatment of this concept.

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The two most prevalent anti-liberal conceptions of tradition are Burkean and what could be termed Neo-Aristotelean-Thomist (MacIntyre). While the first, where Burke sees tradition as static and unchanging, is clearly a reactionary conception of tradition arising out of a Whig ideology that desperately clings to any form of order over the seeming disorder of things, something even MacIntyre himself recognises, the second, that of MacIntyre himself, is more complicated.⁴ One might even refer to this conception of tradition as pseudo-Marxist both in terms of influence (MacIntyre is quite explicit in his Marxist sympathies, though also explicit that he is not a Marxist as such) and in its theoretical practice. The second is shown in the appeal to a structural conception of the self where the self is dependent upon social and material relations that reside outside the individual subject. What is interesting about this seeming hegemony amongst anti-liberal theorists is the ambiguity it introduces into any theoretical attempt to break out of the reactionary circle. We can see this by setting Burke's clearly reactionary character aside and focusing on MacIntyre's conception of tradition and the way he allows for an idealist overcoding of his conception through an appeal to virtues. I will argue that virtues in this sense are as abstract as the traditions which produce them, and so not an end, but still merely a means projected or hallucinated as an end. This becomes especially problematic, even nefarious, when this now idealist conception of tradition treats tradition as a transcendental amongst other transcendentals, the principle among them God, to which the other transcendentals – tradition included though privileged – are related. For now the transcendental character of tradition, even as narrative, takes on a particularly apophatic character weaponized to protect, not the creature (humanity included), but the tradition itself.

MacIntyre's account of tradition is entirely dependent upon virtues, as is well known, and ultimately those virtues are directed towards *the* end (telos) of the Good. However, it is unclear for rational subjects what the Good actually is in itself as the Good clearly takes on a supernatural dimension in MacIntyre's work, meaning its full identity ultimately lies outside of human experience. The telos thus transcends the human, as MacIntyre explains "I have suggested so far that unless there is a telos which transcends the limited goods of practices by constituting the good of a whole human life, the good of a human life conceived as a unity, it will both be the case that a certain subversive arbitrariness will invade the moral life and that we shall be unable to specify the context

4 "We are apt to be misled here by the ideological uses to which the concept of a tradition has been put by conservative political theorists. Characteristically such theorists have followed Burke in contrasting tradition with reason and the stability of tradition with conflict. [...] Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict. Indeed when a tradition becomes Burkean, it is always dying or dead (MacIntyre 221-222.)"

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of certain virtues adequately.”⁵ Since a tradition is related to the end proper to humans that is only achieved in some sense through virtue, we find that MacIntyre’s entire definition of a tradition rests upon this supernatural good that is the only true measure of the limited goods. So, in MacIntyre’s view, traditions are attempts to resist the “subversive arbitrariness” of the limited goods of individuals that “invade the moral life” while still allowing for conflict over the true character of the Good (this emphasis on conflict marks out the difference between Burke and MacIntyre).

However, traditions can never meet on equal footing. Indeed, this is often held up as one of the strengths of MacIntyre’s theory since it argues, against liberalism, that there is no neutral sphere where the claims of rival traditions may be adjudicated. MacIntyre presents a rather Pollyannaish vision of the meeting of rival traditions where, “it is possible for one such tradition to defeat another in respect of the adequacy of its claims to truth and to rational justification, even though there are no neutral standards available by appeal to which any rational agent whatsoever could determine which tradition is superior to which.”⁶ This is a fantasy precisely because it ignores the question of power in the construction of such truth claims. Of course, MacIntyre purposely pitches his own virtue ethic vision of traditions against the idea that “might makes right”, chalking this up to an undesirable Nietzschean view of politics and society. But this is to misunderstand Nietzsche and the ways in which his philosophy of the will to power have been developed in the twentieth-century, mostly by French post-68 philosophers. For what figures like Foucault and those who come after him have shown is that a hegemonic tradition will always make demands on the manifestation of the minority or weaker tradition. While, from Foucault’s perspective as well, there is no neutral perspective from which to adjudicate claims, that does not mean that the victor of the rivalry is in possession of the truth; it does not mean that they “deserve” their station in some way that appeals to a transcendent measure of value. Take an evolutionary example, for just as the success of one species over another in the biosphere says nothing about the value of the extinct species (a modern form of theodicy, a “biodicy”) so neither does the success of one tradition over another in the social biosphere say anything about the value of the extinct tradition. Talal Asad sums up this reality succinctly when he takes up the specific case of European liberalism as it played out in the British demands on its minority cultures this came to the fore in the “Rushdie Affair”:

5 MacIntyre 203

6 MacIntyre 2007, xiii

“The core values of nonwhite immigrants are *not*—so the hegemonic discourse goes—part of British culture, and therefore to live permanently in Britain they must—as political minorities—assimilate into that culture. However, minorities have not always had to make this kind of adjustment. When Europeans went to Asia, Africa, and the Americas, as settlers, administrators, missionaries, they did not need to adopt the core values of the majority populations among whom they lived. On the contrary, they sought with great success to change them. But that immigrations from those populations should now presume to act as though they had a right to something that power did not accord them—that is quite another story. In *that* story it is their presumptuous behavior that needs explaining and correcting, not the postures adopted by the British.”⁷

Here the philosophically-inflected anthropology of Asad can be seen as having tempered and corrected MacIntyre’s philosophy, by performing a kind of non-philosophical completing of MacIntyre in thinking elements of his work with Nietzsche/Foucault: a kind of unified theory of Tradition and Power.⁸ For liberalism is also a tradition and so in practice it is always in conflict with the other traditions it has in the past claimed to provide a neutral space for. Asad, following MacIntyre in part, shows the ways in which liberalism’s abstract claims to neutrality are exposed as a falsehood. He sums up his argument this way, “I am not arguing against multiculturalism or syncretism in the abstract. Instead, I have tried to indicate that the specific way in which they have been practiced in contemporary Britain has meant the reinforcement of centralised state power and the aestheticization of moral identities, that therefore neither has been seen as a potential threat to British identity.”⁹ However, it would be a mistake to simply stop here, at the exposing of the falsehood as if now the ‘Truth-with-a-capital-T’ will simply shine forth. Asad moves beyond those Christian thinkers, like MacIntyre, who hold up this gap between what liberalism proclaims (the protection of difference) and what it practices (the establishment of homogeneity) as the end of the critique. For what Asad claims matters is not this gap itself, but rather the way that the hegemonic

7 Asad 1993, 273.

8 Laruelle sums up his “collider” model of non-philosophy in a recent interview saying, “I have always used two philosophies at the same time. Heidegger and Nietzsche, then Derrida and Deleuze. So it is always a matter of how to eventually combine several philosophies. [...] I had the feeling that in order to completely change the concept of philosophy, two philosophies were always necessary, as if each of the philosophers represented half of philosophy, basically, which I felt to be the non-completeness of a particular philosophy; this problem would have to be resolved each time by the combination of two philosophers. I have followed this way of doing things, a little bit in spite of myself, always combining two philosophies as if each of them was lacking what the other had. You could think that this is a dialectical relation. But in fact that was not that at all, because it was, each time, two philosophies and not one philosophy and the entire history of philosophy in addition. Thus, I am part of a conjugation, I like this term a lot, of philosophies which replaced the missing concept. What was missing was the One, the One-in-One (Laruelle 2012, 239).”

9 Asad 1993, 266.

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discourse (in this case European liberalism) plays both sides of the gap as another means at its disposal in order to decide the very coordinates by which abstraction and practice unfold: “In that context what is crucial for government is not homogeneity versus difference as such but its authority to define crucial homogenities *and* differences.”¹⁰

Government for Asad refers, of course, to the actual British government that is the focus of his anthropological inquiry. But we could take it in some sense to mean any bureaucratic structure of a tradition, which must also include its intellectuals. Those Christian intellectuals who have come after MacIntyre are no less part of the bureaucratic structure of their traditions than the bureaucrats of the ultimately hegemonic liberal regime of capitalist nation-states. But Christianity, even as a tradition or set of traditions with elements that attempt to resist this hegemonic liberalism, is intimately weaved into the very fabric of this hegemony such that a kind of background of Christian culture is inoffensive. This inoffensiveness allows for those in the majority culture to ignore the ways that this Christian culture is often held aloft as a moralising sceptre in the hands of the liberal sovereign.¹¹ Exploring the ways in which its intellectual-bureaucrats have engaged in what I call weaponized apophaticism will reveal the ways in which traditions are hallucinated or turned into golems.

Weaponized Apophaticism

In his influential text of philosophical theology *God Without Being*, Jean-Luc Marion both puts forth a critique of God as conceptualised in the tradition of ontotheology and discusses the way a tradition explicates a *culture* of the Word. The Word is that hybrid Christian concept of the Messiah and the Scriptures that are repeatedly re-read in order to bind the community together (“re-read” and “binding” being two of the possible meanings of the Latin *religio*). There the discourse of theology is a hermeneutic of words on the Word that is, for the Roman Catholic tradition, ultimately

10 Asad 1993, 267.

11 Consider, for example, the strangely amorphous Roman Catholic Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA which, unlike nearly every other archdiocese in the world, has no central seat and no cathedral but serves in an almost Deleuzian rhizomatic way the network of American imperialist bases throughout the world despite the Roman Catholic Church’s official line of propagating a whole cloth “culture of life”.

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enacted in the Eucharist (the ritual of sharing of bread and blood amongst the congregants).¹² Marion's critique of ontotheology would seem to be a secular project, following as it does from Heidegger's own *destruktion*. But what we see in Marion's challenging of the tradition of ontotheology is far from Heidegger's secularism for Marion claims that only the authorities of the Roman Catholic church can speak for God as theologians. He writes, "if finally only the celebrant receives authority to go beyond the words up to the Word, because he alone finds himself invested by the *persona Christi*, then one must conclude that *only the bishop merits, in the full sense, the title of theologian*."¹³ But Marion is clear that all of this goes beyond mere theological fan fiction and actually makes a political claim, rare in his work: "All is given to the Church (space: the nations; time: the days) so that the Church may return it (keep the commandments) to the Word, because he already received all (*exousia* [authority]) from the Father; in theology it is not a question, anymore than elsewhere, of working to a completion yet to come: completion, for the Church, is accomplished definitively at Easter, hence at the origin (*tetelestai* [it is finished], John 19:28 = 13:1)."¹⁴ The two Greek words have purchase within the political economy of the Roman Empire and thus purchase for the political theology of the early Christian sects. While the second, the word of Christ before he dies upon the instrument of capital punishment, was an economic term written on the bottom of receipts indicating that a debt had been paid in full, discharging the two parties from their legal responsibilities. Obviously the giving of authority to a man murdered by the authority of the State is a radical political act and that is carried in the recasting of language present here. But Marion repurposes these terms and mystifies the way they worked as a rebellion against towards worldly powers in the first and second-centuries. He simply ahistorically accomplishes the transfer of transcendent authority from one power to another, and the paying of debt stands in for the always-already character of the accomplishment of the Christian tradition. That is, as Marion says, this mystified end ("completion") is carried already in the origin, which is supernatural and so beyond human cognition.

12 There is likely something interesting in in the Gnostic rejection of the Eucharist. Here we see a different understanding of the relation to authority and power and the possibility of resistance to them through sacrifice. As Brakke summarizes it, "the Gnostic author of the *The Gospel of Judas* severely criticizes the Eucharist as a ceremony that offers praise to Ialdabaōth, the god of this world. The sacrificial victim that other Christian leaders offer on their altars is not bread or the body of Christ, but the people that they lead astray into ignorance and death ([*The Gospel of Judas*] 39:18-40:1). 'Stop sacrificing animals!' Jesus commands his wayward disciples, referring to the animals that symbolize their deceived Christian followers (41:1-2) (Brakke 2010, 77)."

13 Marion 1991, 153.

14 Marion 1991, 158.

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Here the theological method of apophaticism is on display. Apophaticism, as many students of theology and religion may already know, comes from the Greek *apophasis* which literally means “unsaying” and is developed by medieval Latin Christianity in the *via negativa*. In terms of theological claims about God, apophaticism is summed up by the French neo-Thomist Etienne Gilson this way, “To make God known by way of negation is to show not how He is, but how He is not.”¹⁵ But as Gilson goes on to explain, this form of reasoning concerning God’s identity is not a simple denial of knowledge, a saying for example that “God is not knowable” *tout court*. This apophaticism is actually revealing of God’s identity, since the negations flow out of certain theological decisions in favour of monotheistic simplicity implied by God’s transcendence: “Moreover, this is what we have already begun to do in establishing His perfect simplicity. To say that God is absolutely simple, since He is pure act of existing, is not to have a concept of such an act, but to deny Him, as we have seen, any composition whatsoever”.¹⁶ But there is something subtle going on here in terms of the claim to possess knowledge, which is also the claim to possess power, as Marion himself demonstrates by locating authority in the Word that always escapes ontotheology and in those who speak and represent *de jure* that Word. For talk about God is never simply talk about some divine personhood; rather, the Name of God stands in for the principle of authority and sovereignty itself within monotheistic theology. This becomes even clearer in the ways in which apophaticism proceeds in St. Thomas Aquinas’ theology. In Thomas apophaticism, and theology in general, operates through a certain unilateral duality of the natural and the supernatural. The natural is always the base on which human beings begin to reason about God (again taken as the principle of principles, authority itself), but natural reason is always taken to be ultimately grounded upon the supernatural it attempts to think. The consequence of this is that nature provides the vocabulary for beginning to think about God, but the syntax is provided by the decision of faith, the decision that ungrounds any substance being found within nature itself. Nature always points towards the supernatural, yet this pointing is only possible because it is given the power to do so by the supernatural. Thus, from the perspective of the supernatural, everything is supernatural in terms of cause. Only from the perspective of the effect, the natural, is there any duality.¹⁷

15 Gilson 1956, 97

16 Ibid

17 This is a summary of an argument made at greater length with regard to Thomas in Smith 2013, 190-198

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What does this mean from a political perspective then? MacIntyre signals his belonging to this school of thought when he writes of the good to which every tradition is devoted that, “The good for man is of course a supernatural and not only a natural good, but supernature redeems and completes nature.”¹⁸ MacIntyre here is following the Catholic Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac, whose *nouvelle théologie* was heavily influential for Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI and so even this seemingly universal discourse on tradition as such is entirely dependent upon a Christian – specifically Roman Catholic – conception of the Good arising out of this unilateral duality of the natural and the supernatural. But ultimately this good is beyond knowledge, because the good is only another apophatic name for God. Even the way the Good functions in MacIntyre mimics the same unilateral duality, where the Good is the *telos* upon which all means are grounded. Though the ultimate truth of that grounding is always temporally deferred, metaphysically these means are always *subjected* to the end for their very substance. This can be called a weaponized apophaticism in so far as the form of reasoning here has the effect, if one follows this vision of tradition, of setting up the very terms of any conflict and form of life. By collapsing the natural under a deferred supernatural MacIntyre and those who follow him are able to cover over the questions of power that lie at the heart of thinking through the conflicts of rival traditions and in so doing obscure the potential of those traditions as means beneath the duality of secularism and post-secularism set up in contemporary liberalism.

To illustrate this further, and before moving on to our alternative, I want to look at a recent attempt by another Christian theorist to challenge the hegemonic power of liberalism by debunking its “creation myth”, while ultimately deferring the question of power sought after by Christian theology itself. This is found in *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* by William T. Cavanaugh whose work unfolds in ways largely dependent upon MacIntyre. There he attempts to challenge secular liberalism's claim to neutrality by showing its underlying narrative to be false. That narrative claims that liberalism arose in response to the irrational and endless violence waged in the name of religion. As he states in *Myth*, “What I call the ‘myth of religious violence’ is the idea that religion is a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life, essentially distinct from ‘secular’ features such as politics and economics, which has a peculiarly dangerous inclination to promote violence.”¹⁹ Cavanaugh’s book can be placed alongside a number

18 MacIntyre 2007, 184

19 Cavanaugh 2009, 3

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of recent post-secular works of theory (he makes use of the work of post-secular critics of Christianity, like Asad and Tomoko Masuzawa); but unlike them his is an unrelentingly *negative* work: negative in a double sense, subordinating both “the secular” and “religion” under a supernatural good beyond these two traditions. In each chapter the goal is not to provide some better theory of religion and violence, or even a new theoretical framework for thinking about questions generally treated under that academic pursuit, but simply to negate through reasonable doubt the power of the prevailing “myth” and in so doing to “unsay” that myth and open up space for another. This opening up of space for another myth, that of Christianity, is given in the negative deployment of the idea of religion, in so far as he allows this term to still function in a liberal way, not with regards to Christianity, but with regard to Islam.

Though Cavanaugh often provides Islam a modicum of defense against the explicit racism of the New Atheists, he also takes pains to emphasise that he is not saying “religion is off limits” or that he is out to just defend religion (sometimes he says “Christianity” and sometimes just “religion”, despite doubting the existence of religion or at least showing reasonable doubt regarding its existence as a genus; rarely does he refer to any of the other traditions we would normally refer to as “religious”). Yet in the first instance of this hedging it is in fact Islam that is used as the example of a religion that can be interrogated: “I think that the separation of church and state is generally a good thing. On the other side, there is no question that certain forms of Muslim beliefs and practices do promote violence.”²⁰ Now, Cavanaugh is clear that Christianity is up for debate too (namely the relationship between violence and the sacrificial atonement of Christ), but consider the difference in his presentation of Islamic countries in relation to America. He accepts that countries like Iran and movements like Palestinian liberation are a theopolitical mixture that can be identified as Islamic. Yet, his description of America as a largely secular country that has felt the need to separate out Christian religious commitments from civic commitments is an intellectual bait and switch. While, yes, America seems to have a civic religion that goes into full swing when America goes to war, it does so with a whole army of clergy who belong mainly to sects of Christianity. What is it that allows Cavanaugh to label the theopolitics of the Islamic world Islamic as such and to claim that the American system of civil religion is not Christian, but a secular and liberal countertradition? This covers over the way in which the Christian form of post-secular politics lobbies on behalf of Christian institutions inclusion in the State apparatus in some way, even if that inclusion is just as a

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founding and privileged member of the Big Society. This post-secular form of Christianity does so by presenting itself as a “integral part” in the development of Western culture and an integral part in a way that other traditions are not allowed to claim.

The question of the identity of Christianity is, of course, deferred by Cavanaugh and that is not just an accident of academic writing, but goes to the heart of a conception of tradition within the Christian vision of the post-secular. As Daniel Colucciello Barber has argued, building off of Richard King and Daniel Boyarin, “the invention of Christianity amounts to the invention of religion, and vice versa.”²¹ Prior to the invention of Christianity/religion, or what Barber also refers to as Pauline universalism, traditions were not a matter of truth or falsity; only after the development of Pauline universalism is religion “worship of the true”. Thus, “Pauline universalism cannot accommodate a plurality of religious traditions, at least not insofar as these are ultimately determinative of identity. Similarly, the new people of Christ cannot be yet another religion [or tradition], insofar as religion refers to particular cultural practices. The only way forward is to remake religion in the image of Christianity.”²² That is, Christianity requires that in any conflict the terms are unilaterally produced and controlled by Christianity (even as it absorbs Judaism and Greek pagan philosophy), while ultimately deferring the question of the true source of such principles, grounding them upon a supernature beyond the tradition but pointed to it most faithfully by the tradition of Christianity above every other one.

Gnostic Refusal as Pre-Origin

Speaking about liberalism, though he could be talking about any authority hallucinated as transcendent, Asad writes, “Like any imperializing orthodoxy, this doctrine demands of us a universal way of ‘being human’—which is really a singular way of articulating desire, discourse, and gesture in the body’s economy.”²³ Asad’s statement here connects up to our non-theological exploration of tradition because he shows that imperializing orthodoxies are concerned ultimately with the identity of the human. What the axiom of non-theology ultimately means, and has as a

21 Barber 2011, 91

22 Ibid

23 Asad 1993, 292.

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consequence, is that there is no universal definition for being human and that the concept of identity for the human, qua creatural, is radically different from the transcendental or standard philosophical concept of identity. Gnostic refusal, as outlined by Laruelle in *Future Christ* and *Struggle and Utopia at the End Times of Philosophy*, is the breaking from tradition as an end, revealing it merely as a means suspended from origin and end. For gnosis reveals, in its questioning of the simple “what is” and its question of what it means to be a human creature, the ways in which all traditions are ultimately unilaterally dependent upon the creatures who make them manifest, who are ultimately foreclosed to reified tradition. But why is gnosticism, or what we will also refer to as simply gnosis, privileged? Is this simply a puerile anti-Christian move? Does it tarry dangerously close to a more threatening anti-Judaism, which appears to many ignorant of the study of religion as simply anti-Semitism?²⁴ In the story that Orthodox Christianity tells about itself, the heretical gnostic traditions came after the origin of “true Christianity” that Marion spoke about. In reality, as has been long established by scholars, many of the various sects called gnostic (the majority of which no longer exist, often having been physically wiped from the face of the earth by other human beings) came before the establishment of what we would recognise as Christianity and its institutions today. As any institution of the practices of gnosis have passed from this world, these gnososes take on a strange identity as having no origin, or coming from a pre-origin, utterly useless for the ends imposed on the human by the traditional institutions of today.

The neo-conservative philosophy of Eric Voegelin was made famous when William F. Buckley popularised his criticism of contemporary politics with the phrase, "Don't immanentize the eschaton!" Voegelin's own conception of gnosticism is known to be rather unscholarly, but though eliding any historical depth it does touch on what we may call the gnostic impulse. He wrote,

“The truth of gnosticism is vitiated, as you will remember, by the fallacious immanentization of the Christian eschaton. The fallacy is not simply a theoretical mistake concerning the meaning of the eschaton [... but] in so far as they apply their fallacious construction to concrete social problems, they misrepresent the structure of immanent reality. [...] Specifically, the Gnostic fallacy destroys the oldest wisdom of mankind concerning the

24 There is a debate amongst scholars of the history of religions about whether or not something as diffuse as the various groups collected under the term gnosis even exist. Foremost amongst those who argue for the uselessness of the term is Karen King. See her King 2009. However, as I argue below, I follow the work of other theorists who are more structuralist in their understanding of identity, like Corbin and other more contemporary historical thinkers like Gerd Lüdemann (see Lüdemann 1996) who assert the usefulness of this term in capturing a certain spirit of a myriad of “lost” traditions.

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rhythm of growth and decay which is the fate of all things under the sun. [...] Gnosticism, thus, has produced something like the counterprinciples to the principles of existence".²⁵

To this we can only say, simply, yes. While historically it is fallacious to suggest that historical Gnosticism comes after Christianity (and Voegelin's characterisation is especially suspect by the standards of historical scholarship on the myriad of traditions collected under the general term "Gnosticism") there is something to the here-and-now demands of gnostics that goes counter to the kind of Christianity which eventually settled throughout the world. Against a Christianity reconciled with the World, with the State, where any hope of overturning the Powers of this World is always deferred until the end of time, the Gnostic sects and heretics that historically are found throughout history were demanding an imminent change in the here-and-now.²⁶ And so also yes to the notion that gnosticism "misrepresents the structure of immanent reality". Here the issue is one of a kind of sterile, essentialist naturalism common to conservative philosophy. By immanent reality Voegelin means something akin to the modern use of the word "natural" or even "what simply is". This is the pivot point of conservative ideology, turning "immanent reality" into a normative transcendence before which all creatures must bow in their own radical immanence. And so, yes, the key here is to mis-represent that hallucinated "immanent reality", to turn the representation of an oppressive transcendence on its head. And so, finally, a yes to the production of the counterprinciples of existence. It is precisely against the principles of existence given in this transcendent presentation of immanent reality that gnosis provides the counterprinciples to. Specifically, there is a rejection of a survival under the laws of tradition taken as ends. Instead gnosis requires something like a living in truth, something like a lived experience as truth.

Thus gnosis, as it is more correctly called, refers to a transhistorical or metahistorical form of practice and thought that one can see run throughout religions. As Henry Corbin, the forgotten and maligned philosopher of religion, has put it, "Gnosis is not a phenomenon particular to one religion: it is a *Welt-Religion*. There was a gnosis in Islam, just as there was a gnosis in Christianity, and these gnosises certainly have more affinities with one another than the official religious forms into which

25 Voegelin 1987, 165, 166.

26 Norman O. Brown makes a similar claim with regard to the lived experience of time in Islam, marking out Islam as a kind of challenge to the world as a universal prophetic tradition. See Brown 2009 and Iqbal 2012. Basit Kareem Iqbal's goes beyond a mere review and deepens these claims by suggesting ways in which Brown's thesis can be seen without the reference to a certain kind of orientalisering of Islam through exclusive focus on Shi'a sources.

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they secretly made their spirit penetrate.”²⁷ The issue here does not concern origins; whether or not gnosis comes prior to Christianity, or prior to Islam, or prior to both but after Judaism, is not of interest here. Gnosis instead is the name for a form that can be seen running parallel to these established religions. A kind of force that remains undetermined by their constituted power. A practice and thought, a weapon, fashioned out of the materials present in that religion, but changed in the form of gnosis. In many ways this fits within a generally dualistic theory of religion and political-social life that we can see in thinkers as divergent as Bergson, Negri, and Bloch. Where Bergson posits a difference between open and closed religion, and Negri posits a difference between constituting power and constitutive power, the non-theological theory of religion posits a difference between gnostic revolt or even "cultural revolution" and constituted, compromised piety. In its stranger status as passed from this world and without origin, gnosis names a refusal. A refusal of authority and tradition as transcendent, and an insistence that they are instead merely means that can be taken in hand or that must be disempowered by any means necessary.

The problem is not with a simple rejection of all authority – that would be adolescent and puerile – but rather the rejection of the belief that authority is good. It is a rejection of believing in any form of theodicy, or any anthropodicy after the death of God. It is a rejection of belief in any authority that will come and save us, rather than enslave us. Laruelle sums this up beautifully in his comparison of what he calls “the two atheisms”, writing:

“We already know through the victim’s complaint and the courage of certain heretics, perhaps without knowing it because of a certain blessed philosophy, that in God hides the Great Persecutor. The true atheism is not nearly as simple as philosophy imagines it, it goes through two stages, the banal refusal to believe in a God is self-contradictory and satisfies small-thinking, but the refusal to believe in a good God is the true rebellion. There is always a good God in ambush, who prepares his return in any negation, like a negation of his existence, even if it is a materialist negation, but it is important that this is a malicious God, a thesis only an “ultra”-religious heresy can confront. Indifferent atheism is weak and surrenders in calling on philosophy; the second is a strong heresy, the “non-”theological radicalisation of the malicious God, the extension of this malicious God to every divinity that presents itself as One or Multiple, as Unique and Great as much as natural and pagan.”²⁸

It is gnosis that provides, again just as simple means and models, a prior form of thought which undoes this belief in a good God, a good Authority. Gnostic refusal is found in the impossibility of tradition as a real end by way of a more radical weaponized apophaticism, this time turned upon the idea of principle itself. The gnostic text, “The Apocryphon of John” undoes any form of knowledge

27 Corbin 1960, 14. Translation slightly modified.

28 Laruelle 2012b, 46-47. [Translation mine.]

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by declaring that one cannot even speak of the “true God” (which for gnostics was beyond the god who created this world) as Divine. This principle does not rule this world at all and so is not at all related to this world. There is a radical, complete, utterly irreversible and untraversable break between what is actually highest within thought and this world. Or, in less archaic terms, there is a radical break between the Human-in-person (the radical identity of the human stripped of all transcendent attributes) and the structures and authorities that determine the human as subject (the human as a blended identity of immanence and attributes separate from that lived identity). Thus the gnostic naming of “God” always rejects the claim that the authority of God is a good name (think of names like Lord or even the name God) and goes so far as to speak of an “Unknown Silent One” and an “Existent alone by itself” without any attributes.²⁹

Clearly this completely foreclosed identity beyond authority, beyond that who gives authorisation to speak, to theorise, to practice, is taken up in some way by Laruelle in his thinking of the human. To close I want to suggest that this gnostic refusal allows us to approach traditions in a new way, enabling us to think through politics in a seemingly post/secular age (the slash speaking to the fundamental amphibology of the secular and post-secular today). One that looks to traditions, not within the coordinates set by Christian, secular liberalism, but as means for the construction of human identities.

Let’s look at an example taken from a student of Asad, Hussein Ali Agrama in his recent *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt*. While I am not trying to collapse Agrama or Asad under a general non-theological schema, their anthropological work shares much in common with what Laruelle calls the “defence of the human” in their refusal of any straightforwardly universalist schema for human flourishing or ways of being, as well as in their focus upon “ordinary human life”. Agrama’s ethnography focuses on the fatwa courts in Egypt and the people who come there seeking help. As he explains, the reason that Egypt is such a fruitful country in which to examine secularism is because, as a secular state, it has written a fundamental ambiguity into its very modern constitution: its legal structure is modelled on the secular legal system of France while simultaneously claiming the Islamic tradition of *Shari’a*. This mixed constitution is not altogether different than the UK and the US, though the presence of Islam may often cause a hasty observer to assume a kind of exotic confusion while ignoring the parallel confusions of the

29 See Brakke 2010, 53, 60

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West. As Agrama writes, “secularism itself incessantly blurs together religion and politics in Egypt, and [...] it is a form of power that works through and relies upon the precariousness of the categories it establishes. This, however, is not peculiar to Egypt; it is also a characteristic of many states considered to be paradigms of modern secularity, such as France, Germany, and Britain”³⁰ Like these European countries, Egypt simultaneously draws power from its majority religious tradition and attempts to control and circumscribe the claims to authority within that tradition. This is most clearly seen in the way the fatwa courts exist technically outside the civil law and yet *Shari’a*, technically the official basis for that civil law, is also practiced here by muftis whom people respect although they have no actual police powers. *Shari’a* is thus practiced in such a way that it is no longer “entangled in the question of religion and politics” that exists at the level of civil law and so exists in a place that Agrama intriguingly refers to as one of “asecularity”.

Why might we need such a concept? Because the dialectic of the secular and post-secular is established firmly upon a monism of “the political” where everything is taken as needing to submit to this all-too-concrete abstraction: politics as a master attribute which is mixed with anything and everything else. Agrama’s exploration of Egypt’s secularity points to something about secular power that has not been considered by many other thinkers:

“Usually it is thought that secular power renders religious traditions irrelevant by relegating them outside the domain of politics. Where religion remains or becomes political, then this is where secular power is seen to have failed, remains incomplete, where its normative impetus has broken down, or where its impossibility stands revealed. But the discussion here points to another possible way that secular power renders religion irrelevant, not by rendering it outside of politics, but precisely by politicizing it. In politicizing religion in broadly similar ways across various polities, by attaching it to broadly similar sets of conceptual and affective associations, secular power renders the *specificities* of religious traditions irrelevant. This, I submit, is a more profound form of irrelevance than depoliticization.”³¹

This monism of the political, upon which the dialectic of the secular and post-secular plays out, cuts off other forms of life, other stranger forms of subjectivity from being developed. Agrama explains that he chooses the term asecularity because of what we could term its generic element: “The term *nonsecular* is too easily confused with the notion of the religious. And unlike *postsecularity*, *asecularity* is not a temporal marker. It allows for the possibility that *asecularity* has, in different forms, always been with us, even from within the traditions on which state secularity is based.”³² In our terms, derived

30 Agrama 2011, 71

31 Agrama 2012, 185

32 Agrama 2011, 187

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from Laruelle's non-philosophy, *asecularity* may refer to the way in which a creature's radical identity is ultimately foreclosed to the individuals who may destroy her subjectivity (which is not to downplay the real harassment and oppression indicated in such destruction).

In thinking tradition from an asecural lens we may see the ways in which traditions are *used* as means in the construction of those contingent subjectivities, for more or less forms of liberty. Consider this beautiful passage from Agrama detailing the ways in which the fatwa intersects with the subjectivity or self-formation of those who seek a law outside of the massive objects of religion and politics:

“This image of the fatwa as facilitating a journey takes us far from the conventional view of it as primarily a doctrinal pronouncement and an instrument of doctrinal reform. It also helps us to see beyond the idea of Islamic tradition (and its authority) as stuck between its past and a future of incessant novelty. This is because it shows us how the tradition moves towards a future, in the way that it puts a self on a path toward a final destination. One's place on that path, however, is always rendered uncertain, but this is not because endlessly, irreducibly ‘new’ circumstances bring on unforeseeable change. Rather, it is because the familiar friction that arises from the heterogeneity of life's affairs, of being young and growing old and sick, of dying along the way, nevertheless renders obscure whether one has fully arrived at a given place on the path, or whether one is even still on it. Here it is not the creativity of the fatwa that matters, but rather its capacity to enable a self to stay and advance upon an already defined path toward an ideal Muslim self. And that capacity is found not in the pronouncement of doctrinal principles and rules for how to act, not in reforming them to fit modern times, but in the skill of using them *discerningly* to say ‘the right words at the right time’ for the person who seeks guidance.”³³

The heterogeneity of life's affairs, those things that these reified forms of tradition foolishly claim to either give some control over or bestow meaning upon, always ultimately happen to a creature, they are lived by that creature. And though Agrama here speaks of a certain telos it is spoken of in such a way that it could be conceived as ultimately another means. A means upon an uncertain path, acting as a compass, a guide, but still material, still abstract means. Traditions ought to be saved from themselves, from the ways in which they crush creatures beneath them in the very moment that they seek to free them. Traditions may be asecurally reduced to simple means which start creatures on a path seemingly with a power principle driving them, some end driving from behind, reduced as means may allow us to arrive at some kind of liberty that remains to be thought in itself. It may help us move towards some kind of thought and practice without-limits.

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