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The Post-Secular Turn: Enlightenment, Tradition, Revolution

Abstract:

The aim of this essay is to give a general and accessible overview of the so called “post-secular” turn in the contemporary humanities. The main idea behind it is that it constitutes an answer to the crisis of the secular grand narratives of modernity: the Hegelian narrative of the immanent progress of the Spirit, as well as the enlightenment narrative of universal emancipation. The post-secularist thinkers come in three variations which this essay names as Enlightenment, Traditional, and Revolutionary. The first camp wishes to reconceptualize the place of religion in the seemingly secularized modern paradigm and see if revelation can cooperate with enlightenment, that is, if it can support the modern emancipatory values in the dangerous moment of their “crisis of legitimation.” The second one emphasizes the need to recover the institutional aspect of Christian theology which must be reinstated once again as the “queen of the sciences,” or as the true “invisible hand” operating behind social theories. And the third party, which simultaneously opposes both, enlightenment and tradition, revolves mostly around the “revolutionary figure” of Saint Paul and constitutes a radically leftist answer to the crisis of Marxism with its scientific insight into the objective laws of history.

Keywords:

post-secularism, enlightenment, tradition, revolution, Marranism, nihilism, naturalism, indifferentism

The aim of this essay¹ is to give a general and accessible overview of the so called “post-secular” turn in the contemporary humanities. The very term, *post-secularism*, was made popular by Jürgen Habermas in his famous speech from 2001, “Glauben und Wissen” (“Faith and Knowledge”), but the phenomenon as such is much earlier.² The first occurrence of post-secular thought *avant la lettre* can be seen already in the seminal book of Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, which was dubbed by its critics as “post-atheistic,”³ and in the works of the early Frankfurt School, most of all Theodor Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a milieu of which Habermas is the latest representative. The main idea behind the post-secular turn is that it constitutes an answer to the crisis of the secular grand narratives of modernity: in Rosenzweig’s case – the Hegelian narrative of the immanent progress of the Spirit; and in the case of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Habermas – the enlightenment narrative of universal emancipation. They all wish to rethink the place of religion in the seemingly secularized modern paradigm and see if revelation can cooperate with enlightenment, that is, if it can support the modern emancipatory values in the dangerous moment of their “crisis of legitimation.”⁴ Here, religious revelation is not regarded as an enemy of enlightenment, but as its potential ally in the time of need. The main danger, threatening the core values of enlightenment, is *naturalism* – and revelation, understood as an opening of a transcendent, supra-natural dimension of surplus existence, which is regarded as an aid in fighting the reductionist, naturalist specter.

But this is not the only one, and perhaps not even the most popular, version of the late-modern turn to post-secularism. The parallel interpretation, coined more or less in the same time as Habermas’ by John Milbank and his pupils (Phillip Blond, Adrian Pabst, Catharine Pickstock, and Conor Cunningham, just to name the few) insists on the return of theology in the traditional form of Radical Orthodoxy. While the Frankfurt-enlightenment appeal to religion stakes itself on individual, often heterodox and subversive, uses of revelation – the Nottingham Traditionalists emphasize the need to recover the institutional aspect of Christian theology which must be reinstated once again as the “queen of the sciences,” or as the true “invisible hand” operating behind social theories. Here, a radically conceived Christian orthodoxy returns as the defender of faith against modern *nihilism*: the danger, incipient to a purely secular worldview, which reduces human being to a passive and objectified lump of matter and thus annihilates the normative perspective of good and evil. On the one hand, there is nothing new in this theological rejection of modernity, which has been the *thema regium* of such prominent anti-modern thinkers as Erich Voegelin, Romano Guardini and Hans-Urs von Balthasar. On the other hand, however, Radical Orthodoxy’s merit lies in collecting all those theologico-conservative critiques of modern nihilism under one heading of the post-secular reconquest of the West in the name of the return to the *radix*, the very roots of what has been lost, in a hope that they once again will be able to grow a living tradition.

But post-secularism proves to be useful also for the third party which simultaneously opposes both, enlightenment and tradition: the party of revolution. This variant of the post-secular debate, which revolves mostly

1) This essay was written thanks to the support of NCN Opus 13 Grant: “The Marrano Phenomenon: The Jewish ‘Hidden Tradition’ and Modernity” registered in the OSF system as 2017/25/B/HS2/02901.

2) It is in Jürgen Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen: Rede zum Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels 2001* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.5840/forphil200272>, where he summons the Judeo-Christian to the rescue against the specter of naturalist eugenics as the last ditch of humanism, based on the religious idea of election and covenant. For a more detailed definition of post-secularism, see also Jürgen Habermas, “Secularism’s Crisis of Faith: Notes on Post-Secular Society,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2008): 17–29, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5842.2008.01017.x>.

3) See most of all Margarete Susman, “Exodus from Philosophy,” in Franz Rosenzweig, *The New Thinking*, trans. Alan Udof and Barbara Galli (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999).

4) See Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975): an earlier work of Habermas’ diagnosing the wavering of the foundations of the modern “emancipatory narratives”.

around the “revolutionary figure” of Saint Paul (Agamben, Badiou, Žižek), constitutes a radically leftist answer to the crisis of Marxism with its allegedly scientific insight into the objective laws of history. With the decline of the Marxist grand narrative of the “end of history” realized in global communism, these thinkers turn to Saint Paul who founded new religion through a radical break with all traditional systems of faith and social organization. Here, the religious original act of the “foundation of the new” is meant as an inspiration against the late-modern tendency to see the social world as devoid of political alternatives, in other words as the semi-naturalized biopolitical process of “bare life,” dominated solely by the issues of social wellbeing. Thus, while the enlightenment post-secularism invokes revelation against *naturalism*, and the traditionalist post-secularism calls upon religious orthodoxy against *nihilism*, the revolutionary section refers to religion against *indifferentism*, that is, a social state of mind in which a foundational Event and political decision is no longer possible.

Despite irreconcilable differences between these three options, there is also a clear sense of affinity: in all three cases, religion is recollected in order to counteract the detrimental tendency, characteristic of a purely secular modernity, to reduce human existence to a monotonous, predictable, and quasi-natural cycle of life and death in which radically new political decisions either count for nothing or simply become impossible. If, as Hannah Arendt surmises, the domain of politics is sustained only by properly “human action,” based on a certain *surplus* of “self-transcendence,” that cannot be explained from a purely instrumental point of view and, precisely because of that, is capable to establish a radical beginning, the renaturalization of the human in the name of biopolitical pragmatism kills this excess as merely irrational.⁵ Yet, as I will argue here, it is not easy to escape the reductionist climate of our age: the post-secular *use* of religion may also be accused of such reductive instrumentality itself, summoning elements of transcendent faith merely in order to reform the immanent conditions of our social life. On the other hand, however, such reform is exactly what is expected of the returning religious thought: as Hans Jonas insists, modern temper is set on the immanence of the world and what it wants from the post-secular turn is a certain *theology of worldliness* which would venture beyond the “traditional” dualism of transcendence and immanence, where the latter appears as merely an ontologically relative and secondary “shadow” of the former.⁶ There is, therefore, an expectation that thought on transcendence can be *used* for the sake of immanence as a truly existent and significant realm of finite things, yet it cannot be declared from a purely pragmatist – secular – perspective: it should also be justified from the theological point of view. This combination of traits could be regarded as the defining feature of post-secularism *proper*: not any kind of wholesale return of religion in late-modern reasoning, but only this one avenue which can be demonstrated to aim at the theology of worldliness – or a non-secular account of secularism – that goes beyond the opposition of the pragmatic defense of immanence only and the idealist investment in sole transcendence. The theology of worldliness would thus be a highly dialectical concept postulating a middle way between pragmatism and idealism. As I will try to show, there is only one post-secular option which successfully sticks to this criterion – the “enlightenmental” one – while the “revolutionary” and the “traditional” variants fail to meet its dialectical demand and fall to the side of, respectively, the utilitarian reduction of religion, on the one hand, and the premodern denigration of immanence, on the other.

5) Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), especially the chapter “Eternity versus Immortality,” 17–20.

6) “On this unconditional immanence the modern temper insists. It is its courage or despair, in any case its bitter honesty, to take our being-in-the-world seriously: to view the world as left to itself, its laws as brooking no interference, and the rigor of our belonging to it as not softened by extramundane providence.” Hans Jonas, *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, trans. Lawrence Vogel (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 134.

Contaminated Horizons

One way to approach the emergence of post-secular thought on the map of late-modern humanities, is to see it as a continuation of the famous debate around the “thesis of secularization,” which was formulated by Karl Löwith in his *Meaning and History*. According to Löwith, modern philosophy – and especially philosophy of history, which created the so called grand narratives of historical development, for example, Hegel’s “progress of freedom” and Marx’s vision of “communist revolution” – are nothing but secularized forms of premodern religious stories, telling the “holy history” (*Heilsgeschichte*) beginning with creation and ending with redemption. Modernity, inaugurating the secular age, takes these stories and translates them into mundane scenarios in which God’s providential plan is being replaced with the immanent power of mankind itself. On Löwith’s account, therefore, *secularization consists in making theology worldly*: in transposing the otherworldly religious imaginary into contents capable to work through the material condition of the immanence.

But this secularizing maneuver is more complex than just a direct translation of *Heilsgeschichte* into universal earthly history. Already in his comparative study on Nietzsche and Hegel, which precedes *Meaning and History*, Löwith puts forward a hypothesis that this translation is a *compromise* deriving from the conflict between two opposite sacral sensibilities, both represented in modernity, which fight with one another and, in the process, constantly produce hybridical results. On Löwith’s account, modernity is a discursive battle-field of “horizons” consisting in the irreconcilable opposition between Greek immanentism, based on the sacred natural law of birth and decay, and Judeo-Christian transcendentism, based on the divine promise of historical salvation that leads beyond the worldly realm:

To the *Jews* and Christians, however, history was primarily a history of salvation. . . it is only within a pre-established horizon of ultimate meaning, however hidden it may be, that actual history seems to be meaningless. This horizon has been established by history, for it is Hebrew and Christian thinking that brought this colossal question into existence. To ask earnestly the question of the ultimate meaning of history takes one’s breath away; it transports us into a vacuum which only hope and faith can fill. The ancients were more moderate in their speculations. They did not presume to make sense of the world or to discover its ultimate meaning. They were impressed by the visible order and beauty of the cosmos, and the cosmic law of growth and decay was also the pattern for their understanding of history. According to the Greek view of life and the world, everything moves in recurrences, like the eternal recurrence of sunrise and sunset, of summer and winter, of generation and corruption. This view was satisfactory to them because it is a rational and natural understanding of the universe, combining a recognition of temporal changes with periodic regularity, constancy, and immutability. The immutable, as visible in the fixed order of the heavenly bodies, had a higher interest and value to them than any progressive and radical change. In this intellectual climate, dominated by the rationality of the natural cosmos, there was no room for the universal significance of a unique, incomparable historic event. As for the destiny of man in history, the Greeks believed that man has resourcefulness to meet every situation with magnanimity – they did not go further than that. They were primarily concerned with the *logos* of the *cosmos*, not with the *Lord* and the meaning of *history*.⁷

7) Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 4, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226162294.001.0001>.

While neither of these horizons taken in isolation focuses on *worldly history* – the Greeks operate with a cyclical notion of time, whereas the Jews, who invented the linear notion of time, locate its end in the messianic fulfillment coming from beyond the finite realm – the clash between them produces a *bastardized*, “illegitimate” effect which, *purely by mistake*, sacralizes the immanent historical dimension. Löwith, very critical of modern historiosophy, is thus convinced that its leading question – “Is the essence and ‘meaning’ of history determined absolutely from within the history itself; and, if not, then how?”⁸ – is itself meaningless and devoid of any “legitimacy”: it is only an accidental crisscross between the two integral and “legitimate” systems of belief. Theology making itself worldly due to the “pagan” influence is thus neither theology nor immanentism proper: it is, in fact, nothing but an intellectual error. The two *sacra* being ultimately incompatible, modern historiosophies of Hegel and Marx, resulting from their contamination, can only be deemed “illegitimate” and merely “pseudo-religious”:

Nietzsche was right when he said that to look upon nature as if it were a proof of the goodness and care of God and to interpret history as a constant testimony to a moral order and purpose – that all this is now past because it has conscience against it. But he was wrong in assuming that the *pseudo-religious makeup of nature and history* is of any real consequence to a genuine Christian faith in God, as revealed in Christ and hidden in nature and history.⁹

According to Löwith, therefore, one can either believe in “the rationality of the natural cosmos” beyond good and evil, or in “the unique, incomparable historic event” leading to the transcendent revelation of ultimate goodness – but one cannot *believe* in the theological significance of “nature and history” and their inner religious transformation. This *error* would simply not deserve to be called a *belief*. But – why not? Is Löwith’s analysis truly convincing in his rejection of the hybridical forms of modern faith, which, in Jonas’ manner, “insist on immanence”?

The post-secular option, which I call here “enlightenmental,” begs to differ precisely on this point. What for Löwith is an irreparable vice – the meaningless clash of the two meaningful but irreconcilable horizons – it turns into virtue: a “spiritual investment” in the material historical world, in which revelation cooperates with enlightenment and vice versa.¹⁰ Only on the surface, therefore, which hides the dynamic dimension of struggle, modernity *appears* to be secular, that is, devoid of any open religious commitment. Deep down, the aporetic collision between the Greek ahistorical naturalism and the Hebrew “holy history,” constantly gives rise to new forms of religious affirmation of *worldly history*, which, because of their non-normative idiosyncrasy, cannot be properly articulated. As Charles Taylor, himself a post-secular thinker, demonstrates in his *Sources of the Self*: when two hostile “horizons” confront one another in the fight for cultural hegemony, they both lose a capability of full articulation.¹¹ It does not mean, however, that they disappear completely; they rather slide

8) See Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: Revolution in the Nineteenth-Century Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), xvi.

9) Löwith, *Meaning in History*, v; my emphasis.

10) The modern theology of worldliness would thus locate itself on the opposite pole to Jacob Taubes’ famous declaration: “I can imagine as an apocalyptic: let it go down. I have no spiritual investment in the world as it is.” Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Holänder (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 103. It reverts Taubes’ formula and fully affirms what he vehemently denies: a “spiritual investment in this world”.

11) See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 17, where he deplores the loss of stable and all-encompassing conceptual frameworks which were called by Nietzsche “horizons”: “The forms of revealed religions continue very much alive, but also highly contested. None forms the horizon of the whole society in the modern West... the loss of horizon described by Nietzsche’s fool undoubtedly corresponds to something very widely felt in our culture.”

into the regions of the unconscious and emerge on the surface in the form of symptoms, just like the Freudian language of dreams. On Taylor's account, modernity, only seemingly secular, is still religious – but its religions, just as in Löwith's interpretation, are in mutual conflict and because of that repressed, that is, pushed back into the unconscious regions of inarticulation. Yet, *inarticulation* is a lighter condition than *illegitimacy*: it can be cured, if there were to arise *subtler languages* capable to express the dynamic and non-orthodox, hybridical forms of modern theological thought attuned to the “immanentist temper.”

Between Myth and Exodus: Modern Theology of Immanence

Post-secular analysis which takes the “enlightenmental” form is mostly devoted to the task of deciphering the lost “horizons” and their hybridical effects: it wants to reveal the antagonistic religious languages of modernity and their mutual hidden interactions, or, in the words of the contemporary scholar of religion, it attempts to counteract the modern age's “religious illiteracy.”¹² As primarily an *analysis*, it does not postulate a return of fervent piety, does not convert, and does not press toward the reinstatement of theology as the crown of the sciences. In its ambition to disclose the repressed religious horizons of modern thought, it indeed resembles psychoanalysis. This similarity amounts to something more than just an analogy; in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the first truly post-secular work, Adorno and Horkheimer freely use technics of decoding of the hermeneutics of suspicion, elaborated by Sigmund Freud. Just as Freud, in his last essay *Moses and Monotheism*, deconstructed the shallow secularity of modern man, by showing that his unconscious still partakes in a prehistorical struggle between monotheism and paganism,¹³ the Frankfurt duo also demonstrates the indelible presence of heterodox religious motifs in the seemingly solid and objective rationality of the modern enlightenment. The eponymous dialectics of enlightenment amounts to the conflict between two types of sacral sensibility, which, a decade later, will also become the explicit theme of Löwith's *Meaning in History*: Greco-mythological, on the one hand, and Judeo-messianic, on the other. Yet, unlike in Löwith, this conflict is not seen as unfruitful and purely erroneous: it rather translates into two dialectically intertwined models of interpreting enlightenment – as a *myth*, where enlightenment is represented by the story of Odysseus, on the one hand, and as a *promise*, deriving from the biblical story of Exodus, on the other, less explicit in Adorno's and Horkheimer's narrative, but nonetheless very much present as the hidden guiding thread of their cultural critique.

Just as in Löwith's distinction between the two sacred horizons – the Greek one, favoring the timeless cycle of nature, and the Judeo-Christian one, investing in the meaning of history – the *myth* orients itself toward the immanence of being as an enclosed circle (*der Bannkreis des Daseins*), while *promise* engages the imagination of what is to come but is *not yet present* in the actuality of existence, which, by transcending the “circle of being,” constitutes the original figure of transcendence.¹⁴ In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a book composed in 1944, Horkheimer and Adorno grant the latter narrative a proper emancipatory power, but on one proviso: the transcendent promise cannot escape the realm of immanence but must stay within it to serve the ideal of freedom. Only by setting themselves free from *myth*, which praises the mysterious might of nature's cycle of growth and decay and man's dependence on it, could humans make an *exit* from the natural world; only by raising above the ambivalence of elements, could they create their own transparent rules of existence and thus enter the way of enlightenment which still constitutes a valid project for mankind. But they could do it only

12) This term was coined by Diane Moore in her book: Dianne Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Multicultural Approach to Teaching About Religion in Secondary Schools* (New York and London: Palgrave, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230607002>.

13) Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Random House, 1955).

14) Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 247.

when led by a *promise* which promised them liberation from the enchanting powers of myth – or, in biblical words, an *Exodus* from the natural “house of bondage.”

Like everything the Frankfurt School founders ever wrote, this message is anything but simply secular. One of the greatest and most deplorable misunderstandings of the secular age plagued by “religious illiteracy” is the interpretation of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* as a purely profane work which places itself along the skeptical lineage of the Enlightenment narrowly understood, regardless of all its adversarial, violently dialectical and deeply uncanny style which does not shun sacral vocabulary. Walter Benjamin was lucky to have a friend like Gershom Scholem, who immediately reacted to his non-normative modern Jewish sensibility, and stated, both about himself and his younger colleague, that “[our] secularism is not secular.”¹⁵ Horkheimer, less lucky, had to do it himself: many years later, in a famous interview for German radio, he quite suddenly declared that all the early Frankfurt School was really just a “Judaism undercover.”¹⁶ This “Marrano” characteristic, which at the same time betrays and covers its traces, applies all the more to Adorno who was the most reluctant of the three to confess his religious indebtedness – yet all his works, from *Minima Moralia* on, bear a distinctive pathos of the Hebraic prophet who preaches to the strayed hosts in the midst of the wilderness.¹⁷ It thus will not be an exaggeration to say that *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, with its high-pitched prophetic idiom, is nothing else but a typically Jewish type of commemorating narrative called *zakhor*: “remember!” This narrative proves particularly useful as a part of the post-secular discourse, because what it wants us to remember/recollect are precisely the forgotten languages of the sacred, which modernity erased in its confused “religious illiteracy” as once-meaningful integral “horizons.” Yet it is not set with the purpose to return to a traditional premodern purity of those religious idioms; rather with the purpose to affirm – and articulate – their inevitable modern *contamination*.

The specific *zakhor* which Horkheimer and Adorno address to late-modern humanity, fallen into the “dogmatic slumber” of self-contentment, deals with the secret message of enlightenment as, primarily, Exodus: *yetziat mitzraim*, literally, “getting out of Egypt”, and metaphorically, leaving once and for all the domain of the mythical cycle of life and death, the house of bondage of false mystery, and the humiliating domination of nature. “I saw, spoke Yahweh, I beheld the burden my people held – in Egypt. I come down to lift them out of Egypt’s hand, to carry them to a broad, open land.” This great image – Northrop Frye would have said, “the great code” – of lifting, releasing, letting free, is one of the most recurrent figures of Western culture, and, especially, of Western modernity. Immanuel Kant, writing his famous essay on the question “What Is Enlightenment?”, could not, in fact, have made it clearer, when he defined *die Aufklärung* as *der Ausgang aus der selbstverschuldigten Unmündigkeit*, that is, the exit – exodus out of the self-inflicted immaturity in which mankind slumbered for ages, curled up in a self-chosen embryonic state, oblivious of the heroic imperative of “getting out” and challenging the state of dependency on Mother-Nature.¹⁸ His *Ausgang* was to be carried

15) Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis. Selected Essays*, ed. Werner Dannhauser (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 46.

16) See Max Horkheimer, “Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen [Gespräch mit Helmut Gumnior 1970],” in *Gesammelte Schriften in 19 Bände*, vol. 7, 385–404. On the “Marrano” nature of the theology of worldliness as the hybridical result emerging from the confrontation of the Judaic and Hellenistic tradition, highly characteristic of many modern Jewish thinkers, from Spinoza to Derrida, see my work Agata Bielik-Robson, *Jewish Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity: Philosophical Marranos* (London: Routledge, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315774466>, especially the introduction.

17) According to Hannah Arendt, this alone would make Adorno an heir of the hidden Judaic tradition, manifesting itself mostly in a prophetic zeal: Hannah Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition. Acht Essays* (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1976).

18) “Enlightenment is man’s exit from his self-incurred minority. Minority is the incapacity to use one’s intelligence without the guidance of another. Such minority is self-incurred if it is not caused by lack of intelligence, but by lack of determination and courage to use one’s intelligence without being guided by another. *Sapere Aude!* Have the courage to use your own intelligence! is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.” Immanuel Kant, “Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?,” trans. Thoms K. Abbott, in *Basic Writings of Kant*, ed. Allen W. Wood (London: Penguin, Modern Library Classics, 2001), 135.

out without any God, or perhaps, only with the help of the “God of reason” (as Herman Cohen reinterpreted this phrase in his *Religion der Vernunft*¹⁹), yet the pattern remained the same: to invest in the not-yet potentiality of the promise, leave behind the bondage of false “spiritual leadership” and enter the broad, open land of self-constitution and self-creative adventure.

But what also must be “remembered,” is that Exodus is a high-risk project, in which the certainty of Egypt is traded for the unknown of the Promised Land. There is, however, a new religious category which partly compensates for the loss of certainty and which had never played an important role in the mythological universe – *the category of hope*. Søren Kierkegaard, in his *Concept of Anxiety* – the most insightful psychological analysis of the *yetziat* – says that this is precisely what differentiates the Greeks from the Jews and sets the eternal opposition between Athens and Jerusalem. While the Greeks have the tragic religion in which every individual hubris has to be punished by the mythical all-leveling power of fate – the Jews, on the contrary, wish to challenge the natural order, by promoting a notion of hope which only then becomes an “ontological category”: not just a subjective state of a mind, temporarily overwhelmed by *hubris*, but an objective potentiality of the world which is not yet finished as an enterprise of creation.²⁰ For Kierkegaard, however, just like for Saint Augustine, hope is a category of faith, which aims at otherworldly reward: a personal immortality spent in the proximity of God. Yet, in the milieu of the “philosophical Marranos,” to whom Horkheimer and Adorno belong, thinking already in the contaminated context of the Greco-Judeo-Christian horizons, the category of hope acquires a worldly dimension, without losing its theological background. Although strongly opposed to the Hellenistic rule of cyclical immanence, the authors of *The Dialectic* nonetheless accept the very affirmation of immanence as such and shift the category of hope into the secularized dimension.²¹ On the one hand, therefore, they condemn the mythic mind for its creative timidity, by claiming that “in its figures, mythology had the essence of the *status quo*: cycle, fate, and domination of the world reflected as the truth and deprived of hope”²² – yet, on the other hand, they invest spiritually in *this* world, by evoking the motif of Exodus that brings a promise, which, in turn, gives birth to hope.

At the same time, however, they are also highly aware of Löwith’s warning against “the pseudo-religious makeup of nature and history,” which stakes itself on a full realization of the promise here and now, and, when it remains stubbornly unfulfilled, the sense of hopelessness it engenders becomes far worse, far more damaging than the original “deprivation of hope,” inscribed in the safe mythological logic of small expectations and disappointments anticipated in advance. The failure of Western modernity lies precisely in the fact that it first created a promise which it failed to fulfill and stirred a hope which it subsequently abandoned. But the answer which Horkheimer and Adorno have in mind is neither the return to “the genuine Christian faith,” which puts

19) See Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995).

20) See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).

21) This rule is very well demonstrated by Yirmiyahu Yovel, the expert on the Marrano tradition and Spinoza particularly, whom he calls a “Marrano of reason” pursuing the “adventures of immanence”. The very phrase forming the subtitle of his Spinoza duology – *the adventures of immanence* – captures very well the specific spirit of the modern contamination of horizons. While for the Greeks, immanence was anything but adventurous, rather dull and mechanical in its cyclical repetition, for the modern “philosophical Marranos”, it acquires messianic features of something new and unexpected to advance an *adventure-advent* of redemption. See Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason*, vol. 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); and Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Adventures of Immanence*, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

22) Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. G. Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 27. Later on in this essay this work will be referenced in parenthetical citation as DE followed by page number(s).

hope in transcendent immortality, nor the return “to the Greek view of life and the world, where everything moves in recurrences, like the eternal recurrence of sunrise and sunset, of summer and winter, of generation and corruption.”²³ Their answer is *dialectical* in the manner which defines post-secularism proper: it consists in recalling the categories of faith and hope, generated within the transcendentalist theology, yet for the sake of this world. The promise made by the Enlightenment still holds and can *yet* be realized, but only if modernity manages to articulate its contaminated religious horizons in the form of a fully aware *theology of worldliness*, which – to quote Adorno’s formula of the so called “inverse theology” – looks at the world from the vantage point of redemption. To look at the world this way means to be simultaneously compassionate about its state of unhappiness, and ruthlessly demanding, expecting it to become happy according to the redemptive promise. It means to make a full spiritual investment in the world, with no alibis projecting fulfillment into substitute otherworldly realms:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects – this alone is the task of thought. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite.²⁴

The “simplest thing,” therefore, is to see the world as the *only* possible place of the messianic redemption and, at the same time, see it as absolutely *lacking* from the redemptive point of view. The modern world may thus be a “consummate negativity,” but it does not mean that it should be abandoned for the sake of some “chemically pure spirituality” that wants to evacuate from the fallen material realm.²⁵ On the contrary, once squarely faced, the lacking condition of the world should immediately delineate the mirror-image of its messianic opposite: the promised land of the original messianic promise of universal emancipation. The truly post-secular message, therefore, is not: “Apocalypse, Now!”, but – “Exodus, Now!”. The stake here is not a new revelation

23) Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 4.

24) Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 153. The mysterious term – “inverse theology” – appears for the first time in Adorno’s letter to Walter Benjamin from December 17, 1934, devoted to the latter’s essay on Franz Kafka: “Let me only mention my own earliest attempt to interpret Kafka, nine years ago – I claimed he is a *photograph of earthly life taken from the perspective of the redeemed*, of which nothing appears but the edge of a black cloth, whereas the terrifyingly displaced optic of the photographic image is none other than that of the obliquely angled camera itself ... And this also, and indeed in quite a principled sense, concerns the position of ‘theology’. Since I always insisted on such a position, before entering your *Arcades*, it seems to me doubly important that the image of theology, into which I would gladly see our thoughts dissolve, is none other than the very one which sustains your thoughts here – it could indeed be called ‘inverse’ theology.” Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Henri Lonitz (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 66–67; my emphasis.

25) Pace Löwith, for whom otherworldly Christian mysticism is a paradigmatic religion *per se*, Gershom Scholem, himself very instrumental in creating the Marrano “theology of worldliness” in the milieu of German Jews, criticizes it as a “chemically pure” spirituality, which was – according to him – always alien to the materialist interests of the “carnal Israel”: “Judaism thought nothing of such a chemically pure inwardness of redemption.... The establishment of all things in their proper place, which constitutes the redemption, produces a *totality that knows nothing of such a division between inwardness and outwardness*.” Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism: And Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 17; my emphasis.

that, according to the ambivalent meaning of the word “apocalypse,” would destroy *this* world and show *another* – better, more just and truly worthy of “spiritual investment” – but a newly invigorated belief in the old creation, still harboring a possibility of *not* being an eternal Egypt from which there is no exit.

Dialectic of Enlightenment is one of the most alarming books ever written. Or, perhaps, “written” is not the best word here, for this book belongs primarily to the more ancient oral tradition; before it was turned into a scripture by Adorno’s wife, it was first chanted out in a kind of psychotic-prophetic trance by its authors during their American exile. Overshadowed by the war and the Shoah, the book radiates with a particularly bleak aura of ultimate doom and constitutes the most severe accusation of Western modernity, which – by the dialectical twist of the “inverse theology” – becomes also a desperate last attempt to defend enlightenment against the enlightenment itself: rally what remains of its emancipatory promise, which still echoes the religious commitment of Exodus, and set it against the forces of modern myth, which falls into an eternal recurrence of the same. While the “inverse” theology of worldliness – the world looked upon from the standpoint of redemption – may be regarded as the best of the two worlds, harvested from the contamination of the Greco-Abrahamic horizons: the “Greek” earthly focus on the immanence combined with the “Jewish,” intense and hopeful, “spiritual investment” – the Western *Aufklärung* in its actuality appears as its symmetrical, mirror-image worst: having unsuccessfully challenged the power of myth, it is now being haunted by myths that return to it with vengeance and destroy all hope. The modern world, obsessed by “the myth of that which exists” (DE, 12) turns into a positivistic second nature, even more oppressive and hostile to the spectral, merely possible dimension of promise and hope than the first one. Technological development spirals out of control, while individuals become cogs in its universal abstract machine, once again fully dependent on semi-natural forces. The banned nature takes its cruel revenge in the process of repressive desublimation: distorted instincts rage, by turning the promised land of technological self-fulfillment into a regressive, frightening stage of second wilderness. Everything modernity tried to suppress comes back with the threatening air of the return of the repressed: once again, “Egypt becomes enthroned.”²⁶

The critical idiom of Horkheimer and Adorno follows closely the directions of the “inverse theology” – the first theology of worldliness and the first post-secular intervention proper: it squarely faces the consummate negativity of the actual Enlightenment and delineates the mirror-image of its opposite, the Enlightenment as it still could be, at its messianic best. It can also begin to understand what went so disastrously wrong: the reason for modernity’s failure lies in the fact that it never properly exited the mythic world, but merely suppressed it through a superficial and partial maneuver of gaining distance from nature, which did not prevent mankind from imitating *the worst* aspect of nature itself, namely the principle of domination: “What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim” (DE, 4). But if that is the only purpose – just the reversal of the poles of domination – then enlightenment, as the strategy of exiting the mythological world, must be essentially doomed: “Just as the myths already realize enlightenment, so enlightenment with every step becomes more deeply engulfed in mythology” (DE, 12). The enlightenment which Adorno and Horkheimer criticize merely *disenchants* the natural mystery, but disenchantment – being a weapon of instrumental reason – only manages to revert the relations of power, where it is now rational subjectivity that gains domination over nature. In the end, therefore, the historical enlightenment, confused with nothing more than disenchantment-*Entzauberung*, reproduces the very essence of myth from which it wanted to free itself in the first place: *the structure of power*. Contrary to this, the “true” enlightenment implied by the religious promise of Exodus, wanted something infinitely *more*: it gave a promise of getting out of all the Egypts of this world, that is, from all structures of domination as such. By forgetting about the promise,

26) Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 27.

and pursuing only the strategy of instrumental inversion of power-relations between reason and nature, the actual enlightenment inevitably slid back into the mythological world and its cyclical *Bannkreis des Daseins*: the eternal return of the same cycle of life and death, principle of immanence equalizing every event via the mechanism of repetition, and the “dry sagacity” of nothing new under the sun –

The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, that the Enlightenment upholds against mythic imagination, is the principle of myth itself. That arid wisdom that holds there is nothing new under the sun, because all the pieces in the meaningless game have been played, and all the great thoughts have already been thought, and because all possible discoveries can be construed in advance and all men are decided on adaptation as the means to self-preservation – that dry sagacity merely reproduces the fantastic wisdom that it *supposedly rejects*: the sanction of fate that in retribution relentlessly remakes what has already been. What was different is equalized. That is the verdict which critically determines the limits of possible experience. The identity of everything with everything else is paid for in that nothing may at the same time be identical with itself (DE, 12; my emphasis).²⁷

The crypto-quote from Ecclesiastes, whom the whole Jewish tradition regards as the first *apikores* – the “renegade” representative of the Greek wisdom (*hochma yevanit*) skeptically pervading the messianic universe of hope and promise – is very telling here: it confirms Löwith’s critical finding, according to which modernity had mixed two incompatible sacred horizons and, while beginning as a child of the Judeo-Christian exodic promise, matured into a Greek disenchanting view of the immanence in its repetitive *status quo*. The question Horkheimer and Adorno pose in their post-secular analysis is thus the following: can Enlightenment be saved against its mythic distortion in a mere disenchantment and returned to the original project of Exodus? Can there be a future Exodus from the Exodus historically gone wrong? And, if there is an exit into yet *another modernity*, leading out of the house of our present bondage, where can it be found? Are we still capable of hope? These are the stakes of the *exodic* post-secular thought, the elements of which will also reverberate in Habermas’ ideas circling around “the incomplete project of modernity”: without the theological lesson of the exodic promise, modernity comes back to Egypt, the dangerously complete and self-enclosed, mythological nature.²⁸

Against Nihilism: *Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam*

Despite some similarities in the critique of historical modernity, there is not much common ground between the post-secular option advocated by the Frankfurt School and the triumphant return of theology as the “queen of the sciences,” sported by the Radical Orthodoxy. While the former type of critique remains dialectical and internal – as, in Adorno’s words, taking the form of the defense of enlightenment as a virtual promise against the enlightenment as the actual myth – the latter is negative and external in its condemning verdict: modernity is nothing but an *error*. This verdict continues and simultaneously intensifies Löwith’s accusation: modernity results from the confusion of horizons, but it also exacerbates this confusion by a hubristic investment in the

27) Adorno will repeat his famous definition of myth also in *Negative Dialectic*: “By leaving nothing left over except the merely existent, they [modern thought systems] recoil into mythos. For it is nothing less than the closed context of immanence, of what is.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1990), 249.

28) See Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity – An Incomplete Project”, republished under the title: Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity versus Postmodernity,” *New German Critique* 22 (Winter 1981): 3–14, <https://doi.org/10.2307/487859>.

immanentist rationality which cuts off the world from the sole source of meaning, light, and life – the *fons vitae* of God the Creator. The effect is paradoxical, even stupefying: modernity values immanence *only*, but it values it as inherently *devalued*. The world of modern materialism is through and through nihilistic, forming but a “heap of broken articles” (T.S. Eliot), meaningless in itself and infinitely mailable; a realm of *natura pura*, “pure nature” unadorned by divine glory and thus incipiently unworthy of any spiritual investment. But this untoward development called the modern age, although donning a purely secular attitude, has, in fact, a theological genealogy. It derives from the erroneous position of the late-medieval theological school called Nominalism, as opposed to the right version of Christian orthodoxy, best expressed in Neoplatonic Thomism.²⁹

Indeed, the emphasis on the *theological genealogy of modernity*, even if it perceives as an “error” arising out of the “fallen” spirit of Nominalism, as well as the display of all the “unintended consequences” of the modern degradation of theology, constitutes the real provocative *forte* of Milbank’s school. While Adorno, Horkheimer, and Habermas look for *another enlightenment*, virtually hidden and thus still present in the folds of the actual enlightenment as its more promising theological reverse (again, Adorno’s “inverse theology”) – Radical Orthodoxy craves for *alternative modernity* which exists only conditionally in the fictional history never to be realized in the same epochal timeline. Going back to the very roots (*radix*) of the modern crisis, Radical Orthodoxy wishes to recreate the truly orthodox matrix of values, which could once again generate modernity, yet one very different from the actual one. The new genesis would have to exclude the detrimental influence of Nominalism, which plunged the modern world into a nihilistic reduction, and follow the alternative path of Thomas Aquinas, Nicolas of Cusa, and Giordano Bruno: a more democratic (at least in declaration) variation of Neoplatonism, capable to affirm individual material beings from the vitalist perspective.³⁰ *Prima facie*, therefore, the formal difference would appear not so striking: Radical Orthodoxy also wants *another modernity*, organically growing out of a different genealogical matrix, and, in that sense, cannot be accused of advocating a simple return to tradition in its premodern form. Moreover, it also demonstrates the typically modern concession towards the “immanentist temper,” although conceived in a radically different – emphatically vitalist – manner. Yet, this seemingly post-secular formula can indeed turn out to be nothing more than just superficial *prima facie*. When examined closer, RO’s project of alternative modernity emerges as an alibi for bashing the actual modernity to no end (an easy critical position which the Frankfurt heirs, far more dialectical and loyal in their critique of the modern age, would never assume), while their alternative vitalist metaphysics proves to be more hierarchical and less individualistic than originally declared.

29) Duns Scotus’ nominalist turn in theology is perceived by the Radical Orthodoxy thinkers as a destructive departure from the Thomistic principle of *analogia entis* (analogy of being), warranting God’s transcendent and radically other mode of being, which inaugurated the fall into unintended consequences of the rival principle of *univocatio entis* (univocity of being). The latter principle lost the guarantee of the divine otherness and gradually started to turn God into a “highest being”, understood in the immanentist/idolatrous terms of sheer might and power. See, for instance, Phillip Blond on the fallen character of modern theology, unable to sustain the suprarational mystery of the divine existence: “The crucial moment in the development of ‘natural theology’ (which I understand as the surrender of theology to secular reason’s account of nature), seems to occur in England between the time of Henry of Ghent and Duns Scotus ... who elevated being to a higher station over God, so that being could be distributed to both God and His creatures. This prior discourse of being assigns to God that mode of being appropriate for His being (infinity), and that mode of being appropriate to other beings (finitude) This univocity of God and creature therefore marks the time when theology itself becomes idolatrous. For theologians disregarded what Thomas had already warned them against, that nothing can be predicated univocally of God and other beings.” Phillip Blond, “Theology before Philosophy,” introduction to *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Phillip Blond (London: Routledge, 1998), 30. Hence, the favorite theologians of the Radical Orthodoxy are either pre-modern Neoplatonists as Proclus (and Thomas Aquinas read in the Neoplatonic manner), or the modern thinkers faithful to the idea of analogy, as the Cambridge Platonists.

30) On this, see particularly the book of Johannes Hoff, closely associated with Milbank’s group: Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

But having said that, there *are* similarities. The critical complaint which opens Phillip Blond's essay under the telling title – "Theology before Philosophy" (not just in temporal, but, most of all, hierarchical terms) – indeed chimes well with Adorno's lament on the modern principle of immanence conceived in the wrong way: unadventurous, dull, cyclical, deprived of all hope –

We live in a time of failed conditions. Everywhere people who have no faith in any possibility, either for themselves, each other, or for the world, mouth locutions they do not understand. With words such as "politics," they attempt to formalize the unformalizable and found secular cities upon it. They attempt to live in the in-between and celebrate ambiguity as the new social horizon, always however bringing diversity into accord with their own projections. Always and everywhere, these late moderns make competing claims about the a priori, for they must be seen to disagree. Indeed such thinkers feel so strongly about the ethical nature of their doubt that they argue with vehemence about overcoming metaphysics, about language and the dangers of presence. Since *God is committed to presence*, they assume that theology is no longer an option sustainable by serious minds. These secular scholars accept without question the philosophical necessity of their position (they are happy autonomous creatures these atheists), even though with a certain magnanimity of gesture they might concede in an informal discussion that God could perhaps exist in some possible world, but they tell us in all likelihood it is not this one. To an external observer such gestures might suggest that these minds are grasping for enemies in a world that they are no longer sure of. But of course such external positions are now no longer considered possible. Blind to the immanence of such a world, unable to disengage themselves from whatever transcendental schema they wish to endorse, *these secular minds are only now beginning to perceive that all is not as it should be, that what was promised to them-self-liberation through the limitation of the world to human faculties-might after all be a form of self-mutilation*. Indeed, ever since Kant dismissed God from human cognition and relegated access to Him to the sphere of practical ethics and moral motivation, human beings have been very pragmatic indeed. They have found value in self-legislation and so see no reason for God. For after all, they now maintain, there can be no moral realism, the good cannot possess any actuality outside the conditional and conditioning nature of the human mind. Nor apparently, according to these late moderns, can a transcendent value escape any of *the contemporary surrogates – language, pragmatics, power –* which transcendental thinking has engendered in order to preserve itself. These proxies, which are viewed as the ruling a prioris of the day, supposedly determine or foreclose upon any other possibility.³¹

What appears similar in the above diagnosis is the following: the fear that *the focus on the absolute immanence without any theological background* precludes a real hope and a real sense of possibilities, too quickly reduced to the self-enclosed "circle of being"; the critical view of the modern promise of liberation, which had turned on itself; and, last but not least, the suspicion that all-pervasive relativism and pragmatism may not be the right path on which to realize human freedom. The main disparity, however, refers to the precise shape of the theological background. While the Frankfurt School operates with a subtle idiom of what Hent de Vries calls "minimal theology,"³² leaving lots of room for the autonomy of the secular mind – Radical Orthodoxy advocates

31) Blond, *Post-Secular Philosophy*, 1; my emphasis.

32) See Hent de Vries, *Minimal Theology: Critiques of Secular Reason in Levinas and Adorno* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005). Adorno's "inverse theology" which looks upon the world from the standpoint of redemption, is a typical "minimal

a return to the strong and militant *God of Presence* who would replace the malfunctioning *deus otiosus*, the inactive and hidden, half-erased “lazy God” of modernity. While the Frankfurt post-secularists are not willing to give up on the promise of emancipation, even if its first enlightenment execution failed – Radical Orthodoxy questions the very idea of the emancipatory promise, by claiming that it directly leads towards mankind’s “self-mutilation.” And what for the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* constitutes the theological prop of the liberatory story, which should be aided by the affective attitude of faith and hope – for the Nottingham *anti-modernes* is a powerful reset of the whole framework of modernity which must be reminded of what it erroneously rejected: the hierarchical metaphysics of universal values, guaranteed by a non-negotiable divine decree.³³ As John Milbank puts it in the preface to the second edition of his *Theology and Social Theory*:

It remains the case, nevertheless, that there is a new recognition of a need for a universal discourse if we are to sustain any political hope. At the same time, those who remain critical of liberalism have still absorbed Nietzsche’s lesson that *the urge towards universalism as such is contingently and historically rooted in Platonism, the Hebrew Bible and Christianity*. It is this insight which prevents any sort of return simply to ‘enlightenment’ rational universality as if this had just been dangerously forgotten by the fancy footwork of the postmodernists. Instead, *there is a newly serious post-secular, rather than neo-modern, investigation under way into the paradoxical specificity of the European commitment to the universal*.³⁴

The “paradoxical specificity,” denounced by Nietzsche and affirmed by Milbank, refers here to the unique combination of the three, not easily matchable, sources – “Platonism, the Hebrew Bible and Christianity” – which, interestingly, questions Löwith’s apology of pure horizons and seems to affirm their contamination, also endorsed by the “Marrano” strategy of Horkheimer and Adorno. Yet, while the latter figures would also endorse the need for a new universalism as rooted not in some abstract values of enlightenment but in a contingent and historical encounter of traditions, their understanding of the modern contamination of horizons is aporetic and dialectical; although capable of producing hybridical results, they are forever in a clash. For Milbank, on the other hand, the contingent contamination always takes the form of the perfect Thomistic *synthesis*: what unites all three historical factors is the meta-narrative of Aquinas, which now should be recollected as the best possible remedy for the modern and post-modern crisis. The “serious post-secular” thought is not “neo-modern” (as the Frankfurt variant could be called), but *radically orthodox*: going back to the three roots of Western civilization, best synthesized and reconciled in the Thomistic system.

But this “back to Thomas” yields yet another analogy in the comparison between the two variants of post-secular thinking. Just as for Milbank Aquinas is the best of the three roots/worlds – so is, for Adorno, the “inverse theology” of worldliness the best of what Athens and Jerusalem have to offer together. And, symmetrically: just as, for Adorno, the instrumental-pragmatic focus on materialist immanence is the worst possible scenario of modernity becoming once again mythological-Greek, so is the Nominalist School the worst “weed”

theology”: it does not look up at the transcendent God, who remains withdrawn, but only at the realm of immanence – with a view to change it.

33) The return to/of hierarchy backed by Neoplatonic metaphysics as a necessary condition of healing the modern crisis is the sole theme of *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy*, a book written by Adrian Pabst, John Milbank’s doctoral student, also active in the British political movement called “Blue Labor”, devised by Milbank’s acolytes as a traditional/communitarian anti-dote to New Labor’s cultural left. See Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

34) John Milbank, “Preface to the Second Edition,” in *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), xxii, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470694121>; my emphasis.

growing out of the combined *radix* of the Greco-Abrahamic alliance. But there is one significant difference: while for Frankfurt post-secularism the main danger is the wrong immanentization, proceeding in the Greek manner of *kata phusein* – for the followers of Radical Orthodoxy, the main threat, as indeed in the thirteenth century, “comes from the East”: it is Islam. It is the most immediate late-medieval culprit of our remaining Nominalism. The history goes, in fact, further back, to the matrix of nominalist thought, the Islamic Kalam, and most of all the anti-rationalist school of the Asharites. The Asharite obsession with divine power, which eventually led to the disintegration of the “bonds of love” (*nexus amoris*) keeping the created manifold universe in the happy state of ontological dependence on the divine One, is held responsible for paving way to the modern, essentially idolatrous, vision of God as a sovereign ruler of the world – and the world itself reduced to the state of *natura pura*, a “bare nature” made only of dead mechanical objects with which the divine potency toys at its inscrutable and arbitrary will. What, therefore, the Frankfurt authors see as the most detrimental aspect of the enlightenment/disenchantment, namely the career of instrumental reason at the expense of all other, more substantial and value-laden, forms of rationality, Radical Orthodoxy perceives as the inevitable and incurable outcome of modern nihilism which began with the first secular – that is, *thoroughly disenchanted* – vision of God as a powerful sovereign, who had lost the “charm” of the truly metaphysical mysterious divinity.

For Milbank, Blond, Pabst, and Cunningham, it is precisely this lost “charm” that must be restored: contrary to the erroneous Asharite/Nominalist view, nature is not the disenchanted *natura pura*, but a purposefully created being, made by God as a gift and pervaded with the mystery of divine grace. Unlike the Frankfurt School, therefore, they do not mind reducing human being back to nature, but only provided it is nature seen in its full glory as *God’s creaturely gift*. While modern subjectivity regards itself as separated from the world of natural objects, the Radical Orthodoxy theologians advocate the return to the Platonic notion of participation (*methexis*) filtrated through Thomistic lenses. Modern men and women must find their way back into a lost sense of belonging to the totality of divine creation; they must recover the lost sense of “enchantment” which evaporated with the nihilistic progress of instrumental reason. The repetition of Aquinas’ gesture of *defensor fidei*, which “rescued” the late-medieval world from the nihilistic danger advancing from the East, is precisely what the West needs again today.³⁵

This is why Conor Cunningham, a fierce exponent of the divine *methexis* within the school of Radical Orthodoxy, says imperatively: “In being the Bride of Christ, we are to find form in the formless, love in hate, wine in blood, life in death.”³⁶ This imperative is the new form of faith in the post-secular condition, which seeks the active “reenchantment of the world.” What the instrumental nihilistic reason left in ruins – formlessness, hate, blood, and death – must be converted back into the positive and graceful, through the generalized miracle of transubstantiation. The experience of the Eucharist, therefore, where bread becomes the body of Christ, emerges here as the model of post-secular reenchantment, thanks to which the whole of nature can be restored to its former glory of *donum Dei*, the Gift of God. By believing in the goodness of creation, the faithful are asked to beautify it with their vision, fulfilling the function of a renewing *creatio continua*: by the effort to see things under the auspices of grace, the world is to be made as fresh and lovely as “the Bride” of the Creator in the very first moment of creation. Thus, while nihilistic modern science tends to deepen our cynical percep-

35) It is the insistence on the repetition of this gesture which brought on the Radical Orthodoxy an accusation of islamophobia, which I do not want to discuss here in detail. It is, however, true that Milbank understands Aquinas’ work not so much as a *revisionary reception* of certain strains of *kalam* as its *decisive refutation*: hence the exclusion of Islam from the “three roots” forming the culture of the West.

36) Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology* (London: Routledge, 2002), 274.

tion of the world as a senseless repetitive mechanism, the role of Christian theology consists in putting a spell – a “charm” – on disenchanted nature, so it can reappear once again as the precious gift *gratia plena*, imbued with grace. And the more science disenchant, the more theology must re-enchant in turn, stubbornly refusing to accept the scientific “bad news” on the state of the material universe.

Does this *neo-methexis* fulfill the post-secular criterion of the “immanentist temper”? Yes and no. Following Aquinas in his imperative to affirm theologically both the creation of the world and individual creatures, Radical Orthodoxy endorses the material immanence as good, beautiful and existent, according to the Thomistic formula of *ens, bonum et pulchrum conventuntur*. And yet, this affirmation is bought with a cost that no modern mind could gladly accept: if the post-secular role of theology is to find meaning directly within creation and see created reality as “the gift of love,” the world can never be seen as *deficient* – which is precisely the manner in which it appears in Adorno’s “inverse theology,” when looked upon from the standpoint of redemption. The reenchanting language of the gift blocks all the suspicious inquiry into the nature of creatureliness on the grounds of the most elementary etiquette: one does not inspect critically a present that has been given. The gift is thus sacred by definition; it must be accepted *as it is* in gratitude and awe. A true piety of gift and grace excludes any negativity of doubt, which, by forming the spirit of modern skepticism, must inevitably lead toward the nihilistic devaluation of being.³⁷ Either static love or static hate – no dynamic third is given.

The rhetoric of gift, therefore, represses a priori any *critical* attitude towards creaturely being: the gift as such must remain “sanctified” and “enchanted,” glorifying the constant presence of God in his creation which then becomes as if an extension of His glory, ontologically dependent on the divine higher existence. Here there is no place for negotiation, dialectics, argument, or an active “spiritual investment” granting an initiative to immanence: the world is *either* the perfect gift of the loving Creator – *or* a “heap of broken articles,” as in T. S. Eliot’s nihilistic vision offered in his *Wasteland*. The dialectical middle, with its spiritual investment in the mundane, which simultaneously accepts it and demands the redemptive transformation of the world, becomes excluded: *tertium non datur*. Thus, if the disenchantment of the world emerges within the orthodox Christian discourse, it always strikes with the destructive power of the return of the repressed: *any* critique of creation, suppressed by the automatic and total sanctification of *donum Dei*, comes back with a nihilistic vengeance, as in the case of Nietzsche for whom Christianity was essentially a meek religion, simply unable to look the negative straight in the eye. But when religious experience makes no room for the negativity of being, it becomes immediately vulnerable to the expelled Real of nihilism: “formlessness, hate, death, dearth of meaning”. It is precisely because of its anti-dialectical nature that the traditional Christian discourse always disintegrates in two clashing parties: the praisers of the gift of being on the one hand, and their Nietzschean demystifiers on the other. In that sense, Radical Orthodoxy cannot be regarded as properly post-secular, because it merely reproduces the dualism of the naïve gift-enchancement, which blocks any critique of the created world – and the aggressive nihilistic rejection of all values, which perceives being as “beyond good and evil.” By firmly taking the side of one of the warring parties, Radical Orthodoxy is not so much a post-secular *solution* as part of the old problem in which the secular debunkers and the anti-secular apologists, stuck in the non-negotiable “either-or,” constantly clash with one another. Its focus on immanence is, in fact, merely apparent: it does not give voice or emancipatory empowerment to the immanent creatures which are only given one option – to bask

37) The only exception here is Derrida whose reflections on the nature of the gift bear an aura of ambivalence, usually neglected by other representatives of the Gift Theology: the gift erases the giver in an act of generosity, but it also means “abandonment”, that is, a situation in which the recipients of the gift are left with it alone, whether they want it or not. But he also tacitly assumes the prohibition of inspection that is inscribed in the notion of *le don*. See most of all his Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

in the glory of the Creator. In the end, immanence, instead of being affirmed as a realm of separate agency, appears as God's grand vanity project.

Against Boredom: The Revolutionary Reduction

But if Radical Orthodoxy cannot be called truly post-secular, because it is simply *anti-secular*, not ready to negotiate with the skeptical temper of modernity, the same must be said of the Revolutionary Party, but for the opposite reason: it is *just-secular*. While, as we have already seen, post-secularity is not in principle set against any use of religious imagery in the condition of immanency, not every kind of use qualifies as post-secular. This may be the case with Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek whose turn to religion far too neatly coincides with the decline of the official Marxist grand narrative of the laws of history, which is now being replaced by the theology of the revolutionary Event. In the gaping lack of the Marxist scenario, which scientifically invested in the objective succession of historical stages heading towards the “end of history” in the form of communist society, the thinkers of the Radical Left have immediately refound the source of messianic inspirations in religion, both Jewish and Christian, in order to explore – and utilize – its revolutionary potential.

Slavoj Žižek is certainly the best example here, partly because, in his pursuit of the “perverse-subversive” core of Christianity, he often engages in debates with John Milbank (and not always as his adversary), also on the issue of post-secularism.³⁸ In *The Fragile Absolute*, which defends the return to religion from the Marxist perspective, Žižek openly advocates a position which does not bow to “liberal slander”, based on the critical premises of Löwith's “thesis on secularization”:

Against the old liberal slander which draws on the parallel between the Christian and Marxist “Messianic” notion of history as the process of the final deliverance of the faithful (the notorious “Communist-parties-are-secularized-religious-sects” theme), should one not emphasize how this holds only for ossified “dogmatic” Marxism, not for its *authentic liberating kernel*? Following Alain Badiou's path-breaking book on Saint Paul, our premise here is exactly the opposite one: instead of adopting such a defensive stance, allowing the enemy to define the terrain of the struggle, what one should do is to reverse the strategy by fully endorsing what one is accused of: *yes, there is a direct lineage from Christianity to Marxism; yes, Christianity and Marxism should fight on the same side of the barricade* against the onslaught of new spiritualisms – the authentic Christian legacy is much too precious to be left to the fundamentalist freaks.³⁹

The new revolutionary question, therefore, is: how do we activate the common – both Christianity's and Marxism's – “liberating kernel” and save it from an “ossified” dogmatism, on the one hand, and obscurantist fundamentalism, on the other? The following quote from the preface to *The Puppet and the Dwarf* delivers an answer, by succinctly combining all Žižek's favorite motifs: the praise of the political potential of Lacanian psychoanalysis, with special emphasis paid on the quasi-divine status of the death drive; the critique of happiness as a “pagan category,” strongly opposed by the Early Christian revolutionaries, here most of all Saint Paul; and the intense dislike towards Jürgen Habermas as the last representative of the Frankfurt School with its meek, enlightenment and social-liberal, version of post-secular thought:

38) See most of all Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

39) Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), 2; my emphasis.

In 1956, Lacan proposed a short and clear definition of the Holy Spirit: “The Holy Spirit is the entry of the signifier into the world. This is certainly what Freud brought us under the title of death drive.” What Lacan means, at this moment of his thought, is that the Holy Spirit stands for the symbolic order as that which cancels (or, rather, suspends) the entire domain of “life” – lived experience, the libidinal flux, the wealth of emotions, or, to put it in Kant’s terms, the “pathological.” *When we locate ourselves within the Holy Spirit, we are transubstantiated, we enter another life beyond the biological one.* And is not this Pauline notion of life grounded in Paul’s other distinctive feature? What enabled him to formulate the basic tenets of Christianity, to elevate Christianity from a Jewish sect into a universal religion (religion of universality), was the very fact that he was not part of Christ’s “inner circle.” One can imagine the inner circle of apostles reminiscing during their dinner conversations: “Do you remember how, at the Last Supper, Jesus asked me to pass the salt?” None of this applies to Paul: he is outside and, as such, symbolically substituting for (taking the place of) Judas himself among the apostles. In a way, Paul also “betrayed” Christ by not caring about his idiosyncrasies, by *ruthlessly reducing him to the fundamentals*, with no patience for his wisdom, miracles, and similar paraphernalia...⁴⁰

Taking the side of Paul against the strictly evangelical teaching of Jesus’ direct disciples, Žižek aims at the *fundamental reduction* of Christianity to its “liberating kernel” which then appears as the same as Lacan’s “entry of the death drive”: an inner revolution which “cancels (or, rather, suspends) the entire domain of ‘life’” – where “life”, written in quotation marks, is merely an appearance of living, a simple animal process deemed by Kant as an unworthy “pathology.” The true Christian religion, therefore, does not invest in life as it first appears in the realm of immanence: “lived experience, the libidinal flux, the wealth of emotions.” It wants to *cancel* it and replace it by a *true* life which consists in the identification with the death drive – the drive of violence and destruction. It can thus only don a contemptuous attitude to the idea of “happiness” which is as pathological as immanent life is itself:

Happiness is thus, to put it in Badiou’s terms, not a category of truth, but a category of mere Being, and, as such, confused, indeterminate, inconsistent... *It is a pagan category*: for pagans, the goal of life is to live a happy life (the idea of living “happily ever after” is a Christianized version of paganism), and religious experience or political activity themselves are considered a higher form of happiness (see Aristotle) – no wonder the Dalai Lama himself has had such success recently preaching the gospel of happiness around the world, and no wonder he is finding the greatest response precisely in the United States, the ultimate empire of (the pursuit of) happiness... *In short, “happiness” is a category of the pleasure principle, and what undermines it is the insistence of a Beyond of the pleasure principle.* In the strict Lacanian sense of the term, one should thus posit that “happiness” relies on the subject’s inability or unreadiness fully to confront the consequences of its desire: the price of happiness is that the subject remains stuck in the inconsistency of its desire. In our daily lives, we (pretend to) desire things that we do not really desire, so that, ultimately, the worst thing that can happen is for us to get what we “officially” desire. Happiness is thus inherently hypocritical: it is the happiness of dreaming about things we do not really want... So when Habermas advocates constraints on biogenetic manipulations with reference to the threat

40) Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 45, <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/5706.001.0001>; my emphasis.

they pose to human autonomy, freedom, and dignity, he is philosophically “cheating,” concealing the true reason why his line of argumentation appears convincing: *what he is really referring to is not autonomy and freedom, but happiness – it is on behalf of happiness that he, the great representative of the Enlightenment tradition, ended up on the same side as conservative advocates of blessed ignorance.*⁴¹

Assuming an attitude which Alain Badiou, also inspired by Lacan, called *passion du Reel*,⁴² Žižek despises all that which he regards as a syndrome of illusory “pathological” escape from the conflictual reality of the human psyche: its inner revolutionary class war between the Pleasure and Reality principles. *Mere happiness* as a goal of the liberal-democratic consensus seems to him merely a laughable game of appearances, played by the “Last Men” who were famously portrayed in Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* as the declining Western race engaged only in the pursuit of individual dreams of wellbeing. Any ethics of heroism is alien to those late-modern inhabitants of the “evening land” of social democracy; they are incapable of sacrifice and do not want to die for any Cause – they merely wish to live a comfortable life, fading into hedonistic insignificance and boredom. And the only thing that could awaken them again to their humanity proper is an intervention of the Holy Spirit in the new disguise of the death drive: the shattering trauma of “revelation” in the light of which the world of the pursuit of happiness appears as a meaningless *nothing*, not worthy of any – either spiritual or material – investment.

The critique of happiness as a false “pagan” ideal which undermines the higher – properly anthropogenic – ideal of Truth is the key issue here: Christian revelation is summoned again to teach the fallen secular mankind the lesson which it forgot by sliding back into self-contained “animality”. And indeed, as we read in Alain Badiou’s *Ethics*, human rights, the way they are defined by the enlightenment tradition, are a misnomer, because they ascribe inalienable rights to people in their contemptible *animal* state, without encouraging them to become properly *human* agents, capable to fight to the death for the Cause and its Truth and oblivious to the “pleasures of life.” Badiou claims that what today passes for ethical thought is, in fact, nothing but –

the incapacity, so typical of the contemporary world, to strive for a Good. We should even go further and say that the reign of ethics is one symptom of a universe ruled by a distinctive [singulière] combination of resignation in the face of necessity together with a purely negative, if not destructive, will. It is this combination that should be designated as nihilism... By blocking, *in the name of Evil and human rights*, the way towards the positive prescription of possibilities, the way towards the Good as the superhumanity of humanity, towards the Immortal as the master of time, it accepts the lay of necessity as the objective basis for all judgments of value.⁴³

We may find a very similar critique of modern nihilism in the writings of Milbank, Blond, and Cunningham (although, even at the heights of their anti-modern resentment, they would not allow themselves such a smooth and unproblematic conjunction as in the phrase “Evil *and* human rights”) – but *never* in the Frankfurt School authors, Habermas included, who could agree with the worry about the “resignation in the face of necessity” (Adorno used to call it a “disgrace of adaptation”⁴⁴), but would not go as far as to reject the emancipatory ideal

41) *Ibid.*, 46; my emphasis.

42) See Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), where the “passion of the real” is the main subject.

43) Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), 30–31; my emphasis.

44) Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 111.

behind human rights in favor of some Nietzschean “superhumanity of humanity.” We will also never find in the Frankfurt “messianists,” most notably Adorno, a contempt for individual happiness which they regard as a *messianic* – decidedly non-pagan – category and as such a part and parcel of the “promise of Enlightenment”, that is, as, so far, not yet expressed in modernity’s theological background. Although Žižek does everything to shame Habermas for his appeal to the ideal of happiness, there is nothing to be ashamed of – particularly from the religious point of view. The goal of the “inverse theology” is, primarily, to show the actual world as *unhappy*, and use the “redemptive standpoint” to make it *happier* in the messianic process.⁴⁵

But once the messianic promise and its ideal of happiness become rejected in favor of the autotelic-anthropogenic “way towards the Good,” demanding an ascetic sacrifice of the hedonistic pursuit of happiness, there is only a small logical step to make in order to praise revolutionary violence: if the Platonic turn towards the Good and the True requires a violent self-offering of the pleasure principle, it will also extend this sacrificial logic on social action. In consequence, revolutionary violence is no longer understood as merely a necessary means to the realization of a utopian promise; there is no longer a need to *justify* it by evoking the old-school Marxist revolutionary theodicy. Violence, both inward and outward, is not a necessary *evil* anymore, but a “means without end”, a *good in itself*: an autotelic act of faithfulness to the Event, which solely testifies to humanity – in other words, non-animality or, more exactly, the *negated animality* – of the agent.⁴⁶ For, while animals always strive towards wellbeing, it is only humans – and in particular their specific anthropological difference – who can break this instinctual attachment to life with an act of violent sublimation: only they can raise above their biology by their willingness to sacrifice and risk their lives. The messianic language of the Judeo-Christian revelation, therefore, does not serve here as the source of promise to be fulfilled in the future, but solely as a framework for the violent *metanoia*, the rupturing transformation of the self, which appears sufficient in itself. While the “old man” (in Pauline terms) lived in the dissipated nihilism of the “pagan” pursuit of happiness, the “new man” learns what it means to orient oneself towards the Good and wishes nothing more, oblivious to all the costs this “passion of the real” might entail.⁴⁷

It is precisely this fetishization of the “revelatory” Event as opposed to the pursuit of happiness, reserved merely for the “human animal” taken care of by socio-liberal democracy, that underlies the return of the revolutionary Left to religion. Saint Paul for Badiou and Jesus for Žižek are primarily *arch-revolutionaries*, ready to sacrifice their life and unleash an absolute inferno of global violence in the name of the “Cause” they believe in.⁴⁸ But what really counts is not the “Cause” itself, but the originary destructive attitude: the readi-

45) Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* takes very seriously Stendhal’s definition of art as a *promesse du bonheur* and defines redemptive social praxis as leading towards the ideal of “pleasure, happiness, and autonomy”: “Praxis would be the ensemble of means for minimizing material necessity, and as such it would be identical with pleasure, happiness, and that autonomy in which these means are sublimated.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 1997), 319. At the same time, however, stressing the theological-transcendent ideality of this triple goal, Adorno admonishes: “Art is the ever broken promise of happiness.” *Ibid.*, 136.

46) On this phrase, see most of all: Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End – Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), especially the chapter “Notes on Gesture” (49–62), where Agamben defends non-pragmatic political action which has no ready purpose in view.

47) See again Badiou on the “passion of the real” as “the source of both horror and enthusiasm, simultaneously lethal and creative,” and as such completely indifferent to the cost, which may involve the cruelest violence: “the force of the action overrides in its intensity any moral squeamishness.” Badiou, *The Century*, 32–33.

48) See most of all Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). It has to be said, however, that Badiou, although not at all “squeamish” about revolutionary violence, still harbors vague Platonist impressions of the “ultimate Good” it should strive for, whereas for Žižek, who engages in numerous polemics with Badiou on the matter of revolutionary “positivity”, all that truly matters is the expression of the death drive: see especially the essay, “From Knowledge to Truth... and Back,” in *The Fragile Absolute*.

ness for the violent birth of a “new man” on the ruins of the old and “pathological.” Thus, writing about the quasi-Christological cult of Che Guevara, Žižek proposes a reverse maneuver:

Cheisation of Christ himself – Christ, whose scandalous words from Luke (“If any man comes to me, and doesn’t hate his own father, mother, wife, children, brothers, and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he can’t be my disciple”) point in the same direction as the famous quote from Che: “Perhaps you will have to be severe, but do not lose your tenderness. Perhaps you will have to cut down flowers, but it will not stop Spring from coming.”⁴⁹

This severe and merciless “love” differs from bourgeois sentimentalism in that it does not shirk from violence; more than that, it glorifies “violence as such” not just as means to liberation but as liberation itself: “truly revolutionary liberation is identified here with violence – it is *violence as such (a violent gesture of rejection, establishing difference, outlining a division) that liberates*. Freedom is not a blissful, neutral state of harmony and balance but a violent act destroying the balance.”⁵⁰ The “Cheisation of Christ” allows Žižek to bring out of the New Testament this element of Christian love which the Church wrongly attempted to attenuate and marginalize: for him, the properly Christian love has nothing to do with compassion which pities the misery of the individual, while respecting her right to happiness, on the contrary: it is “intolerant and violent,”⁵¹ focused uniquely on its “Cause.” It introduces a difference into the indifferent world of being with fire and sword – or with sickle and hammer – and liberates in and through the very act of violent sundering/destruction. Thus, while the modern Western biopolitics reduces human beings back to animals, leading their life in the state of indifference and boredom at the “end of History”, the post-secular Revolutionaries try to awaken the lost spark of humanity – the faith in the Event which makes a real difference in contrast to the fake difference of the multi-cultural indifferent tolerance – and, in this manner, mobilize the forces of subversion against the social paradigm of the pleasure principle.

This *subversion*, however, seems to be the alpha and omega of the whole process: “The first act of creation is the emptying of the space, the creation of Nothing (or, in Freudian terms, the death drive and creative sublimation are intricately linked)”⁵² – the first and the last. For Žižek, “the creation of Nothing” is also the constitution of the revolutionary subject which, in the Hegelian manner, assumes the “tremendous power of the negative”: the power of voiding, that is, of *virtual* emptying the multitude of beings, that exposes their ontological worthlessness. Thus, if the subject is doomed to fail in its attempt to negate being in actuality, it can nonetheless achieve this negation *virtually*, by invalidating objective existence in the space of the death drive, where “nothing but the place can take place,”⁵³ thus – seemingly – making room for a new creation. Yet, the destruction always takes here the upper hand at the expense of the *pars construens*: it is first of all the Nietzschean *schöpferische Zerstörung*, the creative destruction, which is to repeat itself – again and again, in accordance with the eternal rhythm of the death drive – on the level of historical reality. It is the Revolution as the *voiding* means, the apocalyptic emptying of all being *in effigy* – yet, with this crucial difference, that unlike in the apocalyptic messianism which truly hopes to make all things new, Žižek’s politics has no means to assert such a hopeful attitude: whatever emerges out of this reset will indeed be merely a worthless being again, only worthy of being

49) Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 55.

50) *Ibid.*; my emphasis.

51) *Ibid.*, 58.

52) Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2014), 415.

53) *Ibid.*

destroyed in the next revolutionary throws. Everything new would thus immediately decay into the decrepit old of the *ancient regime*: “What tips the balance of choice towards revolution... is the insight into how the organic harmony of the *ancien regime* is itself a fake, an illusion concealing the reality of brutal violence, division, and chaos.”⁵⁴ This diagnosis does not refer merely to the historical moment of the French Revolution: for Žižek, it is a metaphysical truth revealing the nature of *any* social order, be it authoritarian or democratic, just because it *exists* and as such can only be full of “violence, division, and chaos,” forming the essential and unchangeable characteristics of the immanent Real. In pace with the Frankfurt School’s and Radical Orthodoxy’s variants of post-secularism, which spiritually invest in immanentist reality, Žižek’s (but also Badiou’s, though to a lesser extent) choice of religious imagery privileges a Gnostic solution, precisely as in Taubes who says: “I have not spiritual investment in the world as it is. Let it go down.” With this difference, however, that, unlike Taubes who negates this world in the name of a counter-world (*die Gegenwelt*), they do not have any positive vision of transcendence. The only way in which transcendence manifests itself is in the negation/destruction of immanence, as, literally, *non-being* – and such is also its direct use in the politics of permanent revolution whose goal is always to destroy and never build.

But this emphasis on absolute negativity demonstrates that, if the Revolutionary Fraction recalls the “superhuman” excess of proper humanity, it is only because it serves a well-calculated end which is the subversion of the capitalist pursuit of happiness and its metaphysical illusion of a stable well-prospering world. The surplus of self-transcendence, therefore, which Žižek and Badiou praise in the religious experience of anthropogenesis (the human animal becoming a man proper on its “way towards the Good”) and glorify as a means *without* end, quickly turns into a means *to* an end: its seemingly pure negativity is chained to serve the purpose of permanent revolution which harbors no political promise and becomes an end in itself, a perpetual “voiding” of the political space for the sake of *nothing*. By attempting to utilize the human excess of functionality and channel it into a politically subversive *passage à l’acte*, the post-secular Revolutionaries prove thus to be utilitarian through and through, despite all their declared dislike for the world of modern pragmatism.⁵⁵ One certainly cannot deny them a certain investment in the world of immanence, but it remains deeply paradoxical: Gnostically negative without any positive transcendent counterpart. It thus manifests itself primarily in the wish to destroy not only the *status quo* of worldly immanence, but also its very being, and then maintain such mode of destruction – being-in-the-death-drive – as a permanent political action. It is also questionable whether this investment – to evoke once again Taubes’ succinct phrase – is truly “spiritual.” Their transformative desire is so overwhelming that it immediately consumes the transcendent “excess” and reduces it to the well-calculated negative purpose: the *pars construens* of a promise, forming the positive aspect of self-transcendence, does not even come here into the picture.

* * * * *

Of the three post-secular options here briefly presented, only the first, the enlightenment one, deserves to be regarded as post-secularism *proper*: though critical of the disenchanting tendencies of modernity, it calls for rethinking the Western Greco-Abrahamic religious heritage in a truly new manner – a new Exodus – without

54) Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 70.

55) One is reminded here of the old critique of Alexandre Kojève (to whom both Badiou and Žižek seem indebted via Lacan, Kojève’s faithful pupil), levelled against him by Georges Bataille, who protested against any pragmatic/political uses of the excess of pure negativity and insisted on leaving it *sans emploi*: Georges Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” *French Yale Studies*, no. 78 (1990): 9–28, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930112>.

a wholesale rejection of modernity as an age of liberated immanence. It proposes a new “spiritual investment” in the world, which wants to continue the enlightenment reform of social reality, this time however backed by a “mixed” theological background, feeding on – instead of deploring – the dialectical contamination of the West’s plural horizons. The other two, despite some affinities in their critical perspectives – the protest against reductionism, nihilism, and self-satisfied indifferentism of the “enlightenment gone wrong” – lack essential features of *post*-secularity as a dialectical rejoinder to the problems and aporias of the secular age. Radical Orthodoxy, although names itself post-secular, is mostly *anti-secular*: it postulates the reenchantment of the world in the manner which renders immanence mysterious and imbued with higher meaning, yet at the price of making it once again ontologically dependent on God’s transcendent grace and presence. The Revolutionary Fraction, on the other hand, is *secular* in its openly instrumental use of religious experience as a purely political Event: it calls upon revelation as the model of *metanoia* thanks to which the “human animal,” so far distracted by its illusory pursuit of happiness, can be violently turned into a “human superhuman” political fanatic. Both the Radical Orthodoxy and the Revolutionary Christians, symmetrically fail to fulfill the dialectical criterion of post-secularism: while the former subsume immanence back into the fold of Neoplatonic metaphysics, the latter reduce the “excess” effect of transcendence to immanent goals, most of all to the destructive/ voiding act which contains no political promise of a better future (apart from a perverse project of apocalypse turned permanent). In the end, it is only the Frankfurt variant of post-secularism that manages to maintain a difficult loyalty to “the incomplete project of modernity,” by recollecting the messianic language of the promise as the true theological “surplus” of transcendence, which remains operative within the immanent world without falling prey to instrumental use.

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