

The Postmodern Condition as a Religious Revival: A Critical Review of William Connolly's *Why I am Not a Secularist*, Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*, and Alvin Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*.

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Introduction

Much to the chagrin of skeptical philosophers from David Hume to Bertrand Russell, religion has withstood the onslaught of the Enlightenment project. Indeed, one of the benefits of Western culture's "postmodern condition" is that it has produced a revival of religion in the academic community. Modern thought, the brainchild of the Enlightenment, failed in its promise to emancipate humanity from the fetters of metaphysics. Given the scientific "rationalization" of war, genocide, the exploitative aspects of globalization in the twentieth century, and the collision of faiths in a post-9/11 world, it's understandable that many scholars express incredulity toward Reason's grand narrative. As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer correctly put it in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, "Enlightenment is mythical fear radicalized."¹ "Enlightenment" became the very thing it tried to destroy: a religion. And in the course of this (not so) surprising discovery, what intellectuals once silenced as self-alienation and wish fulfillment is now clamoring for attention: religion demands integration.

Religion is most often presented as a mere social and psychological phenomenon, offering a program whereby individuals and communities can get through the rigors of life. While these functional elements are important, there is more to religion that (literally) meets the eye. Have we forgotten that there are metaphysical realities that correspond to belief? Does God exist? Is there a specific God, one that we can identify by name? Is he active? Can Christians, for instance, truly know and have confidence in Christ's atoning work on the cross? For many, religious beliefs are outside the boundaries of knowledge; verification is futile. When it comes to the realities of the heavenly realm, those who bow the knee to Reason cannot—or perhaps should not—make a definitive decision. God is beyond their reasonable limits.

The practice of suspending judgment when it comes to faith-based issues has unsettled many in the scholarly community. Historian Eugene Genovese, for instance, admitted his inability in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* to move beyond the religious functionalism set down by his own craft: “the overpowering evidence of religious faith aroused in me a skepticism about the reigning tendency in academia...to, as it were, sociologize faith *out of religion—to deny the reality of spirituality.*”² Criticized by a handful of his colleagues “for slighting the spiritual dimension of the slaves’ experience,” Genovese pointed to the restrictions of the historical discipline, “a deficiency of talent, not of intention.” Frustrated by his own materialism, Genovese ultimately concluded that “slaves’ successful struggle for survival,” galvanized by religion, was “more readily spiritual than physical.”³ I often wonder whether religious agnosticism among higher education professors stems from an epistemological *inability* or an ethical *unwillingness* to understand and incorporate the dynamics of faith in a particular discipline.

The protean term “postmodern” invokes notions of confusion, chaos, and contradiction: epistemology is disregarded; morality is relative; and language is slippery. Reality is a social construction, and “truth” is nothing more than what our academic colleagues let us get away with. Few religious observers see any value in our current cultural, social, and intellectual state. Yet, inadvertently, postmodernism has been a boon to religion.

Overturing the errors of modern thought, a few well-respected contemporary thinkers who refuse to simply add to the dissonant clamor of critique have developed some creative ways in which to understand religion that, at first glance, *seem* “postmodern.” Political scientist William Connolly, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, and philosopher Alvin Plantinga have offered different conceptual and methodological approaches to the study of religion that are essentially de-centered, pluralistic, and anti-foundational—all the ingredients to make a modern positivist cringe. Their work underscores the important idea that modernism has for years neglected to recognize religion as a necessary component of one’s proper understanding of the present social world.

Secularism's Dogma

Directly challenging the hegemony of Enlightenment secularism in his book, *Why I am Not a Secularist*, a title that plays on Bertrand Russell's *Why I am Not a Christian*, William Connolly underscores the importance of religion as a public phenomenon.⁴ Modern thought has created a false dichotomy between a supposed secular/public realm and a sacred/private one. The author defines secularism as the "wish to provide an authoritative and self-sufficient public space equipped to regulate and limit 'religious' disputes in public life."⁵ Yet in its attempts to do so, secularism, Connolly argues, has become exactly what it initially sought to overthrow: a dogma stemming from an overconfidence—call it blind faith—in reason that excludes those who fail to abide by it. Connolly's goal is to de-center the center, to sweep away the idea of a homogenous core in order to incorporate a plurality of ideologies.

In an odd yet illustrative way, Connolly's project relies on the work of neurophysiologist Joseph LeDoux. For LeDoux not even the brain is, strictly speaking, "rational" or dispassionate in an "enlightened" sense. Examining the relationship between the "thought-imbued intensities" of the amygdala, "an almond-shaped brain located at the base of the cortex," and the prefrontal cortex, the mind constantly exhibits irrational impulses. When receiving signs and stimuli, the amygdala reacts "quickly, relatively crudely, and with intense energy...below the level of conscious judgment and feeling"; the prefrontal cortex, in turn, receives such signs "more slowly, processing [them] through a sophisticated linguistic network in a more refined way and forming a more complex judgment."⁶ One could say, hopefully without characterizing LeDoux's analysis, that the amygdala manifests immediate, intense, and inexplicable "pre-thoughts." Such impulses are not derived from rational deliberation, nor are they built on a series of core beliefs. With immediate vigor, they "just" happen, which then allows the prefrontal cortex to "organize *conceptually sophisticated translations of these* intensities and feelings."⁷ Thus, an essential part of a properly functioning mind is irrationality or, to be more specific, *pre-rationalism*.

Each part of the brain has a specific function that works in conjunction with other parts. In this case, the cerebral (rational-making part) is dependent on the visceral: "it is for the most part a good thing the amygdala is wired to the cortex, for it imparts energy

and intensity to that center needed for the latter's formation of representations and practical decisions." In the end, LeDoux's point, according to Connolly, is that the "brain network is a rhizome [i.e., having multiple roots]...each with its own internal capacities, speeds, and relays with other brains."⁸ The brain is multifaceted without one central core.

Removing the non-rational would not only misrepresent the rational, but it would significantly undermine our understanding of how the brain stimulates human interaction, which, according to Connolly, is "always accompanied and informed...by visceral intensities of thinking, prejudice, and sensibility."⁹ In this way, the author is not far from the biblical idea that the issues of life flow from the heart and mind. Society, like the brain, is multifaceted: it is irreducibly complex:

When nervous cultural utilitarians insist that the organization of political action in concert would be impossible in a rhizomatic culture, they might learn a few things by examining how their own brains work.

Micropolitics and relational self-artistry shuffle back and forth among intensities, feelings, images, smells, and concepts, modifying some of them and the relays connecting them, opening up, thereby, the possibility of new thinking and alterations of sensibility.¹⁰

To say that religion is deeply emotional or inter-subjective and that such "visceral registers of being" should be removed from the public realm for the sake of stoic, cerebral rationalism is to severely truncate a well-ordered social sphere.

Connolly, in my opinion, needs to explain further his concept of democratic pluralism, what he calls the "ethos of engagement," whereby the multiplicity of voices contributes to an enriching social and political environment. He fails to account for the willful suppression of religious claims. Nonetheless, he certainly provides a helpful alternative to secular thinking. Challenging the hubris of secularism necessarily reintroduces the significance of religious beliefs. More importantly, the public sphere *must* open itself up to religious and spiritual dialogue. Is religion solely a private phenomenon? Should we leave our metaphysical beliefs at the threshold of the public arena? Connolly doesn't think so:

[A]n overt metaphysical/religious pluralism in public life provides one key to forging a positive ethos of engagement out of the multidimensional plurality of contemporary life. In such a culture,

participants are called upon neither to leave their metaphysical baggage at home when they participate in various public activities nor to adopt an overarching faith acknowledged by all parties who strive to promote the common good. Rather, a deep plurality of religious/metaphysical perspectives is incorporated into public discourse.¹¹

The Subaltern's Divine

Historians too face the difficulty of re-conceptualizing religion in a postmodern age. Galvanized by dialectical thinking, subaltern history, also known as “history from below,” highlights the symbiotic relationship between hegemonic and subordinate social groups in the development of unique social and cultural institutions. An essential goal of this school, often vilified for its revisionism, is to take seriously the place of the marginalized, to give them a voice (however true or imagined). The problem comes when that voice resounds with spiritualistic overtones.

For the twentieth-century materialist, labor, an essential part of the progress toward freedom, has been separated *a priori* from the dynamics of religion. Religion is not only backwards it alienates humanity from material change. According to Marx, true liberation follows the path of social labor and the gradual casting aside of heavenly speculations. Yet in many of the communities Chakrabarty analyzes, labor was a means of experiencing the divine, for “work and worship were two inseparable activities.”¹²

This puts the historian, especially one who has been trained in the doctrines of materialism, in a troubling situation—namely, how to take seriously the subaltern's appeal to divine agency? “How,” Chakrabarty asks, “do we [historians] handle the problem of the presence of the divine or the supernatural in the history of labor as we render this enchanted world into our disenchanting prose...And how do we, in doing this, retain the subaltern (in whose activity gods or spirits present themselves) as the subject of their histories?”¹³ Claims of divine activity “cannot be mediated through the secular code of history—bereft of gods and spirits.”¹⁴ Western historians can only “grant the place of the supernatural, but to ascribe to it real agency in history will go against the historian's craft...[consequently] the historian...cannot invoke the supernatural in explaining/describing events.”¹⁵ Is it possible for us to think about God in the same way that we think about humans? Tracing the limits of a subject can be difficult (e.g., Who is God? or What is human nature?), but there *is* something there.

In order to overcome such limitations, Chakrabarty proposes a plurality of histories—specifically, the mutual existence of History 1 (H1) and History 2 (H2), two independent conceptual dimensions of time, which would mutually accommodate a western and an eastern history. The subaltern weakens the former’s (secular) conceptualization that offers one universal time zone, wherein all social groups participate (H1). In the same way that colonial Europeans in North America assumed that they were more culturally advanced than their Native American hosts, western historians today are out of order when they consider the subaltern as somehow pre-modern, presupposing that they are on the same evolutionary trajectory toward liberation. “Thus the writing of history,” Chakrabarty theorizes, “must implicitly assume a plurality of times existing together, a disjuncture of the present with itself.”¹⁶ History 2 is the time that overlaps History 1, but does not consume or collapse it in a kind of totalizing (or totalitarian) presupposition. Does this mean that we should give up H1 for H2? Certainly not—Chakrabarty’s point is that H1 and H2 are valuable in their own right.¹⁷

A point of clarification is necessary at this point. Most people assume that history is a thing, an ontological organism. But the term “history” comes from the Greek word “inquiry,” which can also be defined as “investigate.” Thus, history is essentially an epistemological activity. The number of historians who argue that materialism and empiricism are the ultimate foundations on which their work rests always perplexes me. History is neither empirical nor material. Methodology, conceptualization, memory, and imagination are essential elements in the historian’s tool kit. Given this understanding, it’s appropriate to propose the existence of multiple and complementary histories. Consider for example four people at four different ends of a busy intersection, witnessing an accident. Each person’s account of the incident, although different, paints a picture of the event as a whole. Such is the case, for example, with the four gospels of the New Testament. It’s when one testimony sets itself up as *the* only authority—i.e., becomes the hegemonic discourse—that a bit of revision is healthy.

When dealing with religion, the materialist is akin to one who analyzes a language that he is not fully acquainted with. Having an intimate knowledge of a particular language is comparable to having an intimate understanding of the religion under examination. “The Marxist or secular scholar,” Chakrabarty concludes, “who is

translating the divine is in the place of the student who knows well only one of the two languages he is working with.”¹⁸ Knowing well one of two languages is inadequate. Similarly, in order to have a better understanding of a particular religion one must have an intimate acquaintance of its texts, community, and practices.

The Mind’s Knowledge of God

Arguably, in the modern mind, philosophy and religion seem to be much stranger bedfellows. Yet much of what is dealt with in philosophy focuses on issues related to religion (ethics, God, evil, the soul, etc.). Notre Dame philosopher Alvin Plantinga, proponent of a system known as Reformed Epistemology, a mixture of Common Sense realism and Calvinistic theology, has spent much of his career dismantling traditional epistemology—the “justified true belief” paradigm.¹⁹ The ultimate goal of his three-part series on warrant and proper function, which culminates in his final installment, *Warranted Christian Belief*, is to show that people are within their epistemic right to hold certain religious beliefs (e.g., the Christian God) without the use of external evidence, a coherent theory of knowledge, or the use of any theistic proofs. This rests on the fact that the mode of forming such beliefs about the divine is the same as when we form beliefs about other humans. For millennia, epistemology has been inconsistently applied.

Warrant is often confused with the aspect of knowledge that is based on responsible cognitive ascent. According to the “deontological” theory of knowledge, it is wrong always and everywhere to accept a belief on insufficient evidence. The idea is that one can only know something if they can provide evidence for it. Anyone who cannot present reasons for what they believe is outside the legal limits of belief. In other words, I must be able to prove that $2+4=6$ before I am allowed to give ascent to it. In this system, warrant is equivalent to justification. This is one reason why thinkers suspend judgment when it comes to religion: there’s just not enough evidence, as Russell maintained.

For Plantinga, however, this will not do.²⁰ Warrant, also known as “positive epistemic status,” is not the same as justification. Distinct from simply “truth,” warranted beliefs are “not accepted on the evidential basis of other propositions” nor do they require external evidence (i.e., traditional epistemic justification): “To say that a belief is

warranted or justified for a person is to evaluate it or him (or both) *positively*; his holding that belief in his circumstances is *right, or proper, or acceptable, or approvable, or up to standard.*” Such core beliefs come in degrees. For instance, my belief that $2+2=4$ is more warranted—that is, it is more weighty or central to my understanding of myself and the world around me—than the fact that the human brain depends on both the visceral and the cerebral for cognition. The belief that I was born and raised in San Francisco has a greater degree of epistemic status than the fact that Shakespeare was the author of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

For the Reformed Epistemologist, warranted beliefs are “properly basic.” They are neither *a priori* nor universal, but are nonetheless appropriately formed in our minds. Memory beliefs, perceptual beliefs, or beliefs that ascribe certain mental states to people are immediate. They are occasioned in the mind in given circumstances to the degree that one cannot help but accept them. For instance, when Professor *S* speaks to me in class, I form a warranted belief that Professor *S* appears before me and speaks to me. It is a positive epistemic belief. Am I warranted (and justified) in holding the belief that I experience Professor *S*? Yes, of course. Yet did my mental state come from external evidence? No. My belief came from the experience itself. It required no external evidence, no epistemological theory, and—importantly—no prior proof of Professor *S*’s existence.

The argument supports the reality of a belief, but not the reality of the object. Yet most of our beliefs are formed without prior inquiry concerning the object’s existence. Professor *S*’s existence is not properly basic. While this is true, it is important to understand that such a belief (viz., that professor *S* appeared to me at a point in the past) *entails* the existence of Professor *S*. My proper belief, to use another example, that I had breakfast this morning necessarily entails the belief that the world has existed for more than three hours. The belief that the world has existed for a given amount of time is not basic, but the formation of the belief after the particular experience is basic and therefore so is the world’s existence. The point is that my belief, if it is properly basic and warranted, cannot be simply an illusion.

A critic of Plantinga may ask: Is it possible for our minds to function properly but not acquire warranted knowledge? What if a person is hallucinating or suffering from a

brain lesion? What if they are under the influence of an opiate? Plantinga answers these questions in his second book, *Warrant and Proper Function*. The mind functions in a specific way, in accordance with specific external circumstances (i.e., one's cognitive environment), and according to a designed plan aimed at acquiring truth. "A belief has warrant for person S only if that belief is produced in S by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for S's kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth. We must add...that when a belief meets these conditions and does enjoy warrant, the degree of warrant depends on the strength of the belief, the firmness with which S holds it."²¹ Thus, a person whose cognitive faculties are functioning inappropriately cannot adequately have warrant.

Moments and degrees of cognitive dysfunction are not enough to overturn Plantinga's theory. Humans (rightly) assume that their minds work in most if not all circumstances. An airplane is designed to function in a particular way. The presence of a few airplane crashes, for example, does not undermine the intent or design function of the actual plane. "The idea of proper functioning is no more problematic than, say, that of a Boeing 747's working properly. Something we have constructed—a heating system, a rope, a linear accelerator—is functioning properly when it is functioning in the way in which it was designed to function."²² Hallucinations do not undermine the general design function of the mind. If they occurred on a regular basis, then either such manifestations would be part of the mind's function (of which we'd have to cope with), or we wouldn't recognize them as a problem. Saying, for instance, that often times a person's liver fails does not discredit the knowledge of what the liver does on a regular basis. In fact, unveiling moments of failure in any organism presupposes design. Exceptions rarely disprove the rule.

So what does this iconoclastic theory of knowledge have to do with religion? Plantinga demonstrates that belief in God—and specifically the Christian God—fits (i.e., doesn't violate) the criteria for warrant. God, like Professor S, reveals himself to me. The idea that God loves me and saves doesn't depend on my ability to prove his existence, nor does it require universal acceptance for it to be warranted. Furthermore, in *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga wraps up the concept of warrant and proper

function, criticizes materialists (specifically, Marx and Freud), and offers an alternative model derived from the writings of Aquinas and Calvin, the so-called A/C model. Accordingly, the *sensus divinitatus* (the sense of the divine), whereby beliefs concerning God are occasioned in the human mind, reflects the way in which the mind was created to function—namely, to produce beliefs about the true God. God has implanted in the mind of all human beings a sense of the divine. This “sense” is aroused and occasioned in the proper circumstances; at other times it is, as Calvin writes, citing Romans 1, suppressed. However, the suppression of the divine sense is, again, not enough to collapse warrant and proper function or the accompanying model.²³

Most thinkers confuse belief in God with God’s existence—the former an epistemological position, the latter an ontological question. There is a world of difference between the two. When I tell someone that I believe in God, a belief deeply situated in my mind, the common response is a demand to prove the divine’s existence. Using Plantinga’s system, I could appropriately answer, “I don’t have to.” All I’ve said is that I *believe* in God. Instead, the modernist must show how belief in the divine is unwarranted—viz., how my mind is suffering dysfunction, that my cognitive environment is skewed, or that my belief is not along a design plan aimed at truth. The mode of knowing God is the same as knowing other people. As I mentioned above, belief in an existing being, like Professor *S*, does not require a proof or exhaustive delineation of her person. Nonetheless, the warranted belief entails the existence of Professor *S*. In a similar way, theistic proofs are not required for belief in God. If my belief in God is warranted—and one would have to do a considerable amount of homework to show that it is not—then the belief itself entails the existence of God.²⁴

The notion that one can obtain warrant without argument or reason has caused great angst among today’s scholars. If belief in God requires no argument, evidence, or justification (in the deontological or positivistic sense), then can we believe in just anything? For Plantinga, why would someone even raise such an objection? Consider, once again, the belief in the appearance of Professor *S*. Does my “Professor *S*” belief, which is not based on outside evidence but the experience itself, mean that I can believe in just anybody? Of course not, and no one would respond in that way.

A second objection relates to other non-Christian beliefs. Is it possible for a Jew or a Muslim to employ the same epistemology to account for their belief in God, which is qualitatively distinct from the Christian's God?²⁵ Again, refer to the response in the preceding paragraph: why would an appeal to another religion necessarily collapse the argument Plantinga is making concerning Christian beliefs? The position of the Jew or the Muslim has no logical bearing on the warranted nature of the Christian's belief. Should a Christian reject his or her belief simply because of the objections raised by secularists, atheists, or competing religions? No. It is important to keep in mind that Plantinga is simply arguing that Christian belief satisfies the criteria for warrant in the same way that belief in other human minds is warranted. Furthermore, because it accords with the standards of proper thinking, the A/C Christian model is more cogent than any other cognitive model.

Conclusion

Everyone agrees that a building with a dilapidated foundation is untenable. Demolition, the material equivalent of literary "deconstruction," precedes rebuilding. Connolly, Chakrabarty, and Plantinga have uncovered the rot at the base of the Enlightenment project. Although iconoclastic, none of the authors are anarchistic. A few things can be drawn from their disparate studies of religion. First, they show the conceptual myopia and contradictions of modern scholarship and its utter failure to incorporate religion in the evolution of intellectual professionalism. Second, they propose that taking seriously the place of religion and religious groups offer a richer picture of how we can understand the world. Third, religion is essential to academia's rebirth. Its presence is necessary for a healthy social, intellectual, and cultural ethos, allowing us to understand the relationship between divine and human agency. Finally, what they have offered innervates those, like the present writer, already committed to a specific religious community.

Who will deny that an important characteristic of postmodernism is its indefatigable assault on the contradictions inherent in modernism? A window of opportunity has opened up—namely, the prospect of a re-evaluation of religion as a necessary component of human life and thought. What have we learned? Let those who

are members of religious communities become guarded postmodernists, for this is the time for a healthy dose of radical revision.

Notes

¹ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectics of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr and trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University, 2002), 11.

² Eugene Genovese, "Marxism, Christianity, and Bias in the Study of Southern Slave Society" in D. G. Hart eds., *Religious Advocacy and American History*, 90.

³ Id.

⁴ William Connolly, *Why I am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999)

⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁷ Ibid., 175. Emphasis is the author's.

⁸ Ibid., 176.

⁹ Ibid., 36.

¹⁰ Ibid., 76.

¹¹ Ibid., 185.

¹² Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 79.

¹³ Id.

¹⁴ Ibid., 76.

¹⁵ Ibid., 104-105.

¹⁶ Ibid., 109.

¹⁷ Ibid., 113.

¹⁸ Ibid., 90.

¹⁹ There are a number of problems with the “justified true belief” paradigm. Let me highlight a couple. First, what constitutes “truth”? Quite often scholars have used the same evidence but have produced different truths? Rather than say true, let’s use the term “cogent.” The idea is that certain claims can be considered more persuasive than others, leaving open the possibility that our assumed “truth” may be overturned in the future. At this juncture, then, knowledge is “cogently justified belief.” Second, what is meant by the term “justified”? There is a difference between “justified” and “justifiable.” The former can convey the meaning that our claims are not groundless, while the latter suggests that we are required (i.e., duty-bound) to point out the justifying factors before giving cognitive ascent. Traditional philosophy has suggested the latter—namely, that justifiable proof precedes cognitive ascent. Therefore the paradigm should be “justifiable cogent belief.” Only then can one say that belief is warranted.

²⁰ Plantinga doesn’t reject justification. He just wants to separate it from warrant. Furthermore, Plantinga argues that our beliefs must be “grounded.” We have no right to believe in just anything. But there are things that we can believe without external evidence.

²¹ Quote in *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University, 2000), 156.

²² Alvin Plantinga, “Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function,” *Philosophical Perspective* vol. 2 (1988): 1-50. This essay was the precursor to Plantinga’s *Warrant and Proper Function*. You will notice by the title of the essay that Plantinga prefers “warrant” to “positive epistemic status,” but the two mean the same thing.

²³ In contradistinction to Van Tillian presuppositionalists, the suppression of the knowledge of God is an ethical problem—not an epistemological (i.e., cognitively functional) one.

²⁴ I’m not arguing that knowing God means that I know his every predicate. I know God in as much as he has revealed himself to me. The same is true for our daily human interaction. I know someone solely on the basis of what that person reveals about herself. I know my wife, but I don’t know her *in-herself*.

²⁵ Competing religious claims should not be dismissed. Indeed, I would argue that one would have to employ a different strategy to deal with comparative religious claims or constructions. It’s a much more complicated enterprise. I have deliberately left atheists from the list of objectors. It is much more difficult to prove a universal negative—namely, that God *does not* exist. Not even the so-called argument from evil can cogently dismantle certain theistic arguments. Which statement, for instance, has more weight: “It is possible that God exists”; “It is impossible for God to exist.” The latter has little merit, if any.