

True Religion

Graham Ward



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Introduction: A Manifesto

Religion is, once more, haunting the imagination of the West. The various attempts to exorcise its presence – from Feuerbach’s anthropology to Freudian psychology, from the atheism of the logical atomists to the quarantining policies of liberalism – have failed, for the secularism upon which they were each founded is imploding. A new remythologizing of the real – media-driven, market-led – is emerging. But what does the appearance of this spectre at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries portend? “‘Religious sentiment’ is itself a social product’, the seventh of Marx’s theses on Feuerbach states. And while this was yet another attempt to expunge the transcendent, it points to where critical analysis must begin: with the social production of the religious. What then is being produced in and through contemporary religion and why? Furthermore, having understood something of the cultural logic of this present production, what are its implications for the future?

The answer to these questions can only issue from an historical analysis of the cultural embeddedness of ‘religion’. We stand today in a place created from the manifold labours of human beings and social institutions. We have to examine material practices, and how those practices wrought changes; how they were produced and productive. For we stand in the trajectory of the history of the social production of religion. And not only religion, but also discursive practices closely related to religion (like faith, belief and

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theology) and practices antithetical – yet for that reason still closely related to – the changing understanding of religion (like secularism and modernity). We need a genealogy in which the role played by religion – from the voyages of discovery to the Holy Land Experience theme park in Florida and the aggressive convictions of fundamentalists – can be assessed.

The genealogy I offer charts the changes in the understanding of ‘true religion’ from Shakespeare to Salman Rushdie, pointing out how closely linked those changes are to the waxing and waning of modernity and the increasing incursions on the social and the cultural of global capitalism. In turn such changes are related to the rise, development and, finally, implosion of the secularist worldview. Marx, in those same theses on Feuerbach, observed the virtual reality of secularism: ‘For the fact that the secular foundation detaches itself from itself and establishes itself in the clouds as an independent realm is really to be explained only by the self-cleavage and self-contradictoriness of this secular basis.’ He called for the removal of the contradictory basis through a revolution in practice. The genealogy I offer is an attempt at such a practice. Rather than stabilizing the secular foundation (as Marx desired), this genealogy wishes to demonstrate how secularism’s virtual reality is recognizing itself as such. And the various pursuits for ‘true religion’ today are living, practical consequences of such a recognition.

That genealogy allows me to make the following claims:

- What we are witnessing in Western culture today is the liquidation of ‘religion’ through its commodification.
- This liquidation is the outworking of a cultural logic in which ‘religion’ was inseparable from an imperialistic drive fundamental to Christian missiology and the development of world-trade systems.
- ‘Religion’ is a defining characteristic of postmodernity, testifying to the implosion of both secularism and liberalism and the re-enchantment of the world.
- The implosion of both secularism and liberalism is also the outworking of logics at the core of their enterprises.
- Contemporary Western postsecularism and postliberalism fetishizes all values and objects such that ‘religion’ has become *the*

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commodified 'special effect'. Religion baptises this fetishizing with the allure of a cheap transcendence.

- With the translation of values into market-developed lifestyles we are close to the dissolving of the social into the cultural, sociality into neo-tribalism.
- One of the strong reactions to this tendency has been a return to theological traditions and tradition-based forms of reasoning.
- It is difficult to see what resources there are outside of theological traditions, opposed to phantasms of commercial 'religion', for preventing the collapse of society into culture, the social into the neo-tribal.
- The theological voice will have a much higher profile in public debates and the production of public truth.
- The turn to theology offers the only possible future for faith traditions, but this will in turn increasingly generate culture wars, as the politics of politeness are erased by the radical politics of difference.
- At the moment, the major cultural wars are between faith communities and the remnants of the secular, liberal worldview. This will change. In their new self-assertiveness these faith communities might then turn upon each other.
- The possibilities for resolving these culture wars lie with each theological tradition negotiating the pressure to fetishize their faith.

The story that follows offers a demonstration of these claims.

1

Religion Before and After Secularism

Implosion is not the ‘end’ of secularism, as postmodernity is not the ‘end’ of modernity and postliberalism is not the end of liberalism. There are no radical breaks or ruptures culturally, only negotiations that modify in rehearsing what has been received. Just as the Georgian and Victorian squares and the 1960s examples of office-block modernism remain in the transforming urban landscape, so secularism has its institutions – its systems of education, its practices of law, its government statutes, its research laboratories. These will maintain the myths of objective, impartial knowledge and judgements by quarantining theistic belief-practices for some time to come. They will continue to promote human autonomy and the democratic ideal in terms of the rights of ‘man’. What the implosion signals is that secularism is coming to an end; that modernity is being undermined from within by a certain dawning realization of its unstable foundations; and that liberalism’s universalism, egalitarianism and belief in progress are in terminal decline.

These observations, let me quickly add, are not to be taken as outright condemnations of secularism or modernity or liberalism. Much violence, atrocity, oppression and sheer waste of human resources have been the product of so much religious bigotry, so many different kinds of ‘wars of religion’. Even today it might be remarked that in certain countries in the world a good dose of secularism would break the repressive holds certain state-ratified religions have over people’s lives. Nor can we say that nothing

good came from modernity, or that nothing good still comes from its traditions. The fruits of modernity in terms of the pursuit of humanitarian principles, the advances in medicine and science, and the promotion of educational and political ideals are evident: in public libraries, schools, universities, hospitals, law courts, etc. The observation I am making in this manifesto is that there is a deepening crisis of secularism, modernity and liberal values, such that our culture – being elsewhere – finds some of the assumptions and presuppositions of secularism, modernity and liberalism no longer credible. I am talking about credibility here, not what is true and what is false. I have no view from above; religions have no unmediated, unambivalent view from above either. We – and by that I mean not only we in North America and Western Europe, but we who in these geographic locations have had and continue to have profound influence over the rest of the world – are in the midst of a cultural sea-change.

One of the most striking characteristics of that sea-change is the return of religion to the public arena and the consumer market. However, we are moving too quickly here, and much of this will have to be revisited in the final chapter, where I try to present a description of where we are and what this might imply about where we are going.

Cultural Hermeneutics

For now, we have some fairly weighty words on the textual table: ‘religion’, ‘secularism’, ‘modernity’, ‘postmodernity’ and ‘liberalism’. I am shortly going to add another: ‘theology’. I am not going to define any of these terms. There are enough studies that offer tours of how *religio* has its roots in the classical Roman *relegere*, ‘to reread’, or *legere*, ‘to gather’, and so is synonymous with *treditio*. The third-century Christian writer Lactantius relates ‘religion’ to *religare*, ‘to bind up’ or ‘to bind together’, and so religion becomes inseparable from liturgy, community and the practice of faith. *Religio* is ‘worship of the true’ – with the explicit reminder that only Christianity is therefore a religion, the ‘true religion’. In his treatise *de vere religione* Augustine concurred.

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Theology has a more ancient pedigree. The use of *theologia* to describe stories about or thought concerning the gods is found in Plato and Aristotle. It is not found in the New Testament and *theologia*, like *religio*, underwent a Christian appropriation, having been at first avoided by the early church writers because of its associations with ‘paganism’. When appropriated by figures such as Athenagorus and Clement of Alexandria, ‘theology’ did not refer to knowledge of God’s nature, but speaking about the God who is believed in. Theology was synonymous with doxology.

Furthermore, *saeculum* came to mean ‘age’, ‘this age’, ‘the present world’ and, finally, ‘an account of the world without reference to God’. *Modus* means ‘now’ and the concerns with the present rather than the traditions of the past; and so ‘modernity’ as a cultural epoch characterized by rethinking the present and the future independently of the past is antagonistic to religion as *relegere* and *tradio*. *Postmodus* can mean either ‘after the modern’, ‘anterior to the modern’ or both, as Jean-François Lyotard has taught us.

I am not going to proceed by taking off-the-shelf definitions founded upon etymological possibilities. The importance of drawing attention to the semantic histories of these key terms is to show how words slip and slide in their different uses. What will become evident is how these words are exchanged and circulate in specific cultural and historical contexts, each impacting upon the other. They are defined and redefined as they are iterated in this novel, in that play, in this tract, in that journal entry, across time. Each iteration is an interpretation and a new cultural negotiation. It is by means of these interpretations that cultures change internally and modify each other. Hence what this book seeks to uncover is something of the cultural hermeneutics in which religion, theology and the secular participate. So, in order to understand both what ‘true religion’ produces and how it is itself part of a cultural production, we need to observe where ‘religion’ makes its appearance within particular cultural matrices and begin to analyse the nature and significance of those appearances within those specific contexts. We can then allow the nature of what is ‘religion’ to emerge from the cultural appearance it has made and the nexus of associations in which it stands. In this way we investigate its formations and transformations as a discourse – that is, the way the word is articulated

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within specific gestures, actions, speaking and writings, and the institutions that govern, evaluate and enforce those articulations.

This investigation is not in terms of cause and effect. We are not tracing the influence of 'religion' on literature, say, or the influence of state power on the constitution of 'religion'. We are examining the networks of exchange of signs and the cultural fluidity involved in those networks, such that attempts to determine the direction of influence, the mechanics of cause and effect, are understood as too reductive, too restrictive. 'True religion' is disseminated across social and historical processes; the poetics and politics of cultural determination, production and transformation. What is achieved by analysing this dissemination between, say, the fourteenth and the twenty-first centuries, is a certain genealogy of 'religion'. Cultural hermeneutics enables a story to be constructed, a narrative in which we can appreciate the way the word 'religion' and the pursuit of the 'true religion' are produced, challenged and transformed. We can present these exchanges and negotiations only through examining particular events or cultural loci, making evident the worldview or cultural imaginary that constitutes and is constituted by these events. Frequently these events or loci will be literary texts or other cultural forms such as buildings and films, since in these 'events' or loci are often found complex expressions of the way the world is experienced and understood. We can 'ask how collective beliefs and experiences were shaped, moved from one medium to another, concentrated in manageable aesthetic forms, offered for consumption'¹ and gained popular approval.

The transformation of 'religion' will have implications for other terms: the secular, modernity, postmodernity and theology. For the early developments of secularism in England have been traced to the use made of Protestant thinking in Henry VIII's famous dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century. The early development of 'modernism' has been discerned in the penchant among scholastics of the high Middle Ages for the free exercise of the speculative intellect – free, that is, from appeals to authorities such as the scriptures and the reflections of the church Fathers and ecumenical councils (mediated, it is true, by the cultural politics of the church). From these scholastic freedoms the shift from Oxford University's motto *dominus illuminatio meo* to Enlightenment rationalism was triggered and likewise the inauguration of the modern. No doubt both these genealogies

require critical attention, but the change I wish to illustrate in this chapter is that which occurs between pre- and postmodern religion, at a time when secularism's star was in the ascendant.

Romeo and Juliet I

We will begin at a performance of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, or a particular reading of it, which took place at the Globe Theatre probably in the season 1594–5. My reading of the play is influenced in part by a certain perspective being investigated by contemporary Shakespearian scholars: Shakespeare's relations with Roman Catholicism.² Shakespeare's father, after all, is known now to have been a recusant; that is, a Catholic who refused to go to the newly formed and constituted Protestant Church of England brought about by the Elizabethan Settlement. Shakespeare himself may be the same 'William Shakeshafte' who served in one of the great Catholic houses in Lancashire during the 1580s. The focus of my critical attention will therefore be upon (1) the role of Friar Laurence, (2) the role the sacraments play with respect to the politics of personal love and civic strife within the play, and (3) religious rhetoric as it is used by various characters. I am attempting to reconstruct what was understood by religion at a certain time, in a certain context.

The opening of the play establishes an atmosphere of sexual pleasure and violent struggle, dominant throughout. Swords become pricks and pricks become swords in a fluid metamorphosis that requires no Freudian analysis. The entrance of the brooding Romeo only intensifies the youthful, turbulent erotics, by demonstrating through the excessiveness of his love for Rosaline the profound internalization of these feuding dynamics, this 'brawling love'. He participates in the fray, despite not being present at the recent squabble. And religious references constantly appear, in ways that do not draw attention to themselves at this point, but weave in and out of the feverish antitheses of desire and aggression, libidinal pleasures and murderous impulsiveness. The 'fiery Tybalt' hates the Montagues as much as he hates hell; the Capulet characters who provoke the opening fight bear ironized biblical names: Sampson the Old Testament Judge; Abram the Jewish lawgiver; and Balthasar,

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a name given by legend to one of the three wise men who brought gifts to lay at the feet of the infant Christ. Prince Escalus equates, in true Elizabethan fashion, rebellion with profanity; Benvolio acts as Romeo's confessor, hearing his 'true shrift'; Rosaline repudiates Romeo's advances because she has taken a vow of chastity, wishing either to remain in or enter a convent; and Benvolio wishes to teach Romeo another 'doctrine'. But it is within the poetry of Romeo's early ruminations that religion is not only first named, but appears as a defining characteristic of the cultural context:

Why then, O brawling love, O loving hate
O anything of nothing first create!
O heavy lightness, serious vanity,
Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms! (I.1, 174–7)

Here Romeo relates the play's violent erotics to the creation of the world out of the brooding chaos of nothingness described in the opening lines of Genesis. The violences, though, are clouding the creative processes, so that he (and we) are unsure of the procedure – does chaos move towards well-seeming forms (in which case why the 'seeming?'), does anything come from nothing (in which case why the 'vanity?'), or is it all the other way around and are the divine creative processes being reversed? In making this metaphoric connection Romeo expands the local libidinal warfare shattering the peace of Verona to embrace the cosmic creativity of divine love – the love that shapes all times and places. Romeo intuitively acknowledges a providence, a divine economy at work in creation and maintaining the world. His personal perplexity, expressive of a wider internecine struggle, has not simply a religious dimension, but is itself essentially religious. And so he concludes his deliberations with Benvolio:

When the devout religion of mine eye
Maintains such falsehood, then turn tears to fire,
And these who, often drown'd, could never die,
Transparent heretics, be burnt for liars. (I.2, 90–3)

Of course, the references to religion and religious acts here are metaphorical. But Shakespeare's metaphors have both a habit of