

Religious Narrative and Postsecularism
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‘We should read the Bible one more time. To interpret it, of course, but also to let it carve out a space for our own fantasies and interpretive delirium.’ (Julia Kristeva, 1995, 126)

Postsecularism

‘Postsecularism’ is a concept that lends itself to ambiguity. It could suggest a deeply antagonistic stance towards secularism, involving the call for a resurgent religiosity. In this case the term ‘post’ really implies ‘pre’ - a dismantling of the secular culture of the past few centuries and the re-establishment of a theological perspective on life (see, for example, Blond, 1998). This is not how the term will be understood in this paper. Here ‘postsecularism’ denotes an attempt to overcome the antinomy of secularism/religiosity in a manner which recognises the strengths and weaknesses of the two elements. Historically, the struggle between the secular and the religious simultaneously yoked the two together, with each side drawing sustenance from not being its opposite. In other words, there was a mutual need of the one for the other - separateness required the other. Perceptive critics at the beginning of this historical process understood how the liberal secular project carried Christianity like a ball and chain. Hence Saint-Simon’s observation that the concept of ‘the sovereignty of the people’ presupposed ‘sovereignty by the grace of God’, ‘These two opposing dogmas... have nothing but a reciprocal existence’ (Ionescu, 1976, 160), or Tom Paine’s claim that, ‘toleration is not the opposite of intolerance, but is the counterfeit of it’ (Paine, 1969, 107). This interpenetration prompts Derrida to ridicule ‘the ingenuity, and at times the inanity of those who sloganize Voltaire and rally behind his flag in the combat for critical modernity’ (Derrida, 1998, 22). A postsecularist perspective no longer feels the necessity to counterpose the secular to the religious. This approach therefore betokens not a rejection of the secular, but a recognition that the achievements of the secular will not be lost by a more nuanced approach to religion (see also Martin, 1996). Postsecularism can thus be seen as either part of a poststructuralist deconstruction of a linked antinomy, or, with reference to an earlier tradition, as part of a dialectical project.

Religious narrative

Clearly the most important religious narrative in western society is that contained in the Bible (the Hebrew Bible plus the Christian New Testament). Over the past two centuries the secularism/religiosity antinomy has impacted on responses to the Bible. The increasingly important historical-critical approach to the Bible, with the troubling questions it asked about the factual reliability of the text, was clearly a factor in the emergence of attitudes of hostility or indifference to the scriptures. This could range from the self-conscious atheistic utilisation of German biblical criticism by Left-Hegelians, or the militant freethought of Victorian radicalism, to the gradual ebbing away of the sea of faith, in the face of scientific appraisals of the biblical stories. This is not meant as a criticism of the historical-critical approach, which did, and still does, important work; rather, it points to the historic ideological field within which this

technique was situated. Thus, to take a modern example, although the historical-critical approach can be, and has been, accommodated within a variety of 'believing' and 'non-believing' stances, its recent challenge by literary and poststructuralist perspectives, has heartened religious fundamentalism, which believes it has triumphed over its old 'godless' opponent (Carroll, 1998, 51). The challenge is to go beyond this particular structure of ideologies and, deploying a variety of reading techniques, read the biblical narrative afresh. An indication that just such a contemporary shift is occurring is the increasing frequency of accounts of people who have compressed the historical stages of biblical rejection and reassessment into one lifetime. The scientist Steven Rose, looking back to his youthful rejection of religion, recalled that 'if science was right, religion could not be, and I preferred white coats to black hats'; yet on reading, and meditating on, the Book of Genesis he was surprised to find that the science/religion distinction was not as clear-cut as he had previously assumed: that, for example, 'white coats, as much as priestly robes... can be bloodstained' (vii, viii). In short, the abandonment of the Bible to a narrowly-conceived 'religion' has had the serious consequences of bestowing the text's potential on often deeply conservative actors (despite the best efforts of Christian Socialism, amongst others), and retarding a more widespread and pluralist appropriation.

There has, in recent years, been an upsurge in new readings of the Bible. They come from a wide variety of perspectives: feminist, gay and lesbian, Afro-American, post-colonial and so forth; and focus on an equally varied range of biblical material: the treatment of sexuality and gender, notions of power, the nature of exclusion, etc, etc. In what follows, an attempt will be made to focus on the utopian aspects of the Bible. This might not seem a particularly novel or interesting approach, given the available literature on utopian imagery in the Bible. However, recent work on the origins and structure of the Bible, and fascinating deconstructions and reconfigurations of the text, provide an opportunity to move beyond earlier discussions of biblical utopianism. The analysis, following Paul Ricoeur's influential model, is divided into reading *behind*, *in*, and *in front of* the biblical text. To read *behind* a text is to try to reconstruct the activity which produced the text in the first place; to read *in* a text is to get to grips with the structure of the work, while to read *in front of* a text is to explore the interaction between text and reader (Ricoeur, 1981, 141; Court, 1997, 8). Barthes deploys a similar model, but brings out more fully the potential of the third form of reading. His first form is 'historical criticism' ('where the text *comes from*'), the second is 'structural analysis' ('*how...* [the text] is made'), and the third is 'textual analysis' ('*how...* [the text] is unmade, how it explodes, disseminates') (Barthes, 1994, 247; Bible and Culture Collective, 1995, 132). Whilst there is a tendency in these two authors to privilege the third act, the following analysis seeks to use all three modes.

Behind the text

The most insightful work on the historical status of the Hebrew Bible has come in recent years from a range of writers who, despite their important differences, have been variously labelled as 'New Historicists' (Carroll, 1998, 52-57) or 'Deconstructionists'. They have major methodological objections to traditional attempts to read off a supposed history of Israel from the pages of the Hebrew Bible. Their focus, instead, is on the process whereby the composite text was produced - to which they give a relatively recent date, between the fifth and the second centuries B.C.E.. As to the motivation for this act of textual production, they reject the notion

that the Hebrew Bible was a straightforward act of historical retrieval, in favour of explanations stressing a range of complex historical, social, and ideological factors. Significantly, there is an awareness of the vital element of future-orientation in the constructed Bible, an orientation that deeply marks and structures the presentation of the biblical 'past'. This approach is most explicit in the work of Thomas L. Thompson, who actually deploys the term 'utopian' in his analysis. For Thompson, the Hebrew Bible was most probably constructed in the period when Palestine was a part of the Persian empire - the so-called post-exilic period. Present concerns and future hopes were articulated through an 'historic' narrative composed of reworked traditions, imaginative reconstructions, and sheer invention. This narrative spoke of a blessed people who had fallen away from their God, but who could recreate, sustain, and even surpass the previous days of divine beneficence by appropriate behaviour:

in the renaissance born of the Persian restructuring of its conquered territories, the Israel of tradition first presented itself to history, like the phoenix, specifically in the form of an Israel *redivivus*, whose true essence and significance - and implicitly its future glory - was traced in the tales of the patriarchs, the stories of the wilderness and of the judges, and the great legends about the golden age of the united monarchy. (Thompson, 1992, 384)

It was these 'utopian religious perceptions' (ibid., 422) which animated and energised the whole process. However, as another 'new historicist', Philip R. Davies, argues, although the Hebrew Bible is very concerned with religion, it was not created as a religious text - its metamorphosis into 'scripture' was a subsequent development (Davies, 1992, 113-115). Davies ascribes the production of the text to a small post-exilic immigrant Jerusalem élite possessed of a distinctive class ideology: a this-worldly agenda, claiming to embody the aspirations of a newly conceived 'Israel'. This group 'will transform itself in the direction of becoming the "Israel" of its own creation as it accepts that Israel's presumed history as its own, accepts its constitutions, beliefs and habits as its own, and begins to incarnate that identity' (ibid., 93). It was thus an immigrant and exclusionary ideology, attracted to notions of a journey, or return, to a promised land, in which the indigenous population was a radical other - hence the importance of Abraham's travels, the Exodus and conquest narratives, and of course, the Babylonian captivity (ibid., 87-88).

The Hebrew Bible, therefore, isn't simply a text containing utopian moments, it is a utopian moment in itself. The continuing presence of this utopian energy, sustained by, amongst other factors, the experience of foreign domination, in turn created the environment in which the various expectations of the New Testament could flourish, themselves nurtured by the narratives of the Hebrew Bible. The complex pattern of political and religious hopes apparent in the Hebrew Bible, refracted by the specific conditions obtaining in the Palestine of Jesus, profoundly shapes the New Testament. The New Testament scholar, E. P. Sanders, sets the creators of the New Testament in the two interlocking contexts of a long standing Jewish salvation history and the more immediate climate of an anticipated, and imminent, climax to history, noting that both are 'orientated towards the future, and... assume that God will do something in *history* that agrees with other things he has done.' (96) The forward looking concept of salvation (individual or collective) reveals the deep utopian dynamic of that text - though its focus on a 'historical' and 'divine' Jesus marks the most fundamental discontinuity with what has become known as

Judaism (the Christian conceit that Jesus was the sole authoritative fulfilment of the hopes of the Hebrew Bible). The stage was set for two millennia of complex utopian intertextuality between the two texts, as well as the darkness of genocidal incomprehension.

In the text

With the new approaches to the Bible stressing the literary features of the work, the desire to develop new, rich readings of the text has inevitably created fears that the 'objective' constraints of the text are no longer recognised, let alone respected. An arid polarisation can best be avoided by exploring the undoubted strengths of both approaches. In this section the focus will be on those structural elements of the text which can help explain how, for thousands of years, readers have generated recurring utopian interpretations of the Bible.

As Shimon Bar-Efrat has argued, the Hebrew Bible has a temporal rather than a spatial orientation. Space, as a static dimension, is sacrificed to the fluid flux of time (196). There are in fact *two* levels of time, corresponding to the two levels of narrative (see Thompson, 1992, 357-358) - the narrated time of each specific book of the Bible, and the overarching meta-time of the text as a whole. Since, as Thompson has argued, the juxtaposition and manipulation of these two levels of time was in the service of a broadly utopian project, we should expect a significant dimension of utopian temporality at each narrative level. Thus at the micro level there are a whole series of dynamic narrative devices: a land is promised, there is an escape from bondage, an epic journey is endured, the goal is reached, and then lost, and so forth. These in turn feed into, and are themselves structured by, an epic story of the vicissitudes of the chosen people. Each of the constituent episodes is therefore capable of evoking the whole. This, in turn, gives the Bible a metaphorical power which enables it to be abstracted from its ostensible and real historical grounding, and applied to very different temporal and spatial contexts. The New Testament, also, is a highly dynamic text in which the final canonical ordering of Gospels to Revelation produces its own form of the two narrative lines. As ever there is a conscious effort to root the Christian story in the older Hebrew narrative. Thus Court notes that 'the word Luke uses for Christ's death, 'his departure' (exodus) is chosen deliberately because of its association with a God-given event of deliverance, the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. Jesus' dying will be an even greater act of liberation' (Court, 1997, 36).

This is not to say that there is a uniformity in the utopian material in the text. The Hebrew Bible can be analysed in literary terms but it is not a novel, and no amount of ingenious re-reading can turn it into a seamless web. It drew on heterogeneous traditions whose authority precluded any act of homogeneous standardisation; a diversity clearly accentuated by the addition of the New Testament. Thus Michael Walzer has claimed that there is an Exodus perspective out of which grew a messianic approach, differing in crucially important ways. Whereas the Exodus model is the account of a people who, mainly through their own efforts, struggle to create a better world, the messianic is essentially a miraculous transformation of the universe, in which the people are largely passive spectators of a divine project. He locates an historical perception of this distinction in Oliver Cromwell's juxtaposition in a single speech of an evocation of the book of Exodus in relation to the English revolution, and a condemnation of the messianic fantasies of the radical Fifth Monarchy group (Walzer, 1985, 17). Walzer's analytical distinction is thus, as he admits, also a normative one. He thus continues a long line of differing political

readings of the utopian material in the Bible. In Norman Cohn's admirable study of medieval millenarianism we have a chronicle of very different tradition of political biblical interpretation which derived its utopian vision from the apocalyptic elements in the text (Cohn, 1970).

At first sight, therefore, the text seems infinitely amenable. Certainly the stories of deliverance and new life are as potent as ever. The Argentine liberation theologian, J. Severino Croatto, perceives in the Pentateuch 'a great *utopia* of liberation' for the poor of Latin America (Croatto, 1999, 39); the Afrikaner Bernard C. Lategan finds in Paul's concept of 'the family of God' a new way to develop social relationships in post-Apartheid South Africa (Lategan, 1999); whilst the figure of Christ as liberator, according to the musician Nick Cave, gives 'our imaginations the freedom to rise and to fly' (Cave, 1998, xii). Increasingly, however, the limits to this type of reading of the text have become more apparent. Although patently adaptable to a multitude of liberation contexts, do not the utopian images also carry elements of exclusion, violence and authoritarianism whose effects need to be considered?

How does that great utopian image of the Israelite entry into the promised land look when considered from the perspective of the people already living in the land of Canaan? Deliverance for one group is invasion for another. The Native American writer Robert Allen Warrior notes the biblical warrant this story gave to the European attacks on the indigenous population of America (The Bible and Culture Collective, 1995, 284-286); Lategan recalls the way Afrikaners closely identified their own position in South Africa with the biblical chosen people (Lategan, 1999, 132); and Keith W. Whitelam argues that the Palestinians have been dispossessed of their past through the biblical narrative (Whitelam, 1996). Others are covertly or overtly excluded from the utopian subject. The patriarchal assumptions of the biblical writers inevitably marginalise women, whilst no amount of ingenious exegesis of the Sodom and Gomorrah incident can present a Bible manifestly welcoming gays. Then there is the element of violence often associated with the utopian moments - the slaughter of Egyptians and the people of Canaan, the eternal damnation of sinners, and the genocidal level of mass killing in the various apocalyptic passages. As Pippin and Aichele write in a discussion of the image of the kingdom: 'The price of the utopian kingdom of God is violence... Indeed it is the violence attributed directly to God, as well as the violence of humans in obedience to God's will, that is most troubling about the biblical images of the kingdom' (Pippin and Aichele, 1998, 7). There is also an authoritarian quality to the visionary in the Bible. We are presented with one answer, one goal, which all the righteous ought to follow. The strong images of the New Jerusalem or the kingdom are presented as archetypes or essences of a rightly ordered society. They thus tend to impose parameters, shut out alternatives and even the possibility of legitimately conceiving of such alternatives. Utopia silences utopias.

Mindful of these structural problems, new supplementary avenues of interpretation should be explored. This does require, though, a change in the relationship between reader and text. Whilst it is undoubtedly the case that readers have always read their concerns into the text, the text itself was always deemed to have an 'objective' quality which restricted certain forms of interpretation. This authority is now no longer deemed sacrosanct. The reader must be able to use the text in ways it does not, at first sight, legitimate. The possibilities for utopian readings are accordingly expanded.

In front of the text

The wish to play with the biblical text, to take, literally, liberties with it, particularly lends itself to the utopian enterprise. More's *Utopia* is an especially fine example of this serious playfulness, combining the real and the fictitious, the grave and the humorous in an ambiguous, topsy-turvy world. In the utopian genre the constraints of the actual could be left behind in a carnival of exploration. Why not, therefore, bring some utopian energy to bear on the rich narrative of the Bible? The *dramatis personae* and story lines are already so marvellous and fantastic that the launching pad for a flight of fancy is already in place. The endless openness of the text is thereby revealed. Such unlocking can take many forms: minor characters can be magnified, the implicit can be made explicit, familiar stories can be given different endings, deities and demons can be recharacterised, losers can become winners, contradictions can be registered rather than resolved. Biblical space becomes utopian space.

Some examples. Tina Pippin explores the strange little story in Genesis 6: 1-4, where the 'sons of God' come down to earth to mate with the beautiful 'daughters of men' to produce a race of 'mighty men'. Pippin recounts traditional misogynistic and patriarchal interpretations of the tale, but then seeks to play with the text by retelling it in a number of voices - Disney, Stephen King, the Brothers Grimm. She concludes with 'one possible' feminist version, which is explicitly utopian. Here the daughters of men preferred the supernatural beings to their oppressive terrestrial men folk - 'Besides the sex was incredible!' - and brought forth not only mighty men but amazon women. Whilst world conquest was left to the men, the women 'stormed heaven (with a magical ladder from the goddess Ishtar who had lost her position in the downsizing of heaven by Elohim), where they live eternally, wise women of renown.' (Pippin, 1998, 59) Roland Boer plays with the text of Chronicles 'as *though*' it were utopian fiction (Boer, 1997, 15). Thus he notes the presence in the text of the coexistence of interesting narration and boring description, an inability to describe adequately the utopian space, and the elements of connection and disconnection to the 'real world'. He explores the utopianised past presented in the text to find not blueprints, but figures of a utopian future. Thus using a Zizekian reading of Hegel he interprets the 'somewhat mechanical' presence of Yahweh in the society as bringing to a head the contradiction between the divine and the human, and as thus prefiguring a move from the religious to the political. He also ponders the utopian significance of the temple, concluding that 'the temple is a figure, an analogy, for the sort of collective existence that is only glimpsed in Chronicles: the image of everyone, without distinction, working hard and together is an image that projects beyond the specific hierocratic content of Chronicles to a possible collective life for which the temple is the enabling figure.' (Ibid, 166) Jan Tarlin relates pornography and utopia in a reading of Ezekiel. Because of Ezekiel's linkage of the violent and the erotic it can be read by a contemporary audience as pornography. By acting out the interaction between gender, desire and aggression, this text, like the films of Fassbinder, both indicts and opens up a utopian space - 'attaining utopia by the path of pornography' (Tarlin, 1997, 180; see also the discussion in Boer, 1998, 44). Finally, Gene Doty provides a 'blasphemous' reading of Revelation. Using James Blish's novels *Black Easter* and *The Day After Judgement* he envisages the triumph of Satan in the final apocalyptic battle, where Satan, reluctantly, becomes the new God. This enables him to explore the deep dualism represented by the good God and the evil Satan, a dualism with deep psychic effects on western consciousness. Whilst a writer like C.S. Lewis, in his own apocalyptic novel, *That Hideous Strength*, merely reproduces the dualism with the victory of God, Blish's alternative ending forces the reader to consider the

interpenetration of good and evil - a genuinely human transcendence of the ancient dualism, 'a situation in which humans experience all the dimensions of the holy' (Doty, 1998, 94).

This third line of approach is therefore a powerful addition to the techniques available for utopian readings of the biblical narrative. Again, it must be stressed that there is no suggestion of a rank ordering here. The other two approaches, which have themselves been enriched by recent retheorizing, each have their own important contributions to make. The possibility of such expansive open readings is grounded in the potent dynamics of a text which was itself created as a document of hope.

The Secular and the Religious

The relationship between the 'secular' and the 'religious' is clearly of fundamental importance in any postsecular utopian readings of the Bible. The Anglican clergyman Don Cupitt, in *After God: The Future of Religion*, ruthlessly prunes the traditional claims of religion. He wishes to validate the claims of the human, the this-worldly, against the debilitating strictures of philosophically unsustainable religious structures. There is no external God, or afterlife, no absolutes in the universe. But he is still committed to carving out a role for the 'religious'. The language, however, is muted, even, on occasions, disparaging. Thus, all that is left are various 'tricks', 'a toolkit, a small set of attitudes and techniques' which will, hopefully enable people to gain self-knowledge, inner peace, and an affirmative take on life. As to the traditional literary resources of religion, we must 'make whatever use we can of the surviving scraps of vocabulary, ritual, and symbolism that are available to us' (Cupitt, 1997, 104, 106). Despite Cupitt's upbeat assertions to the contrary, there is a reductionist melancholy to this project which both evaporates the 'religious' and impoverishes the 'secular'.

An American perspective is provided by Patrick Glynn in his article 'Prelude to a Post-Secular Society'. He situates the construction of the American constitution in a secular reaction of the founders to the European experience of religious wars. This he believes has created a firm basis for American society. Nonetheless he identifies a religious/spiritual reaction to the negative aspects of this process, assisted by perceived deficiencies in the intellectual, particularly scientific, foundations of the secular worldview. Hence the attractions of a possible 'post-modern synthesis, combining heightened spiritual or religious awareness with the tolerance, rationality and mutual respect we have learned from two centuries of democratic living' (Glynn, 1995, 3). As he elaborates this 'synthesis', however, it becomes clear that Glynn is primarily interested in negotiating a religious revival in the secular structures of the USA. Thus whilst acknowledging the legitimacy of the secular sphere, his desire for a form of spiritual democracy identifies him as having primarily religious interests; hence the conclusion that his desired synthesis will be '*based* [my italics] on a spiritual understanding as common as the God or Source that is the focus of our collective religious yearning' (ibid, 3-4).

A more fruitful, dialectical, approach is to be found in the work of Ernst Bloch; which also possesses the advantage of a self-conscious utopianism. Bloch has a sense both of the historic depth of religiosity and of its continuing validity; this is, nonetheless, grounded in a materialist and 'atheist' Marxism. Emmanuel Levinas, in an appreciative appraisal of aspects of Bloch's 'religious' thought highlights the concept of 'astonishment' (Levinas, 1998, 40-41) - that moment of utopian awe before the plenitude of being, which religious language has so often sought to express.

Although articulated in otherworldly terms the content is real and human, and embodies much of the richest of humanity's historically evolving aspirations and possibilities; religion has also sought to stifle, negate or discipline these yearnings; in short, 'where there is hope there is religion, but where there is religion there is not always hope' (Bloch, 1972, 266). This 'religious' material thus survived the thin rationalist criticism of the Enlightenment, and still lies ahead as unfulfilled potential. The conventional dualisms of theism/atheism, God/humanity, religion/secularism thus obscure the vista of humanity creating a home in an astonishing universe; hence his paradoxical formulation: 'Only an atheist can be a good Christian; only a Christian can be a good atheist.' (ibid, 9). At its worst this vision degenerates into a linear and authoritarian Marxist-Leninist teleology, but at its best it is genuinely insightful.

Derrida's recent thoughts on religion might also be noted here. He excoriates the shallow universalism of the Enlightenment which not only failed to destroy religion but, in its wake, created the conditions for the violent fundamentalist reaction of today. To develop an alternative grounding he conceives of a place he calls the 'desert', an abstract location in which he can reflect on the 'religious' apart from the historical phenomenon of 'religions'. This space is therefore prior 'to the opposition between the sacred (or the holy) and the profane.' (Derrida, 1998, 17; see also Caputo, 1997, 151-159). Within this space Derrida speaks of a possible 'messianicity without messianism' (ibid), combining both reason and faith. Any genuine realm of universality requires a faithful response to personal testimony - somebody says they will do a thing, and others act on the assumption (faith) that the statement is sincere - a process which partakes of the miraculous: 'Believe what I say as one believes in a miracle.' (ibid., 63-64). A possible 'universalizable culture of this faith' (ibid, 18) is therefore grounded in a conjunction of faith and reason which precedes the complex historical antagonisms of the two elements. Derrida is, however, at such pains to prevent any foreclosure of the future, that he rejects attempts to specify the nature of that future. Thus his messianicity would be 'the opening to the future... but without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration' (ibid., 17). In this respect he is at one with Marx's strictures about utopianising. The impulse is a laudable one - visions can indeed restrict and discipline - but, as with Marx, its exclusive application would leave politics blind.

The reference to fundamentalism needs to be developed, for it is clearly of importance in any discussion of the contemporary resonances of the biblical narrative. Whilst fundamentalist responses to the text have a long history, *fundamentalism*, as an ideology or political practice, is of fairly recent vintage. It can perhaps be seen as part of the fallout from the inadequacies of the Enlightenment project, with the biblical text providing a point of orientation in the confusing geography of the new order. Religion had to use the forms of secular life to retain any position at all; for just as a genuinely conservative society could not produce *conservatism*, so too could a 'religious' society not produce *fundamentalism* - both are forms of tragic reactivity. A paradoxical outcome, therefore, of Enlightenment universalism, was that fundamentalism was likewise driven to assert universal certainty in the biblical text - a radical assurance begat an equally radical counter assurance (Lane Fox, 1992, 42-43). But this is not the same as reassurance. One should not forget the dangerous psychic energies involved here: to be prepared to kill for a fundamentalist interpretation suggests to Derrida the presence of a pathological anxiety, derived from the necessity of using the technology and techniques of the 'enemy' to validate its counter-position (Derrida, 1998, 24, 44). Likewise, the continuing hold of christianity on secular

rationality, in the form of a wilful ignoring or rejection of the biblical narrative, left that terrain to be thoroughly colonised by fundamentalism. Ernst Bloch, surveying the barbarism of Fascism in the 1930s, noted how vulgar Marxism's unwillingness to engage with the 'religious' dimensions of German history had allowed in those who were prepared to use this material to build a popular base: 'the Nazis streamed into the vacated... regions (Bloch, 1991, 139-140); the utopian promise of Joachim of Fiore's third kingdom was transformed into the 'Third Reich' - 'blazing darkness fell on the land, a night full of blood and nothing but Satan.' (Ibid., 127) Furthermore, the world hegemony of christian secularism, what Derrida terms '*mondialatinisation*' (globalatinization) (Derrida, 1998, 67), creates explosive conflicts with non-christian, especially islamic, forms of fundamentalism.

It is, of course, entirely possible and legitimate to find the biblical narratives of no use whatever. They may, for example, carry so many negative associations as to repel any creative development. Christopher Isherwood recalled that his exploration of Indian philosophy was facilitated by its radical difference from the discredited christian language of his childhood:

Here were a lot of new words... uncontaminated by association with bishop's sermons, schoolmasters' lectures, politicians' speeches. To have... picked up the old phrases and scraped them clean of their dirty associations - that job would have been too disgusting for a beginner. (Isherwood, 1996, 29)

Or it might be felt that the narratives are too much of their time and place to be of any present relevance; that to avoid slipping into ahistorical assumptions about a universal human nature and perennial or archetypal situations, heroic feats of reinterpretation are required, energy better expended on more fruitful, current sources. These are quite properly matters of individual disposition and choice. One should however be aware of those internal and often unconscious resistances conspiring against the text, which manifest themselves in evasion, embarrassment and silence. To not want to read the Bible is one thing, to be *unable* to do so is quite another. If inhibitions about reading the text stem from conscious or unconscious anxieties about contact with the religious other this is the corollary of the religious use of the text as an offensive weapon. Try reading the Bible in a crowded train to experience the polarised body language suggesting that you are either a religious nutcase or fighting the good fight! Both responses are unnecessarily squandering the potential of the text.

Nor is it particularly helpful to see the central faultline as the distinction between belief and unbelief; the theism/atheism dualism conceals far more than it reveals. It is the openness of approach which is important, not the philosophical label. Dogmatic theists and atheists have far more in common than either do with that flexible and sensitive exploration of meaning which can link, and overcome the distinction between, 'believer' and 'unbeliever'. Frederic Jameson has made the observation that this was implicitly recognised in the sophisticated theological literature of the past:

it has always seemed to me that the nonbeliever strengthens his adversary's case by his tendency (a properly superstitious one, we might point out) to attribute some unique and specialized, intrinsically *other* type of psychological or spiritual experience to the believer; and this, even though it is made plain in theological literature from the very outset that faith is to be described essentially as the longing to have faith, that the nature of belief lies not so much in some apprehension of the presence of God as rather of his silence, his

absence - in short, that there is basically no real difference between a believer and a nonbeliever in the first place. (Jameson, 1971, 117)

To consign the biblical narratives to a homogenous realm of belief, with all non-believers indiscriminately classed as interlopers on alien territory, is immensely unproductive. A realignment based on what one does with the text seems a more sensible way forward.

Conclusion

The proposal is therefore a modest one. Overestimation and underestimation of the Bible have between them deprived the text of useful labour. It needs to be set to work once more. The three levels of utopian dynamism in the text suggest one possible line of development. Created out of hope, rich in utopian tropes, a catalyst for yet further speculation, the old text retains its resourcefulness. Further productivity can be best assisted by a postsecularist sensitivity to the instabilities and potentialities of the modern dichotomy between the secular and the religious. The text deals with the divine, but, whatever may have been its ultimate source of inspiration, it was written by humans, and for humans. As the Bible itself makes clear, Moses claimed no divinity, and Jesus is only preserved in the memories of others. To treat it as a work of terrestrial artifice is, therefore, neither to diminish its power, nor to break with its original conception. To reduce this example of human creativity to a theological singularity is a retrograde step, but so to is a reduction of the human to the mundane.

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