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FROM REPRESENTATION TO CONSTITUENT POWER:  
RELIGION, OR SOMETHING LIKE IT, IN  
HARDT AND NEGRI'S *EMPIRE*

Whoever comments on Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's work *Empire* must do more than point out the empirical realities that run counter to the authors' thesis about the imminent globalized world.<sup>1</sup> Hardt and Negri have undertaken the riskiest conceivable task, that of marrying an analysis of historical change and a possible future to an ontology. This is the highest of intellectual high-wire acts. Considering the perils, commentators too must proceed with caution. It seems trivial to object, for example, that globalization as "the future" is not yet fully here, since to insist on this point would be to see the leftover institutions of previous eras as a fatal "gotcha!" that refutes the authors' analysis.<sup>2</sup> But though there is a hermeneutic scruple involved in reserving judgment until history catches up with theory, this too has its limits. Political theorists should not have to bite their tongues rather than mention the inconvenient persistence of the nation state that hinders the arrival of global network sovereignty. Likewise, as sociologists and demographers anticipate the preeminence of immaterial labor, they should not have to pretend not to see the masses still engaged in unreconstructed manual and industrial labor. So the

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<sup>1</sup> *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> A recurrent problem for Marxist-based analysis is to decide what does and does not count as a hegemonic form (of production, of consumption, of social life) in the present, over against forms from the past that continue even as they are superseded. Jason Read stresses the prospective nature of Marxist analysis. "The difficult task is to recognize the specific way in which the various tendencies have realized themselves, or failed to, in the history of capitalism, while at the same time maintaining some element of the tendential, the nonactualized, and the conflictual, which as Marx understood are the conditions for a future different from the past." Jason Read, *The Micropolitics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 104. In a similar vein, Tony Smith advocates the construction of "ideal types" to convey the most salient and influential models in any given situation. "An ideal type of the numerically most prevalent phenomena in a given period may differ from a model of the phenomena most closely associated with leading sectors of the economy...All we can say is that any ideal type relevant to one or more of the above considerations in principle may be helpful for grasping essential features of particular periods in economic history." Tony Smith, *Technology and Capital in the Age of Lean Production: a Marxian Critique of the "New Economy"* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 2-3.

commentator has to walk the line between being a stickler for facts and employing a principle of ontological charity.

Something similar happens when it comes to the treatment of religion in *Empire*.<sup>3</sup> Real, factual religion has not gone anywhere, nor does it appear ready to anytime soon. And yet, just as Hardt and Negri herald the arrival of an imperial sovereignty that variously is both here and not yet here, religion, or something like it, has its own place in the imperial and post-imperial landscape they describe. Depending on one's prejudices, it can be seen either as truthful or as a scandal that Hardt and Negri make ontology and politics inseparable. But this linkage does make some things conceivable that otherwise would not be. And in the case of religion, one such thing would be its ontological figuration as a function and result of human production. The trick, as with all religious analyses that refuse a transcendent source, is to preserve the divinity of the religious without referring it to any outside source. This need will be met by religion's removal from the fideist "beyond" in favor of its investiture in the activity of the multitude.

The treatments of religion in *Empire* may be set out according to that most traditional of schemes: past, present, and future. In the case of the past, this would be religion as the expression of transcendence. The present is the hybrid formed by combining the earlier legitimation of transcendence with some functions that belong to the structures of immanent rule. Finally, the future of religion appears to be its collapse as a distinct institution in favor of its uptake into a generalized theory of the multitude's constituent power. For the sake of manageability, I want to focus particularly on understanding the present functions which religion plays within imperial society, and upon the role Hardt and Negri envision for it within the post-imperial world to be born in the ascendancy of constituent power.

### **The Current Political and Ontological Situation**

What is the present political and ontological situation of the globe? And where does religion fit architectonically within this picture? Ontologically, Hardt and Negri, among others, have analyzed the constitution of the present according to Marx's theory of real subsumption.<sup>4</sup> With the end of the initial phase of capitalist accumulation, capital ceases to incorporate pre-existing practices of labor within itself. Where before capital confronted a spatial, geographical, and cultural

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<sup>3</sup> The present essay will focus on *Empire*, since the successor volume, *Multitude*, mostly sticks to the model constructed in the earlier book. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004). However, it is true that Hardt and Negri's later treatment of religion is softer in tone, if not in content, than its predecessor. Such changes will be noted where they are relevant or bear on the analysis.

<sup>4</sup> The theory of formal and real subsumption is found in the Appendix to Marx's *Capital* entitled "Results of the Immediate Process of Production." Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I (Introduction by Ernst Mandel, Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1990), p. 948-1094

“outside” that had to be brought “inside,” it now confronts a world it has already prefabricated in its own image. And what now falls inside the scope of “productive” processes are all aspects of the “reproduction” of life.<sup>5</sup> That is, the production of labor now invests itself in the human *bios* and its own auto-reproductive activities, rather than in inert and receptive nature. From the other side, the reproduction of life is itself now a site for the creation of surplus value. So, making things for the market makes us, and in making ourselves we make some new thing that is a commodity. Capital thus creates its own plane of immanence in which accumulation happens on the ground created and recreated by capital itself: the bodies and minds of human beings, conceived *en masse* as a global human subject. We will return to this point.

This ontological description has an immediate political import for human subjects. To describe the political dimension of this shift, Hardt and Negri turn to other thinkers, notably Michel Foucault, whose concept of “biopower” figures prominently in the analyses of *Empire*. This term names the site of real subsumption, and describes the manner in which power is brought to bear on the contemporary subject. As Hardt and Negri write, “the highest function of this power is to invest life through and through, and its primary task is to invest life. Biopower thus refers to a situation in which what is directly at stake in power is the production and reproduction of life itself.”<sup>6</sup>

A brief sketch of Foucault’s genealogy of power, from traditional power to disciplinary society and then the society of control, will set up this concept. In place of the traditional paradigm of power that modified behavior through an expensive and conspicuous system of “levying violence,” disciplinary society imposes a less obvious and more efficient system. It works by isolating subjects from one another, and it exercises power over them by observing and correcting their behavior. Rather than damming up the flows that are the actions of specific subjects, disciplinary society works by observing and channeling such flows. Systems are made to work with the powers and efforts expended by individuals. The disciplinary logic remakes the significant institutions within bourgeois society (schools, asylums, factories, prisons), and over time deposits within the living actors the ability to police their own behaviors, habits, and affects. The result promotes the bourgeois project of accumulation, since much greater efficiencies can be extracted from subjects whose collective *bios* “naturally” moves in the direction of certain affects rather than others.

Such is the biopolitical outcome of disciplinary society that corresponds to capital’s phase of formal subsumption. Foucault registers the shift from formal to real subsumption with a shift of his own, from disciplinary society to the society of control. In the society of control, the disciplinary logics that used to be housed within specific institutions are now brought directly to bear on the brains

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<sup>5</sup> Jason Read provides what I believe to be the authoritative account of this transformation. See Chapter Three, “The Real Subsumption of Subjectivity by Capital,” of *The Micropolitics of Capital*.

<sup>6</sup> *Empire*, p. 24.

and bodies of subjects. Where before mediating institutions of civil society channeled and distributed power from on high to each individual, now power is brought to bear through a global communicative sphere. This functions as a lateral network, so that what discipline achieved by means of extension is now accomplished intensively in the virtual space of communications media (Hardt and Negri refer to this as "ether," while Jason Read talks about the virtual "halo" that hangs over the commodity form in all its manifestations).<sup>7</sup> And the lowering of boundaries between mediating institutions also means the cross-pollination of their logics: schools become carceral, prisons become educational, workplaces become personal, and families become productive. We come away from Foucault's analysis cognizant of the specific mechanisms that have overcome the separation between production and reproduction.<sup>8</sup>

### Religion in the Now

Contemporary religion has no choice but to make this transition, but the best one can say is that it has done so imperfectly. In fact, for Hardt and Negri, there is a strong sense in which Western religion (read "Christianity") never completes the historical transition from pre-disciplinary society to disciplinary modernity. In their schema, the distinction between revolutionary modern humanism and reactionary, transcendental counter-modernity reduces to an ontological dispute between human immanence and a reconstructed transcendence. Theologically, Judeo-Christianity and Islam perpetuate the orthodox unreconstructed theological mystification of God that props up patrimonial sovereignty. If, in the modern era, religious institutions are actors within civil society (to the extent that one can still meaningfully employ this category), this is only because their absolute transcendence is compatible with and useful to the relative transcendence (which also acts as a neutered immanence) that grounds metaphysics (Kant) and modern political sovereignty (Hobbes).<sup>9</sup> But the coming of immanent imperial sovereignty portends a crisis for such religious forms if they are merely a throwback to a long-bygone era, a crisis that plays out formally and historically.

When Hardt and Negri first mention religion as a category of entities in their exposition, they do so in connection with the imperial sovereignty that gives the book its title: *Empire*. Religion appears in the early discussion of imperial intervention, and in the later discussion of representation in the imperial political framework. While the ultimate instrument of intervention is military and/or police power, moral and juridical intervention also belong in the imperial

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<sup>7</sup> Read says, "every commodity produced must have an image, a lifestyle, and an immaterial "halo" that accompanies it to market." *Micropolitics*, p. 127.

<sup>8</sup> Hardt and Negri state this plainly: "biopower is another name for the real subsumption of society under capital, and both are synonymous with the global productive order." *Empire*, p. 364-365.

<sup>9</sup> For the discussion of how Kant installs immanence and transcendence and mutually limiting conditions, see *Empire* p. 80-81. For Hobbes' view of the sovereign, see *Empire*, p.82-85.

arsenal. It is here that religion and news media belong as tools of imperial intervention. This placement is intriguing because Hardt and Negri go on to elaborate the growing category of non-political entities that are called Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's), as the *real* vanguard of moral intervention, rather than assigning this function to religion. These agencies are interesting for a number of reasons. They are actors not in the evacuated striated space of national civil society, but in the smooth space of *global* society, and their refusal of political affiliation and national boundaries inoculates them against the charge of acting for vested interests. NGO's have as their express purpose relief work and the protection of human rights. However, their manifest purpose (which Hardt and Negri concede may well be "counter to the intentions of the participants") is to set the stage for military interventions (i.e. police actions).<sup>10</sup> This happens when NGO's "denounce, publicly the sinners (or rather the Enemy in properly inquisitorial terms)...and leave to the "secular wing" the task of actually addressing the problems."<sup>11</sup>

The ambiguous place of religion in this project is striking. The authors introduce religion in order to frame the project of moral intervention.<sup>12</sup> But then they direct the discussion away from it in favor of other kinds of institutional instrumentality. While we have seen that the *tactics* of NGO intervention invoke something like a Catholic social justice morality, their strategic *goals* reflect an updating of the activist strands in medieval and Reformation Catholicism. Like the Dominicans and Jesuits, NGO's "strive to identify universal human needs and defend human rights," even if against their will they end up calling down military powers that transgress against these same interests.<sup>13</sup> All of this, then, leaves unanswered the question of precisely what function religion *does* serve.

Further on, in the chapter entitled "Mixed Constitution," Hardt and Negri circle back to identify the group in whose name religion claims to act. There, they place religion within the architectonic of Empire, envisioned as a pyramid with three tiers. The first comprises the military and economic hegemony held by the U.S. and the other dominant nation-states; the second tier serves the capillary function of distributing this power through transnational corporate networks that return capital upwards; and the third and broadest tier consists of groups that represent the popular interest, or what Hardt and Negri call "the People."<sup>14</sup> While the subordinate nation-states belong here, so too do the bodies mentioned earlier: news media and religious institutions. These now are re-elaborated in

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> In *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri backpedal somewhat on their earlier characterization of NGO's as the other side of the interventionist, Imperial coin. Here, the criticism stands, but is mixed with a more sympathetic acknowledgment of the work done by NGO's. "Nonprofit and charity organizations provide enormous assistance for those in need, but they cannot change the system that produces and reproduces poverty. It is impressive, in fact, how many people who begin in volunteer charity work pass to activism and protest against the economic system." *Multitude*, p. 279.

<sup>13</sup> *Empire*, p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 102-103.

their representative capacities, though both are identified as “traditional components of civil society.”<sup>15</sup> Here, religious institutions merit two sentences:

Religious institutions are an even more long-standing sector of non-governmental institutions that represent the People. The rise of religious fundamentalisms (both Islamic and Christian) insofar as they represent the People against the state should perhaps be understood as components of this new global civil society – but when such religious organizations stand against the state, they often tend to become the state themselves.<sup>16</sup>

The passage is quite curious. While it attributes a representative function to religion on the basis of its non-identification with either any particular state or with capital as a whole, it says nothing more about how this operates concretely. Rather, religion at once is referred to fundamentalism, whose tendency is to evacuate the project of representation in favor of sovereignty. The suggestion is that just as media fails to keep its distance from sovereign institutions, thereby compromising its representative function, so also does religion. And as in the earlier discussion, the NGO’s are left to take up the slack.

We are left with the question of how to understand this apparent throwaway of religion. A couple of alternatives suggest themselves. Negatively, the treatment of religion in the discussion of NGO’s could be a sign that for Hardt and Negri, contemporary religion is *so* irrelevant that its functions have been distributed to other kinds of institutions. Support for this interpretation can be found in the obvious fact that as Marxists, the authors have no desire to perpetuate any theological mystification of illegitimate power.<sup>17</sup> Religion in general natively attaches itself to legitimating projects, and is risky for that reason. This is borne out in the tendency of fundamentalism to shed its representative function in favor of sovereignty, since it is seen elsewhere in the text as a “powerful refusal of the contemporary historical passage in course.”<sup>18</sup> In general the authors view fundamentalism through a political lens as a backlash against the projects of national modernity and now imperial post-modernity; in fact, they paradoxically read fundamentalism not as a throwback, but as a kind of *post*-modernity, whose status as a pastiche makes it all the *more* “postmodern.”<sup>19</sup> This response, in both

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 311.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 311.

<sup>17</sup> But later, in *Multitude*, while discussing the injunctions against idolatry that were instituted by the Byzantine Emperor Leo the Isaurian in AD 726, Hardt and Negri arrive at a more complex formulation of the relation between religion and the political. They write, “iconoclasm was not only a religious project, but also a political one – or, rather, the religious and political projects were one and the same. At stake was the power of representation itself.” *Multitude*, p. 325.

<sup>18</sup> *Empire*, p. 147.

<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that the label “postmodernism” also positively connotes “increased mobility, indeterminacy, and hybridity.” *Empire*, p. 150. However, that Hardt and Negri acknowledge an “upside” to postmodernism does not amount to an unqualified (or even a qualified) endorsement of economic globalization. Rather, in

the Islamic and Christian worlds, posits its own imaginary of what counts as a legitimate form of life, and thereby encroaches on the terrain of sovereignty. As Hardt and Negri say of Christian fundamentalism, "the 'return to the traditional family' of Christian fundamentalists is not backward-looking at all, but rather a new invention that is part of a political project against the contemporary social order."<sup>20</sup> The capacity for inventiveness, which exists alongside nostalgia for a mystified past, applies *mutatis mutandis* to Islamic fundamentalism, and to the Iranian Revolution in particular. In this way, religion abandons its representative function in order to become directly *constitutive*.

If we return to the question of religion's throwaway, this treatment of fundamentalism should alert us to different possibility than the simple failure of religion to accomplish its assigned task. Even if Hardt and Negri want to classify fundamentalism as a reactionary phenomenon, its refusal of modernity nonetheless discloses a revolutionary potential. Fundamentalism therefore serves as a negative example. But of what? We will pursue the hunch that Hardt and Negri's refusal to fully commit religion to the discussion at this time means that they are saving it for other things. Provided that religion is capable of being dislodged from a strict identification with the state, it may yet have an ontological, constitutive future in the post-imperial configuration in which the multitude comes to govern.

### **The Constitutive Grounds of Religion**

In a book filled with controversial assertions, none may be more debated and more debatable than Hardt and Negri's claims regarding the multitude. This is the global human multiplicity, producing and reproducing, thinking and feeling, which is the political subject corralled by imperial sovereignty. In an earlier era, the mass subject was rounded up for the nation-state, and given the name "People." Politically, the move from imperialism to Empire opens at least the possibility of democracy unbounded by sovereignty. Ontologically, this move is isomorphic with the collapse of mystificatory political transcendence. If this sounds messianic, it is only because, for Hardt and Negri, it is. And while I want to avoid, in the present essay, any detailed consideration of their dependence on tropes of Christian millenarianism or chiliasm in the construction of epochal history, what matters is to elaborate the present era as one in which, for a variety of reasons, the multitude has become active. From here we will be able to inquire into the role religion may play in such a changed landscape.

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keeping with Marxist praxis, they index an individual's attitude towards postmodernism to his or her position in the globalizing political economy. "Simplifying a great deal," the authors write, "one could argue that postmodernist discourses appeal primarily to the winners in the processes of globalization and fundamentalist discourses to the losers." Ibid. The insight that capitalist globalization dislocates at least as much as it liberates, coupled with the suspicion that many more people suffer its downsides than enjoy its benefits, motivate Hardt and Negri's effort to displace Empire by turning its own weapons against it. "Postmodernist discourses," in particular, are to be the weapons of choice.

<sup>20</sup> *Empire*, 148.

The “becoming active” alluded to above is defined by the multitude’s exercise of its *strength*. Prior to *Empire*, in *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, Negri had elaborated the distinction between constitutive and constituted power.<sup>21</sup> The first is “strength,” which is the Latin *potenza*, while the second is “power” or *potere*.<sup>22</sup> Strength is formative and original, standing over and against, or rather below and through, the institutions and structures that it deposits in its wake. Such strength is both Nietzschean and Spinozistic. Negri writes, “in this tradition, the absence of preconstituted and finalized principles is combined with the subjective strength of the multitude, thus constituting the social in the aleatory materiality of a universal relationship, in the possibility of freedom.”<sup>23</sup> Quite literally, strength is the virtual and actual capacity for creation, unbounded, that resides within the human multitude. And just as, for Spinoza, no other power exists by which to limit substance, so here all constituted being in its ontological and political dimensions arises from constituent power. We might say that Spinoza’s *natura naturans* becomes Negri’s “strength,” while *natura naturata* is his “power.” And just as Spinoza rightly attributes freedom to God or substance as the sole actor, so Negri attributes freedom only to the multitude in its constitutive strength.

Once again, if this sounds messianic, it is only because it is, but in a very curious sense. This is because messianism, following the religious tendency to invest the transcendent, typically inverts the order of “strength” and “power” as here established. From there, the appearance of any messiah must always be conditioned by the ontological and political facts on the ground and the horizon they delimit. For Hardt and Negri, the multitude explodes any such constituted reality. It *itself* engenders these realities, and creates and recreates ontological and political reality from out of itself. As Negri provocatively says in *Insurgencies*, “democracy is the project of the multitude, a creative force, a living god.”<sup>24</sup> While in this work Negri remains wary of divinity, which tends toward constituted universality rather than toward constitutive omniversality, the sense here nevertheless is that of the multitude taking on the functions of the absolute, and thereby inheriting some sense of religiosity.

So if the world to come is marked as the reign of the multitude, where does religion fit? What functions does it serve? The religiosity of *Empire*’s multitude is set up in *Insurgencies*. There, Negri theorizes strength outside of modern categories like fear, transcendental philosophy, and the limit, since all of these reduce strength to power. What Negri calls a “new rationality” will be the key to his argument, but a rationality that has been radically rethought. Against modern definitions of rationality as “calculation” or “instrumentality,” Negri

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<sup>21</sup> Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*. Theory out of Bounds Series, vol. 15 (Translated by Maurizia Boscagli. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307.



ontologically determines it as “the relation between strength and the multitude.”<sup>25</sup> This is the formal character of rationality, which the genetic productive standpoint reveals to be an abstraction from out of empirical production. One again is reminded Spinoza, for whom substance’s basic self-expression is will, which secondarily expresses itself in the attributes of thought and extension. Negri, though, goes further: this abstraction takes place for the sake of communication, which, he says, “is nothing but the ontological relation of multitude and strength.”<sup>26</sup> A question arises as to whether communication is the kind of production that gives rise to rationality, or whether rationality gives rise to communication. Here Negri wavers: on the one hand, he says that abstraction is a “function” of communication, while on the other claiming that this new rationality is the key to the constitution of the world.<sup>27</sup> Where to assign priority is not a question that can be answered here. And anyway, it falls outside what is needed for our argument, which is to establish *communication* as the relation of multitude and strength.

Returning to religion and to *Empire*, the first challenge is to identify where religion takes on a communicative role. One question that arises immediately is how far back, historically, this extends. Once this has been addressed, we then need to say how such functions are to operate in the world born of the multitude’s ascendancy.

We have already seen Hardt and Negri consider, in the context of discussing NGO’s, the representative role of religion. In this discussion religion was grouped *with* news media as an unaligned institution that putatively represented the people. But where communication clearly was the province of the media, it was not clear what instrument religious institutions used to represent the People.

The yet-undefined relation between religion and communication becomes more definite in an intriguing section of *Empire*, entitled “Imperial Administration,” in which the authors argue for the political efficacy of decentralized institutional actors within an overarching administration. To this end they consider an historical analogy: the medieval relation of feudal territorial organizations with monarchic power structures, as this compares to the modern relation between mafia organizations and state structures. While this comparison is obviously polemical—*the church is the state is the mafia!*—it nonetheless confirms the boundary position in which religion finds itself. This much is clear in the following passage, where religion appears parenthetically:

In the European medieval system, the vassal was required to contribute armed men and money when the monarch needed them (whereas ideology and communication were controlled in large part by the church).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 328.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

<sup>28</sup> *Empire*, p. 342.

The ideological reading of medieval Christianity should come as no surprise. But while we should not try to make too much of this brief mention, it does concretely tell us more than we have thus far heard about the actual role which religion plays in historical reality—any historical reality. Parsing the passage reveals a division between the church as an institution firmly placed in the project of legitimating patrimonial sovereignty, and as one whose ideological role depends on its more basic function of serving as a communicative apparatus. This suggests that the medieval alliance between state and church is at least as fortuitous as it is necessary, if not actually more so. And in turn, if we connect this hint with the above discussion of *Insurgencies*, the suggestion is that what really defines the religious project is its ability to gather a multitude in what Hardt and Negri earlier termed strength, rather than power.

This identification of religion with a communicative project oriented to strength is also apparent in Hardt and Negri's treatment, in *Empire*, of early Christianity's effect upon Rome. Here they follow Machiavelli's claim that rather than functioning as an ideological agent of state power, Christianity actually corroded the social cohesion that had been deposited in Roman civic religion.<sup>29</sup> This accomplished from the inside what the Teutons went on to do from without. Through evangelism and the dissemination of texts, communication furnished the means for the religious multitude to constitute itself *as* a multitudinous subject. In fact, it would be more proper to say that the multitude constituted itself *in* and *as* communication rather than *through* it.<sup>30</sup> By doing so, it claimed its own powers of refusal, and mobilized itself for the exodus from Rome to Christendom, an exodus that radically overturned the imperial sovereignty of Rome even as it went on occupying the same geographical space. And if, eventually, the free multitude became fixed in place, and if religion became a partner in the projects of patrimonial and national sovereignty, Hardt and Negri can nonetheless can and do appeal to the liberatory history of religious self-constitution, transpiring in and through communication.

### The Future

With early Christianity as an historical precedent, what is it possible to say about the constituent future Hardt and Negri envision for the multitude? Where does religion fit in the world to come that, in a virtual sense, already *is*, even if it is not yet actual?

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 372-373.

<sup>30</sup> The recent return of interest in the Apostle Paul among thinkers on the European Left supports this observation regarding the power of religious communication to gather a political multitude. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, Cultural Memory in the Present Series (trans. Patricia Dailey. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Alain Badiou, *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Cultural Memory in the Present Series (trans. by Ray Brassier. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (New York: Verso, 2001).

The final chapter of *Empire*, helpfully titled “The Multitude Against Empire,” goes right at this question. In fact, through the choice of epigraphs, religion actually frames the question of how the multitude valorizes itself politically and ontologically. To put it bluntly, the multitude does so through, and as, religion. The authors cite, at some length, the anonymous writer (it could be Hegel, Hölderlin, or Schelling) of *Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus*, a brief document discovered by Franz Rosenzweig among Hegel’s papers.<sup>31</sup>

The great masses need a *material religion of the senses* [*eine sinnliche Religion*]. Not only the great masses but also the philosopher needs it. Monotheism of reason and the heart, polytheism of the imagination, this is what we need...[We] must have a new mythology, but this mythology must be at the service of ideas. It must be a mythology of *reason*.<sup>32</sup>

Hardt and Negri piggyback onto this program in earnest and, I believe, not at all ironically. Their decision to assign to religion the most basic of communicative and constitutive functions becomes clear if we follow their elaboration of this passage. The key phrase, “material religion,” is understood as that which “separates the multitude from every residue of sovereign power and from every ‘long arm’ of Empire.”<sup>33</sup> Religion here is redetermined through the immanence of materiality, and away from any form of transcendence. It therefore *is* the strength of the multitude that has found itself, and that has become able to dispel the parasitic order of sovereign power. Put somewhat differently, religion is the communicative matrix that comprises the interhuman world itself, and is identified with this self-related, immanent omniverse. Mythology and reason here figure as second-order activities whose role is to “allow the ontology of the multitude to express itself as activity and consciousness.”<sup>34</sup> And again, although reason belongs to the second order in the sense that its origin lies in strength, its priority for the multitude depends on its role as the medium in which the multitude constitutes itself *as* a multitude. And finally, that *upon which* the material mythology supervenes is the activity of the multitude itself: “the language, technologies, and all the means that constitute the world of life.”<sup>35</sup> It is no accident that the structure of real subsumption may be seen to reside in this description of religion, since the means of the world of life are subjects of production, but also the means for the multitude’s communicative and religious self-reproduction.

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<sup>31</sup> Terry Pinkard provides a useful summary of the arguments for attributing the piece to Hegel or to Hölderlin. *Hegel: A Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 682-683.

<sup>32</sup> *Empire*, p. 393. Pinkard credits the ideas to Hölderlin, though he leaves open the possibility of some measure of contribution by Hegel.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 396.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 396.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 396.

Thus it is that religion takes its place in the self-relation and self-constitution of the multitude. Religion is determined as immanence, and therefore belongs in Hardt and Negri's normative destination. Curiously, this placement for religion is strongly reminiscent not only of the Spinozistic tradition that the authors claim, but also of the Hegelian legacy to which they are more uncomfortably related, the above passage notwithstanding.<sup>36</sup> In fact, a cursory comparison of *Empire* with the *Phenomenology of Spirit* reveals some striking parallels.<sup>37</sup> Both works change their perspective twice. *Empire* takes two passes through the transition from modernity to post-modernity, first by tracking the concept of sovereignty as it develops in the history of ideas, second by following the development of production from economic production to the production of subjectivity. By comparison, as the *Phenomenology of Spirit* advances toward deeper and deeper presuppositions, it constantly shifts between the perspectives of participatory and engaged natural consciousness, and the observing *We*. Paradoxically, a comparison of the endpoints of the two works presents a striking reversal, by which "reactionary" Hegel seems less optimistic about religion's power to transfigure the present than do the "radicals" Hardt and Negri. For Hegel, revelatory religion fails at reconciliation and makes way for Absolute Knowing, or the pure relation of Spirit to itself in the medium of thought.<sup>38</sup>

By contrast, Hardt and Negri close their book with a religious figure: St. Francis of Assisi, whom they laud as a figure of the multitude, one who refuses instrumental disciplines, and who poses a joyous life in "love, simplicity, and also innocence."<sup>39</sup> Given Hardt and Negri's (relatively) unqualified self-identification as communists, this mention of St. Francis raises a suspicion that the authors are being deliberately ironic or that the mention should be treated as a throwaway.<sup>40</sup> I reject this view. It seems to me that the authors see Francis as deserving of sainthood, albeit for a theologically heterodox set of reasons. In connection with Francis's "love, simplicity, and innocence," the final passage of

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<sup>36</sup> For a sample of Hardt and Negri's critique of Hegel, see *Empire*, p. 81-83.

<sup>37</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (foreword by J.M. Findlay, translated by A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>38</sup> The end of "Revealed Religion" sees religion fall short of Spirit's total reconciliation. "The Spirit of the community is thus in its immediate consciousness divided from its religious consciousness, which declares, it is true, that *in themselves* they are not divided, but this merely *implicit* unity is not realized, or has not yet become an equally absolute being-for-self." *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 478.

<sup>39</sup> *Empire*, p. 413.

<sup>40</sup> At the end of Part Three, Hardt and Negri issue something like a reply to their critics. "You are just a bunch of anarchists, the new Plato on the block will finally yell at us. That is not true...No, we are not anarchists but communists who have seen how much repression and destruction of humanity have been wrought by liberal and socialist big governments. We have seen how all this is being re-created in imperial government, just when the circuits of productive cooperation have made labor power as a whole capable of constituting itself in government." *Ibid.*, p. 350.

the book concludes that “this is the irrepressible lightness and joy of being communist.”<sup>41</sup>

It is true that the multitude’s present effort to reclaim its strength may force Hardt and Negri closer to Hegel than they might like. After all, the language of “reclaiming” veers perilously close to Hegel’s “return into the self.” But this does not efface their larger claim, that only by moving beyond itself as transcendence can the multitude come into its own as immanence—a movement that begins when the multitude gathers itself under the sign of religion.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 413.