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RELIGIOUS STUDIES AS THE "STATE RELIGION" OF NEOLIBERALISM

*Neptunus alii per alia, poterunt intellegi qui qualesque sint, quoque eos nomine consuetudo nuncupaverit, hoc eos et venerari et colere debemus.*  
– Cicero, De Natura Deorum

*Religion as the Inscription of Difference*

The very concept of political theology insinuates a transcendental source of value from which the axiomatics of political thought, if not "political science", can be enunciated. Neoliberalism, as I have argued elsewhere, is eminently a value-system. As a value-system, it also performs a certain "religious" function. But, at the same time, it also serves as an "apparatus" à la Foucault that manufactures a new kind of subjectivity as well as a new kind of truth that inscribes this value system. At the same time, our task is not to dwell on what Foucault had in mind. Instead we must interrogate more closely the character of neoliberal subjectivity itself and how it materializes these value propositions. There is one such factor in neoliberal subjectivity that Foucault identifies as essential to the "analytic of finitude." That factor is what we know as *religion*. Within the immense sweep of culture, language, and personal identity religion serves as the decisive inscription of difference.

As Talal Asad has presciently observed, the genealogy of religion is not about the fabrication of private experiences. The grammar of religion goes hand in hand with the maintenance of state power because it is the state that inscribes difference. Religion is a power grid made up of "different ways in which it [has] created and worked through legal institutions, different selves that it shaped and responded to, and different categories of knowledge which it authorized and made available."<sup>1</sup> The "separation" of religion from the state is a modernist fiction, Talal argues, only because with the decline of monarchy the invisible power that renders the state coherent is less visible and more diffuse. "Freedom of religion" merely refers to a plurality of standardized confessions or discursivities that are no longer formally associated with the state apparatus. But the biopolitical regimen of the modern liberal state requires a more rarefied and remote machinery of legitimation that is neither coercive nor

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<sup>1</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 29.

discernible. Modern state power comes, according to James Scott, with its capacity to "make a society legible," insofar as "the legibility of a society provides the capacity for large-scale social engineering." The process of making legible, Scott contends, began in the seventeenth century with absolute monarchs bent on enhancing their control over their subjects by collecting previously unreported demographic information. Today it manifests in the deepening alliance between big government and "big data", between the surveillance state and the sprawling tech monopolies. The preoccupation with social "legibility", in turn, requires the elaboration of increasingly "authoritarian" state instrumentalities, leaving in its wake "an incapacitated civil society."<sup>2</sup>

Neoliberalism simultaneously intensifies and conceals the consolidation of state power. On the one hand, like a clever confidence operator it seeks to assure its mark that they are receiving certain obvious benefits when in reality they are being bilked of whatever they are worth. Melinda Cooper traces this sort of double-dealing all the way back to the 1960s with the advent of Theodore Schultz' "human capital theory." Schultz' work, Cooper notes, was largely responsible for passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which gave American students access to federally subsidized student loans as well as Pell Grants for the first time.<sup>3</sup> As we see nowadays, generous access to such "capital" for the vast majority has actually come to mean widespread debt peonage. It has also been linked to a massive and sprawling post-secondary educational industry that even at the institutional level commands an enormous quantity of public and private resources. Maurizio Lazzarato argues that the octopus-like expansion of higher education and the "neoliberal condition" are torturously entangled with each other. Neoliberal governmentality, he writes, "has produced a collective capitalist – (as Lenin would put it) – which is not concentrated in finance, but operates throughout business, administration, service industries, political parties, the media, and the university. This political subjectivation provides capitalists with the same education, the same vision of the economy and society, the same vocabulary, the same methods, in short, the same politics."<sup>4</sup> We must ask ourselves rigorously and honestly to what degree the academic study of religion has become a vital cog in the neoliberal wheelworks. It was during the 1960s in America, when the Johnson Administration set up and placed in operation a

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<sup>2</sup> James Scott, *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Melinda Cooper, "Neoliberalism's Family Values: Welfare, Human Capital, and Kinship," in Dieter Plewe, Quinn Slobodian, Philip Morowski (eds.), *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism* (New York: Verso, 2020), 154.

<sup>4</sup> Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2012), 107-8.

sprawling new and all-embracing apparatus of "governmentality" that the academic study of religion as a field exploded.

The functionalist hermeneutic and classificatory methodology of "religious studies" was born from this impulse to codify and condition the unconditional, which has always been the secret to success for the nascent neoliberal system. The system relies heavily on cognitive regimens enforced through corporate control of the knowledge production process, in particular universities and mainstream media. Neoliberalism as the next generation of global colonial administration with its covert "civilizing mission" has merely re-engineered for much of the developed and developing world the "Raj" model that was so successful in India in the nineteenth century. According to Asad, the interpretative and *anthropologic* gaze through which this broader managerial – and inherently colonial – paradigm claims an unquestioned quasi-scientific, and thereby objective, validity when in fact it has become a sophisticated subterfuge to erase the authority of interior conscience and motivation. Subjectivity is dismissed as idiosyncrasy. These manifold instances of vital and strongly motivating symbolic ecosystems are denied their independence and self-determination. Instead they are hauled up like diverse multitudes of wriggling sea creatures in the colossal nets of intellectual "inquiry" and distilled unceremoniously into "facts" or "information" about so-called "lived religions", when in fact their significance has already shriveled to inconsequence under the withering glance of "theory". In short, the representation of religion as some kind of exotic specimen of human belief and behavior must be unmasked for what it is – a neocolonial intervention. What we term "religion", according to Asad, is really something that is not amenable to any kind of generalized taxonomy. Yet any phenomenological perusal that might bring us into immediate encounter with the "truth experience" of any particular engagement with ultimate reality remains impossible on Asad's grounds. Nowadays any indication of "religious" reality is ensnared and smothered within the pervasive thralls of the neoliberal knowledge monopoly. As Asad says, "it was not the mind that moved spontaneously to religious truth, but power that created the conditions for experiencing that truth."<sup>5</sup>

What was, or is, this "power"? Asad does not cast any wide theoretical net, nor does he explore the many different historical means by which the truth-experience of religion is irreversibly coded into the "conditions" of the experience itself. Asad is thoroughly critical of the doctrinaire *anthropologism* that has permeated the study of religion over the years. To that end he has fixed most of his polemical fire on the work of Clifford

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<sup>5</sup> Asad, op. cit., 17.

Geertz, the *éminence grise* who early on laid out the larger parameters for, and shaped the initial content, for the field. Asad challenges Geertz' assimilation of religious theory to social phenomenology and the sociology of knowledge, specifically the methodology of Austrian philosopher Alfred Schutz, on whom the former's concept of the symbol profoundly depends. He argues against the essentialist notion that religious symbols have some kind of transhistorical or transcultural primacy, which somehow find varying modes of expression in whatever socio-linguistic setting they happen to arise. Asad writes that

...religious symbols – whether one thinks of them in terms of communication or of cognition, of guiding action or of expressing emotion – cannot be understood independently of their historical relations with nonreligious symbols or of their articulations in and of social life, in which work and power are always crucial. My argument, I must stress, is not just that religious symbols are intimately linked to social life (and so change with it), or that they usually support dominant political power (and occasionally oppose it). It is that different kinds of practice and discourse are intrinsic to the field in which religious representations (like any representation) acquire their identity and their truthfulness."<sup>6</sup>

Throughout his book *Genealogy of Religions* Asad presses a twofold claim. First, he argues that the standard model of "world religions" is nothing but a fancy form of cognitive colonialism that deprives the base religious community from understanding itself as part of its own social life-world. Second, he offers a brief against what is sometimes called "perennialism" – the idea that there are universally decipherable schemata for communicating "the sacred." In a word, Asad contends that religious symbols are in no sense *sui generis*. Carl Jung's theory of archetypes would be perhaps the most well-known example of perennialism. The theosophical movement, which since its emergence in the late nineteenth century and because of its outsize impact on modern art and New Age modes of thinking, is perhaps the best-known example of perennialist thinking. Asad's position is that the "common sense" of the world instantiated in any given culture is invariably mediated by their semiotic framing systems. Asad asserts that "the world of common sense is always common to all human beings, and quite distinct from the religious world, which in turn differs from one group to another, as one culture differs from another; but experience of the religious world affects the commonsense world, and so the distinctiveness of the two kinds

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<sup>6</sup> Op. cit., 24.

of world is modified, and the common-sense world comes to differ, from one group to another, as one culture differs from another."<sup>7</sup> Asad's anti-perennialism is also clearly anti-essentialist. If we are to state it succinctly, we can say that the assumption that there is anything at all which we can label "religion" is dubious.

This wizardly way of coding and recoding symbolic forms to render them somehow religious, or *not* religious, has been scrutinized at length by Brent Nongbri. A classicist, Nongbri makes a convincing case that there is no such thing as "ancient religion". The assumption that everything from Isis-worship in the Roman world to even the multiplicity of texts, spiritual practices, and ceremonial performances that we know as Vedanta or ancient Hinduism are nothing more than retrojections of modernist concepts. Nongbri maintains, rather controversially, that the notion of different religions has its origins in the efforts of those Renaissance philosophers steeped in the *studia humanitatis* to reconcile classical and Christian writers and to remove from the former the stain of heathenry. Such a reputational makeover, together with the semantic transformations that propelled it forward, were further occasioned through meetings and interactions with aboriginal peoples around the globe, who had no knowledge of Christianity as the age of European exploration and expansion went into full swing. According to Nongbri, "during the age of European colonial encounters with modern 'pagans' and 'idolaters,' the entities we now designate as Greek and Roman gods went from being demons in a biblical Christian system to being the central figures of what we now call 'ancient Greek and Roman religions.'"<sup>8</sup>

In short, Christianity – and we might add Islam in its age of empire also – during the millennium that preceded the Renaissance had created shell categories to account for those who had failed for whatever reason to accept the universal, monotheistic revelation that can be found in both the New Testament and the Qur'an. Once theological authority was slowly supplanted by, or made to co-exist with, "secular" authority, these shell categories were now populated with positive rather than negative content. The taxonomical passion of the Enlightenment, what Foucault termed "the age of the catalogue,"<sup>9</sup> contributed significantly to this reordering of what were now crypto-theological dispensations that ultimately came

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<sup>7</sup> Op. cit. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 132.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1966), 141.

to be known as "religions."<sup>10</sup> And the rage of colonial administrators in the nineteenth century both to differentiate between the deeper cognitive commitments of their subjugated populations and to find a way of providing them with newer, secularized identities came to be the genius of the system as a whole. Most importantly, this taxonomical approach is perhaps the signal feature of what Mignolo and Walsh describe as the "colonial matrix of power."

For Mignolo, classification was a method of revaluation, or devaluation, that allowed knowledge for the first time to be *evaluated* and turned into a commodity that could be extracted from local sources and refined by large-scale methods of industrial manufacturing in order to be acceptable to the new *cognitive cosmopolitan*, who was first the European aristocracy and later the bourgeois champion of free enterprise. Mignolo writes:

"Knowledge in the colonial matrix of power was a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it was the mediation to the ontology of the world as well as a way of being in the world (subjectivity). On the other hand, as far as knowledge was conceived imperially as true knowledge, it became a commodity to be exported to those whose knowledge was deviant or non-modern according to Christian theology and, later on, secular philosophy and sciences. This combination was successful enough, in terms of the amassing of wealth and power, that by the end of the nineteenth century China and India had to confront the fact that Western men and institutions saw them as (i.e., built knowledge in such a way that they came to be regarded as) lagging behind historically; and history, for the West, was equal to modernity. Consequently, Western knowledge became a commodity of exportation for the modernization of the non-Western world."<sup>11</sup>

The extraction of knowledge under the aegis of late capitalism (i.e., neoliberalism) coincides, as Byung-Chul Han has emphasized, with the commodification of our own affective positionalities. According to Han, this process of extraction and commodification occurs in the background. We are utterly

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<sup>10</sup> Following Foucault, Enlightenment historian Devin Vartija shows how this classificatory system produced both the "science" of religion and the classification of social difference in terms of racial rather than theological distinctions. The reign of the social sciences of the nineteenth century began with the reduction of religion during the eighteenth century to part of the "natural history" of the human race. "Society serves as the ground of meaning, and religion is necessary insofar as it facilitates the smooth functioning of society." See Vartija, *The Color of Equality: Race and Common Humanity in Enlightenment Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 161.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 13.

unaware of it. Han terms the process by which our essential "souls" are parceled out, reified, and ultimately turned into etheric products that we are enticed into "buying back" for our self-gratification or sense of moral responsibility "smart power." Han writes: "smart power cozies up to the psyche rather than disciplining it through coercion or prohibitions. It does not impose silence. Rather, it is constantly calling on us to confide, share and participate: to communicate our opinions, needs, wishes and preferences – to tell all about our lives. Friendly power proves more powerful, as it were, than purely repressive power. It manages not to be seen at all." It is both productive of and parasitical on human desires. "It places its stock in voluntary self-organization and self-optimization."<sup>12</sup>

The supreme achievement of neoliberalism, according to Han, is that it has massively perfected on a planetary scale the system of exploitation that eighteenth and nineteenth century liberalism pushed under the false flag of enlarging "freedom." Robin Blackburn documents the complex, conflictual, and disingenuous patterns of discursivity by which the various processes of "modernist" subjectivation contributed simultaneously to the popular spread of both democratic and egalitarian ideals in Europe and America and to the horrific degradation and enslavement of Africans. Similarly, Han analyzes the many ways in which the neoliberal *modus operandi* along with its rhetoric has turned so-called "emancipatory" strategies upside down and converted them into occasions for self-servitude. As Han puts it, "neoliberalism represents a highly efficient, indeed an intelligent, system for exploiting freedom"<sup>13</sup>

In addition, neoliberalism fosters what Isabella Guanzini characterizes as a universal tiredness or ennui that renders the very promises of neoliberalism – i.e., self-realization, mutual recognition, liberation from historical structures of oppression – impossible. Unlike liberalism, which throughout its two-century stint waved the vision of both infinite material acquisition and immanent self-transformation, as coded into Emma Lazarus' famous image of immigrant "huddled masses yearning to breathe free," neoliberalism dangles before the hypersensitive sensibility of the overworked urban professional the seductive illusion that one, through a politics of polemics and protest without serious risk to their own privileged position in society, can triumphantly free others. Neoliberalism, Guanzini points out, seduces us with the offer of community. But it is enervated community that has no real substance or attraction in our "fatigued" state. It is "a fundamental fatigue" that "turns into a

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<sup>12</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Psycho-Politics: Neoliberalism and Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler (London: Verso, 2017), 14.

<sup>13</sup> Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492-1800* (London: Verso, 1997), 3.

surrender to the world in the name of an ideal of community with the other." The presumed global solidarism of abstract "otherness" demonstrates to us that it is not merely the commodified self that abandons itself. "It is no longer the tiredness of the self but the tiredness of the we."<sup>14</sup> It is this globalized ennui (in Guanzini's terms an *ennu-we*) that epitomizes what we might regard as the religion of neoliberalism.

### *The World of the "Woke"*

The religion of twenty-first century neoliberalism is a vaporous, cosmopolitan sentimentality that postures as a vigorous moral project. Its incoherence and insipidity are exceeded only by its surly self-righteousness and willingness to rely on both corporate and state power to commandeer information as well as censor dissent. It is a religion with a vast "priesthood" of cerebral and behavioral specialists flouting innumerable streamers of self-representation and self-reverential status markers, very much like the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages. It is the latter day counterpart to Foucault's "pastorate" in the guise of a proliferating, professional "knowledge class" that in recent decades has materialized as the present day, planetary ruling class. It is a class, just like any decadent aristocracy, that is absorbed principally in maintaining its own privileges and sinecures.<sup>15</sup>

The foregoing can also be considered a more hard-core, anatomical profile of what has currently come to be known in the popular press as "wokeness". "Wokeness" is the sorrowful

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<sup>14</sup> Isabella Guanzini, *Zärtlichkeit: Eine Philosophie der Sanften Macht* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2019), 129.

<sup>15</sup> In *Neoliberalism and Political Theology* I wrote: The ruling class of the present era is the so-called 'knowledge class' - what in the first chapter I have named the 'corporate-university-financial- information complex'. It is a class that controls both the means of 'material' production (which is now essentially 'virtual') in the form of the global 'symbolic economy' of digitised media, computerised investment and currency transactions, an increasingly credentialled lifelong learning and professional service industry, and a vast intellectual cognitive and communicative machinery that rigorously defines and enforces a new 'global-civic' moralism of self-criticism and self-denial ostensibly aimed at the good of all humankind, all the while ruthlessly grinding down the dignity and physical livelihoods of workers of all races, cultures and ethnicities. Neoliberalism is not in any way now the old-style 'capitalism' of Marx's day. In fact, the word 'capitalism' as a synonym for neoliberalism may be highly misleading. It is indeed what Marx and Engels named the 'ruling intellectual force' of our contemporary era. Ironically, it is the very neoliberal ideology that often invokes 'social justice' terminology in order to impose the opposite agenda than classical Marxism once envisioned. It is the true wolf in sheep's clothing, and it must be unmasked for what it is so that a radical and hitherto unenvisioned political and ethical path forward can be charted. *Neoliberalism and Political Theology*, op. cit., 7-8.



stupor of a once critically-minded intellectual aristocracy who, long impelled with ardent dreams of turning the world upside down and remaking it, have in their dotage as the new ruling class that is the "knowledge class", hunkered down into a sanctimonious but secular clerisy reminiscent of Catholicism under the Bourbons, which Voltaire reviled with his slogan *écrasez l'infâme*, "crush the infamous thing". The new clerisy from government functionaries to tech workers to college instructors to the self-styled urban cognoscenti sequestered most of their waking hours in corporate cubicles find relief from the barrenness of their lives to wallow in the wasteland of social media in an ongoing orgy, as Nancy Fraser puts it, of "moralizing condescension".<sup>16</sup> Wokeness claims a certain comradeship of ever accumulating moral outrage aimed not so much at the profound abuses and predations of the present day, but crafted to stoke a growing obsession regarding past sins and transgressions of generic and caricatured historical types (e.g., the "slave holder", the "fascist", the "pioneer", the "capitalist") for the purposing of identifying and indicting an ever expanding circle of guilty parties, who cannot speak for or defend themselves. They become an easy foil to distract from the hyperboles and hypocrisies of the very intellectual class who with only a superficial knowledge of history become grand inquisitors torturing history itself to confess what it wants to hear.

Like the pastorate of yore, our woke warrior class orchestrate an endless spectacle of, condemnation, forced contrition, and public penance. "Wokeness" is but the popular piety of this new kind of progressive neoliberalism. Progressive neoliberalism has always had a comprehensive social agenda – an "hegemony" in the parlance of Gramsci. Political theorist Thomas Biebricher make this point cogently. Biebricher argues that liberalism itself has never been devoid an expansive social theory.<sup>17</sup> Contrary to the conventional wisdom, its classic formulation over a century ago never could be boiled down merely to *laissez faire* economics, the rights of individuals, and the consent of the governed. As early as the Progressive Era and especially under the impact of philosophers such as Thomas Dewey and later Richard Rorty, liberalism has insisted on the cultivation of an encompassing social-democratic order in which its core value "freedom" is purported to be necessarily embedded. One could even make the case that a similar tacit form of "social ethics" can be found in the works of the

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<sup>16</sup> Nancy Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born: From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond* (London: Verso, 2019), 33.

<sup>17</sup> See Thomas Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

nineteenth century utilitarians, especially Mill, as Wendy Donner has suggested.<sup>18</sup> Fraser doubles down on this argument.

Like every form of capitalism, this one is no mere economic system but something larger: an institutionalized social order. As such, it encompasses a set of noneconomic background conditions that are indispensable to a capitalist economy: for example, unwaged activities of social reproduction, which assure the supply of wage labor for economic production; an organized apparatus of public power (law, police, regulatory agencies, and steering capacities) that supplies the order, predictability, and infrastructure necessary for sustained accumulation; and finally, a relatively sustainable organization of our metabolic interaction with the rest of nature, one that ensures essential supplies of energy and raw materials for commodity production, not to mention a habitable planet that can support life.<sup>19</sup>

A woke capitalism with its woke pastorate superintending its woke minions from top-tier universities ensconced in socially and economically dysfunctional metropolises with their global commercial galleries may confound the Gilded Age myth of the politically reactionary Mr. Moneybags, or Ayn Rand's snorting and self-made saviors of industry with their utter contempt for the well-being of the less fortunate, and who like John D. Rockefeller or the Koch Brothers may in fact be prompted by some obscure style of Christian zealotry.

The neoliberal metastasis of capitalism has come about concurrently alongside an outthrust into international markets with their highly diverse demographics and socio-cultural particularities. "Wokeness" by nature is both an eclecticism of the affects and a dilettantism when it comes to social theory. At one level it evokes in a postmodernist register the *Sehnsucht*, the longing for the "blue flower" as a trope for the impossible, of the early nineteenth century Romantics. At another level it projects out on to a turbulent and eminently fragile social universe its own unnamable night broodings, the disturbing "Gothic" undercurrent of all hyper-charged collective, insurrectionary fantasies. Its rage to identify malevolence and numberless malefactors in previously undisclosed alcoves of the social architecture is matched only by its dogmatic and persecutorial demand to pursue uncompromising remedies. But that was also the pretense of the Inquisition. And it has been the standard

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<sup>18</sup> See Wendy Donner, *The Liberal Self: John Stuart Mill's Moral and Political Philosopher* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Fraser, op. cit. 217.

rationale of every terroristic atrocity as well as every totalitarian police action from the Jacobins to the Khmer Rouge.

What separates the woke nowadays from their sanguinary forbears is not so much the energy of resentment and coiled ruthlessness. It is their tendency to turn everything into a holy war for conceptual definition along with the aggrandizement of one's own virtuous self-image. Such a subtle, yet surly affect field emerges from a mass addiction to all the petty rushes that percolate from full-time immersion in the digitized "panopticon" of social media. Social media, in comparison with early visions of the internet as a global "safe space" for culture and conversation, has become a comprehensive system for surveillance and policing thought and opinion. It is capable of singling out most minimal affronts while amping up mob emotions to turn every perceived transgression of woke ideology into a mass perp walk for multitudes of perceived malefactors. But this show-trial monstrosity of digital politics is made more insidious by the supposition of those in its thralls that are convinced they are heroically warring for the wretched of the earth, or for the survival of the earth itself. In truth, they are simply dreaming deeper into their own self-indulgent fairyland. In Guanzini's words, they are wholly enticed like desperate lovers by "the illusion of becoming one, in other words the desire to overcome any alterity and separation," which "is the narcissistic variety of a relationship that is lived as a pure reflection, as a mirrored reciprocity." (104-5). But they are incapable either of loving others or loving themselves – or even loving the very abstract "goods" or virtues they insist they are defending. Instead, they rave and despise.

The world of the woke – that cloying, meme-infested fool's paradise of the progressive neoliberal – is a friable and self-contradictory one that constantly spits out pharisaic fantasies on the part of those who pretend to hold them can no longer in good conscience do so. It is a world in which the specter of "nihilism", as Nietzsche described it, crouches at the door. Nihilism, Nietzsche proposed, is the condition where "the highest values devaluate themselves," while "the why finds no answer."<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche viewed nihilism as the unavoidable complication of the death of God. Unlike our present-day hordes of would-be "death of God theologians", who routinely genuflect before Nietzsche as some kind of totem animal or ancestral spirit, Nietzsche himself did not revel in God's death. For Nietzsche, God was dead because "we have killed him, all of us are his murderers"<sup>21</sup>. The peril was that those responsible for God's death, like feckless palace coup-plotters, might wrongly presume

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<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1968), 9.

<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*.

they could offer a plausible placeholder for the murdered monarch. Nietzsche wrote in his unpublished literary remains:

Nihilism as a psychological state is reached, secondly, when one has posited a totality, a systematization, indeed any organization in all events, and underneath all events, and a soul that longs to admire and revere has wallowed in the idea of some supreme form of domination and administration (-if the soul be that of a logician, complete consistency and real dialectic are quite sufficient to reconcile it to everything). Some sort of unity, some form of "monism": this faith suffices to give man a deep feeling of standing in the context of, and being dependent on, some whole that is infinitely superior to him, and he sees himself as a mode of the deity.- 'The well-being of the universal demands the devotion of the individual' - but behold, there is no such universal! At bottom, man has lost the faith in his own value when no infinitely valuable whole works through him; i.e., he conceived such a whole in order to be able to believe in his own value.<sup>22</sup>

The unacknowledged truth is simply that the death of God, nihilism, woke psychology, and the elaborate and pervasive circuitry of debt, guilt, anger, narcissism, mindless groupthink, and ubiquitous subservience to the idols of personal self-presentation constitute the essential cerebral ecology of neoliberalism. This ecology is almost undetectable by the cognitive elites because they are all along profoundly enmeshed within it. It is like young fish, as Guanzini notes in a parable, who cannot answer the simple question "how's the water?" because they do not know what water is, even though they have been swimming in it the entirety of their little piscine lives.<sup>23</sup> The underside of neoliberalism is nothing more than a *Protean semiosphere* of once immanent symbolic forms and acts extracted from their native life-worlds and sedimented as "forms of religion" to be clinically dissected. These forms at one time comprised what Mignolo terms "local knowledge." However, they now course prolifically throughout our everyday speech and higher-order discourse as well as perhaps in our collective knowledge base and have simply become compostable fodder for the neoliberal pseudo-moral imaginary. They are the putrefying skin and once vital organs of dead gods, or God. The hackneyed expression "spiritual but not religious" crystallizes such a sensibility. The transcendental comes to be commodified along with Nietzsche's "highest values" which, like white bread or refined sugar, serve as delectable enticements to consume more

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<sup>22</sup> *The Will to Power*, op. cit., 12.

<sup>23</sup> Guanzini, op. cit., 37.

and more of what remains in truth of little, or absolutely no value.

*The Metastasis of Modernism*

A genealogy of the neoliberalization, together with the desiccation and commodification, of the vast ranges of human subjectivity and social experiences we have reduced to the lone signifier "religion", can be found in Mignolo's work. Mignolo is often chastised for not talking about religion, but for him to do so would be defect to the very discursive regime his entire project aims to unmask and critically scrutinize. For Mignolo, "religion" is nothing more than one linguistic coding among many that swarm under the sign of "modernity" and are linked intimately with the colonial matrix of power. It is really a question of *what religion actually is*, not what we call it, or how we seek to bottle its elixir by somehow *theorizing* it in keeping with the protocols of "scientific" research. Modernity has replaced metaphysics and ontology with a certain rigorous epistemology, and Mignolo summons us to recognize the unavoidable distinction. Such an approach he dubs one of fostering the "re-existence" of previously denied or discarded subjectivities. Mignolo remarks that "reason, the materiality of the world (its ontology) is shaped by epistemology (world sense projected into storytelling and argument [logos]) coded, in every culture and/or civilization, as knowledge (epistemology). If I am not careful, I can break my nose running into a "standing piece of living wood" (ontology), but a tree is another story – it is a particular name given to the standing piece of living wood that occupies a particular place in human imagination who invented the concept of 'nature.' When it comes to democracy, being, art, and religion, the same principle applies, though the circumstances change: they depend on how universes of meaning are built."<sup>24</sup> In other words, there is no such thing as "religion" other than a genesis of the real that is somehow susceptible to being swept up in the net of abstraction, iteration, and classification that give full rein to the colonial matrix of *discursive* power. Reproducing in some viable format this modernist manufacture of the *real* should be the true task for any venture in authentic critical theory in the neoliberal era.

The venture must be, as Mignolo stresses, the rescue of the ontological from the steely mesh of the epistemic. The need especially for indigenous people to steer clear of the neoliberal epistemic machinery has been boldly advanced by Tink Tinker. "We must remember that our past and future have been consistently signified for us." Shaping the authentic subject of enunciation in this subjectivation process has always required an

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<sup>24</sup> *On Decoloniality*, op. cit., 196.

intervention by those who truly have the last word in representing indigenous lives and livelihoods, not those who have imposed their artificial world-schema on native experience. It has been a relentless and systemic project *ab extra* carried out "by missionaries, by anthropologists and other university academics, by government bureaucrats, etc."<sup>25</sup>

Such a project unfortunately has been the core, unacknowledged mandate of the field of religious studies since its infancy. South African historian of religions David Chidester has famously and relentlessly documented this trend in his *Empire of Religion*. Citing the very statements of German-British scholar Max Müller from the late nineteenth century, who in multiple respects invented the very critical organon for the later development of the field, Chidester notes that the process of naming what is "religious" and what is not performed as the hidden handmaiden of European imperial policy up through the twentieth century. Invoking Müller's slogan "classify and conquer", Chidester shows how Müller, and those who emulated him, were able to convince colonial administrators to begin assembling, warehousing, and analyzing data about their native subject peoples both as an instrument of domestic intelligence to forestall rebellion as well as to commodify for the purposes of fashionable interest and consumption the inner lives of previously autonomous, and *autochthonous*, peoples. "Raw religious materials," Chidester writes, "which were contained in the reports of travelers, missionaries, and colonial administrators, were extracted, exported, and transformed into intellectual manufactured goods at metropolitan centers of theory production."<sup>26</sup> That explanation of course corresponds *punctum a puncto* to Mignolo's account of the colonial matrix of power. Yet it has also persisted – and indeed embedded itself – in what might be called *the neoliberal matrix of cognitive hegemony*.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> George E. Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 4.

<sup>26</sup> David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 64.

<sup>27</sup> To understand how this process works in detail, I would refer the reader to my article "Religious Studies as Neoliberal 'Triple Mediation': Toward a Deconstruction of Its 'Colonial Difference'". In that article I explore the arguments of David Chidester, Achille Mbembe, Tomoko Masuzawa, and Mignolo. I contend that the academic study of religion is *prima facie* a "colonial" discipline and the paradigm of rational inquiry inherent in these types of scholarly praxis conforms to what Chidester characterizes a "triple mediation" between the imperial subjugation and taxonomization as well as administration of colonized peoples and civilizations. I write that "the notion that the 'religious', in its most enigmatic implications, can somehow be scrubbed down to manipulable 'datasets' is one great, grey manifestation of what we might call the neoliberal *idee fixe*". Carl Raschke, "Religious Studies as Neoliberal 'Triple Mediation': Toward a Deconstruction of its 'Colonial Difference'", *Religions* 10 (2019): 238.

To understand how such cognitive hegemony works, we must hark back once more to what colonialists in the nineteenth century characterized as their "civilizing mission." Even though colonialism visibly was all about rapacious extraction of resources and the meticulous regulation of ethnic, racial, and caste distinctions, in the minds of the colonialists themselves all these well-documented predations were but collateral damage in the righteous campaign to foster European moral and political values in the name of "progress". The philosopher Kant's definition of Enlightenment as release from one's own self-incurred cultural immaturity became the shibboleth of the colonialists, inasmuch as the colonialists piously viewed their own exploitation of foreign peoples as a necessary form of discipline in "educating" them. The notion of the civilizing mission, according to Michael Mann, had its origins in the French Revolution as the *mission civilisatrice* with its focus on liberty and equality as a radical new secular catechism. Napoleon's imperial wars and, ironically, the successful slave uprisings on the island of Hispaniola that led to the formation of the nation of Haiti, were early manifestations of this unprecedented kind of modernist post-Christian millenarianism.<sup>28</sup> Present day neoliberalism – specifically progressive neoliberalism – is heir to the *mission civilisatrice*. But, more importantly, like any imperial regime it cannot function adequately with some simulacrum of state religion.

In light of our foregoing analysis, I would argue that the "state religion" of neoliberalism is tantamount to the field of religious studies per se. Religious studies scholars, routinely cited as "authorities" in the mainstream press whenever some type of religious controversy catches public attention, have learned studiously how to discredit the very phenomenon they claim to be analyzing. Much of this tendency may be due to the biases of the mainstream press itself, which often selects its "experts" in order to reinforce a predetermined story line. A Pew study of the 2008 Presidential election found that news coverage was generally "unfavorable" to both the religions of the candidates and those portions of the electorate supporting them, focusing equally on Vice Presidential hopeful Sarah Palin's evangelicalism and the long discredited rumor that Obama was a Muslim. "Often," the report concludes, "the context was negative".<sup>29</sup> But there is also a built-in penchant to minimize the

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<sup>28</sup> See Michael Mann, "'Torchbearers Upon the Path of Progress': Britain's Ideology of a 'Moral and Material Progress' in India: An Introductory Essay," in Harald Fischer-Tiné and Michael Mann, *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission: Cultural Ideology in British India* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 4.

<sup>29</sup> "How the News Media Covered Religion in the General Election", Pew Research Center (November 20, 2008), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2008/11/20/how-the-news-media-covered-religion-in-the-general-election/>. Accessed Sept. 15, 2022. Some research

subject itself that scholars of religion rarely acknowledge. Whereas most high-prestige "scientific" fields such as physics or neuropsychology in the last half century have moved away from reductionistic models of research, religious studies has tended increasingly to ape the crudest versions of the social sciences with their own internalized "classificatory", crypto-colonial schema that critics such as Chidester and Mignolo have dissected.

Much of this tendency has always been of a defensive nature. Since it sprung up as a field in the 1960s it has always gone out of its way, often obsessively, to distance itself from the theological disciplines on account of the rigorous strictures in American separating church and state. Eminent religious scholar Russell McCutcheon writes on his department website that "the academic study of religion is fundamentally an *anthropological enterprise*. That is, it is primarily concerned with studying people...their beliefs, behaviors, and institutions, rather than assessing 'the truth' or 'truths' of their various beliefs or behaviors."<sup>30</sup> Of course, one cannot learn anything more about religion simply by studying religious people than one can learn about stars by studying the stars in their eyes. The very notion of a "secular" approach to the phenomenon of religion is not much different from trying to unravel the mysteries of human love and bonding by examining people's genitals. It is also analogous to the difference between politics and political theology. Even if we dare not call it "theology", the study of religion requires a theoretical inquiry into the "truth" of the claims that are often made in the name of religion, not to mention politics. In short, there must be a *metadiscipline* for both politics and religion whereby the relationship between the two can be sorted out.

### *The New Imperial "State Religion"*

But religious studies has a far more a political role to play than a theoretical one. In many respects religious studies is similar to the political function of Roman religion, which had no "theology" worth naming to underwrite it. The purpose of Roman religion, as Jörg Rüpke notes, was "control" by political elites. "Religion offered a powerful source for legitimizing political decisions; it remained what Georg Simmel called a 'third

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shows that this bias is strong toward all "unconventional religions", allowing stereotypes to proliferate. See Stuart A. Wright, "Media Coverage of Unconventional Religion: Any 'Good News' for Minority Faiths?", *Review of Religions Research* 39 (1997): 101-15. See also Kim Knott and Elizabeth Poole, *Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred: Representation and Change* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Russell McCutcheon, "What is the Academic Study of Religion?", Department of Religious Studies, University of Alabama, <https://religion.ua.edu/links/the-students-desk/what-is-the-academic-study-of-religion/>. Accessed Sept. 16, 2022.



authority”<sup>31</sup>. Roman religion was extremely intricate, highly differentiated, and thoroughly functionalist in both its symbology and its performances. Strong fixation on a single set of beliefs was regarded with suspicion. Roman religion was also class-ridden. The more prestigious aspects of “civil religion” were restricted to the ruling elites, while a polytonal hodgepodge of foreign “cults” proliferated among the lower classes and dregs of Roman society. Rome permitted personal religious devotion and expression to the extent that one did not challenge the inviolable authority of the secular state. It was the deification of the state in the form of Caesar worship inaugurated during the first century of the common era, combined with the ruthless punishment and suppression of those who refused to participate in the practice, that epitomizes Roman religion. The familiar canard that Rome’s religious pluralism was a paragon of tolerance to be emulated throughout the ages belies this reality. As Richard Corradini notes, Augustine in his *City of God* heavily criticized the religious functionalism of the Roman imperium as a subterfuge to cover up the narcissism, corruption, and increasing dysfunctionality of Roman society after the end of the republic.<sup>32</sup> According to Ittai Gradel the term “religion” itself, in its early Roman context, was thoroughly political. *Religio* signified an attitude of respect and diligence toward constituted authority, whether divine or human.<sup>33</sup> Gradel argues that most of what we call “religion” in the Roman sense was known as *publica sacra*, or sacred public rites where the “numinous” character of religious symbols were systematically and methodically exploited to prevent the increasing tension between subjugated, conquered, or favored groups of people from tearing apart the empire. Emperor worship itself, which the first Christians resisted often at the cost of their lives was not, as is often assumed, some weird adaptation by the Caesars of Asian cult practices. Roman religion revolved around the concept of *divus*, or supernatural power, which could be wielded by both gods and human beings. The transition from republic to empire merely concentrated divine authority in the most commanding political figure of the times.

The “Romanization” of religion under the sign of neoliberalism, however, poses a distinctive challenge to the doctrine of sovereignty. The idea of sovereignty as we know it, has been curated within an endowment of political thinking that is shot through with monopolitical presuppositions, which

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<sup>31</sup> Jürg Rüpke, “Roman Religion – Religions of Rome”, in Jürg Rüpke, *A Companion to Roman Religions* (Malden MA Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 3-4.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Corradini, “Augustine on the Polymorphism of Roman Identity,” Austrian Academy of Sciences, Institute for Medieval Research, Research Blog, Nov. 1, 2018, <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/en/imafo/read/augustine-on-the-polymorphism-of-roman-identity>. Accessed Sept. 4, 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002),

following Schmitt constitute the heritage of both Near Eastern and Mediterranean monotheism. The question of sovereignty is also the same as the ontological as well as the moral question of political legitimacy. In many respects the monopolitical legacy of the Western world, including Islam, can be understood as the offshoot of a radical religious monotheism that doggedly resisted the concentration of political power in any single position or person, which in turn consistently rendered autocracy suspect. It also served to undermine the legitimacy of monarchy, especially the hereditary kind, and transposed the unitary impulse to the people as a whole. The vaunted religious pluralism of Rome, however, was a cover for the unconstrained concentration of power in a single individual, largely because political authority in Rome was ultimately vested in the military. Such authority was dubbed *imperium*, the same word from which we derive "empire". In other words, Roman politics, even with the Republic, was an incessant power struggle in which the most ruthless and the most cunning came to rule by brute force. Whoever that might be simply won the title of *princeps*, or "first citizen". We might be so crass as to translate the word as "top dog". There was no transcendental principle which might decide who should in a neutral or normative sense be allowed to rule. *Auctoritas* – social prestige, or the qualification to command – was simply granted to whomever came out on top, and after the solidification of empire it was embellished with the title of *divus*, or "deity".

As Gradel emphasizes, this state of affairs was the inevitable outcome of the intimate association of the sacral in ancient Rome with the ability to vanquish one's enemies. In the view of Adrastos Omissi "to understand [Roman] imperial power, one must understand usurpation." Furthermore, he notes: From the moment of its creation, Roman imperial power was power usurped. The Roman Republic had been governed by an aristocracy whose members competed with one another for power and prestige within a political system the express function of which was to limit the concentration of power in individual hands. But during the first century BC, as the spoils of conquest poured into Roman coffers, the regulations that governed the Republic began to break down and powerful men fought with one another to rule a Roman state that now spanned the Mediterranean.<sup>34</sup>

Overall there could be no such thing as a "political theology" in ancient Rome because political power and religion were virtually

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<sup>34</sup> Adrastos Omissi, *Emperors and Usurpers in the Later Roman Empire: Civil War, Panegyric, and the Construction of Legitimacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 4. See also Sarolta Takács, *The Construction of Authority in Ancient Rome and Byzantium: The Rhetoric of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

one and the same thing. Roman "religion" from the earliest days of the Republic was preoccupied, as were other archaic religious systems such as the Indian Vedas, with the proper performance of rites. These rites, in turn, were routinely improvised as a means for appeasing the whims of the countless gods and managing the opaque operations of even more incalculable divine forces, all of which was designed to guarantee the well-being of what came to be known as the "eternal city". Everything was modelled on an elaborate juggling of innumerable and ever proliferating "subjectivities", as Clifford Ando suggests, without the benefit of any firm or intelligible metaphysical set of guideposts for bringing order out of both the social and cosmic chaos.<sup>35</sup> The most important religious rite, therefore, was the *auspicia*, a form of divination that relied on the behavior of birds, especially chickens, in order to predict the results of battles or political decisions.<sup>36</sup> The Roman *religiones* functioned necessarily as dependent variables in the maintenance of an abstruse and ill-grounded system of competing and usually violent power imbalances. The violence of the system was justified through an even more vague ideology of multiplying subjectivities – the identity politics of its day – that could be called upon at any moment both to locate obscure sources of conflict and to prosecute anyone who might be perceived as a threat to the Rube Goldberg configuration itself.

In other words, the ancient Roman *imperium* was hardly any different from the progressive neoliberal order of today. Where religion in the early modern era served to anchor, or to confront, political authority through the doctrine of sovereignty, the raw politics of Rome and contemporary neoliberalism create a sheer veneer of sovereignty that is easily exposed for what it is – the exercise of the power of the state for the benefit of embedded economic and cultural elites. The Romans termed this ideological sleight of hand *virtus*, or "virtue". We call it "virtue signaling," but it is by and large one and the same. In order to grasp precisely how this deception work, we will need to explore how the illusion of sovereignty is created in the first place.

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<sup>35</sup> See Clifford Ando, "Religion and Government in the Roman Empire", in *Annuaire de l'École pratique des hautes études (EPHE), Open Edition Journals* (2012): 119-20. For Ando's overall analysis of the relationship between religion and politics in Rome see his *The Matter of the Gods: Religion and the Roman Empire* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2008). In addition, for a comparable analysis see Eric Orlin, *Temples, Religion, and Politics in the Roman Republic* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 1997).

<sup>36</sup> Siddiq Alis Chishti and Muhammad Ifzal Mehmood, "The Nature and Function of *Auspicia* in Roman Religion and Roman Political System", *International Journal of Science and Research* (2013): 2697-9.