THE LIMINALITY OF DEMOCRACY

TOWARDS A BELOVED COMMUNITY OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Rory D. McEntee

Drew University

Madison, New Jersey

ABSTRACT

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The organization of academic disciplinary structures around a religion/secular binary is arguably the prime regulative logic within higher education in the United States today, and throughout the West. Religion scholar Boaz Huss has called such a binary the "fundamental discursive category of modernity," affecting our entire social and political milieus. This organizational structure emerges from a long and complex history with Christendom in the West. Yet, given that we live today amidst cultures of vast diversity—with perhaps the greatest racial, ethnic, and religious diversity the world has ever seen, including growing religio-spiritual experimentation—this dissertation asks what is meant when terms such as 'religion' or 'the secular' are utilized. Analyzing how various uses of these terms are embedded in contemporary academic disciplinary structures, this dissertation imagines how disciplinary structures might be reconceived in the light of decolonial concerns, as well as current scholarship that questions the meaning of terms such as 'religion' and 'the secular.'

Beginning with democratic political theory and a consideration of the role of academia as a locus of professional thinking and education in society, academia is seen to hold at least some responsibility for inculcating democratic and decolonial praxis. What does this mean in terms of current disciplinary delineations? In particular, I analyze delineations between philosophy, theology, religious studies, cultural-critical theory, and sociology. These delineations within the humanities are places where a religion/secular binary has significant sway, and this dissertation argues that current disciplinary formations have racial and colonial consequences. Following upon this analysis, an exploration of democratic and decolonial praxis commences, mainly thru voices from marginalized communities, leading into the constructive work of envisioning new discourses and disciplinary formations in academia—ones that might better serve our democracy today.

A *liminality* of democracy materializes in the course of these explorations, recognizing religio-spiritual becomings as vital aspects of a religiously pluralistic democracy. In bringing clarity to the ways in which a religion/secular binary functions in the organization of society, politics, and knowledge production today, this dissertation simultaneously opens up liminal, interstitial spaces in which one might reassess the disciplinary structures of academia. Given colonial and racial consequences discovered along the way, this dissertation argues extensively that our democracy is better served by a thorough reassessment of the anachronistic, often fetishized, institutional structures we have inherited. In their stead, it argues positively for the relevance of an interreligious/interspiritual contemplative discourse within academia, as well as a movement towards a beloved community of religious diversity—as a cultural, political, and even scholarly formation.

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INTRODUCTION:

BEYOND SECULARITY AND 'RELIGION'

La compasión es una conversación sostenida.
—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark / Luz en lo Oscuro*[1]

To become aware of the peculiar shape and implications of our category "religion" is to see more clearly the ways in which it implicitly shapes not only the answers to our historical and interpretive questions but also the very form of those questions and, therefore, the form that any possible answer can take.
—Robert Ford Campany, "On the Very Idea of Religions"[2]

Religions or* daos*? And Why It Matters

It was the straw that broke a camel's back.

I had been reading for some time critiques of the category of religion, from secular as well as theological perspectives, many of which make an appearance in the chapters ahead. On the secular side, scholars such as Timothy Fitzgerald, Tomoko Masuzawa, Talal Asad, and others provided critical genealogies of the category of religion, as well as of its co-constructed notion, the secular.[3] Yet these analyses left me wanting. Even when offering convincing critiques of the secular, they displayed a peculiar desire to remain more or less militantly within heavily secularized modes of scholarship. Strange, I thought. And they left me with much to ponder.

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[1] Anzaldúa, *Light,* 92. My translation: "Compassion is a conversation sustained."

[2] Campany, "On the," 290-291.

[3] Fitzgerald in particular shows how the secular is co-constructed with the category of religion—and thus far removed from the neutral space of rationality it is often assumed to be—while Masuzawa provides a critical lens into the invention of 'world religions' discourse amidst assumptions of Christian, White, and Western supremacist stances. See Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity,* and Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*. For other critiques of the categories of religion and/or the secular, see Asad, *Geneologies of Religion;* Asad, *Formations of the Secular;* Thatamanil, *Circling,* especially 108-151; Chidester, *Savage Systems;* Nongbri, *Before Religion;* Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan.*

On the theological side, John Thatamanil's writings articulated extensive problems with the Western category of religion, while contemplating what theology might look like "after religion."[4] Here I discovered a critique that resonated more with my own contemplative leanings. Thatamanil's attention to religious dimensions of reality, as well as his interests in a "quest for interreligious wisdom," brought novel dimensions into critiques of both religion and the secular.[5] Thatamanil, however, writes mostly from the standpoint of a Christian theologian, addressing other Christian theologians and engaging their relevant questions. My interests remained broader. They began to turn specifically towards this delineation between 'religion' and 'the secular.' Given current critiques, I found myself asking: How does—and how *should*—such a binary play itself out in contemporary socio-political structures? In particular, how does (and should) such a binary function in academia?

It was through Thatamanil's work that I discovered, unbeknownst to me at the time, that consequential straw. One never quite knows when a fracturing (yet fortuitous) straw might arrive on the scene, cracking open a liminal horizon in one's thought. The seemingly innocent straw does not announce itself with blaring warnings about radical change, or promises to rethink 'everything,' or declarations of some new political order. I suppose that's the point. It is, after all, just a straw.

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[4] Thatamanil, *Circling*.

[5] "quest for interreligious wisdom," see Thatamanil, "Theology Without Walls."

This particular consequential straw arrived in the form of Robert Ford Campany's essay, "On the Very Idea of Religions (in the Modern West and in Early Medieval China)." Campany's essay marked an inflection point in my thinking about 'religion,' the religious, and the secular. His essay compares and contrasts metaphors in modern discourse on religion with those in early medieval China. It is the metaphorical analysis, I think, that makes the essay so persuasive. Metaphor always refers back to *experience*, and hence stimulates an embodied element—a felt-sense-of-the-world—within it.[6]

Campany's essay helped coalesce a different way of feeling into human religiosity. What had been a nascent intuition bloomed into a novel perspective. I realized that I had yet to really 'think' outside Western constructions of the category of religion, in particular religions as bounded containers based upon beliefs, confessional stances, and shared practices. (Even though at this point I was someone who had read, practiced, and been mentored extensively in numerous religious traditions.) Thatamanil's and others' work had done much to undermine any notion of non-porous 'religions' for me, as well as made clear colonial consequences in the ways the category has often functioned. Campany's essay opened up a new dimension, on a more affective register. His exploration of *daos* ("ways" or "paths") and their corresponding metaphorical implications in medieval China offered an alternative vista in imagining human religious formations—not as bounded containers, systematized beliefs, or even shared ritual or practices—but as paths, or 'ways.'

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[6] Campany notes that he follows the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson on linguistics, cognitive science, and consciousness around metaphor (Campany, 288, fn 4). See, for instance, Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By;* and Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought.* Before reading Campany's essay I also found myself interested in the work of Lakoff and Johnson, and drawn to the idea of human consciousness as ultimately embodied in empathic experience. I resonate with the idea that language is metaphorically based, in the sense of always referring back to embodied experience.

As Campany makes clear in his essay, comparing metaphors is not about showing which ones are "right" or "wrong," but rather makes possible an uncovering of "hidden aspects." Comparing metaphors may help us notice "something well worth seeing," or simultaneously how a "latent ideology encodes an uninvoked but silently looming model or set of expectations," expectations that revolve around particular metaphors.[7]

In Western discourse, many of the most common metaphors for religions envision them as entities. Campany views this as the "most basic aspect of how religions are imagined…they are reified." This is seen in the "isms" we so easily attach to terms.[8] We speak of 'Confucian-ism,' or 'Hindu-ism,' or 'Buddh-ism,' creating a guise of systematicity and of a "thing among other things."[9] Other metaphors commonly used in the West include religions as organisms (e.g., the "growth" of a religion), religions as marketable commodities (e.g., religions can lose their "appeal"), religions as personified agents or armies (e.g., religions can "conquer," "infiltrate," "adapt," and "succeed"), and of course, religions as containers—especially of people.[10]

All of these metaphors tend towards bounded reifications. An organism, for instance, has clearly demarcated physical boundaries, personal agency, and a kind of teleology in that it grows towards a specific form.[11] Marketable commodities are bought and sold, and containers imply that one belongs in one or another of them. If one is Buddhist then one cannot also be Christian—they imply different containers that ‘contain’ contradictory “beliefs.”[12] Through metaphors that reify ‘religions,’ Western discourse tends to move against more liminal implications, such as multiple religious belonging, “spiritual fluidity,” or religious syncretism.[13] Even terms such as “multiple-religious belonging” imply “belonging” to a reified entity, at least in some sense.[14] It is not that such metaphors are wrong necessarily, but that they foreground certain aspects, hide others, and sometimes completely miss essential elements. Given that the very term ‘religion’ tends towards reified entities, it also limits our social (and religious) imaginary.

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[7] Campany, "On the," 294.

[8] I note that we attach these "isms" in the English language in many different ways, not just to religions. I utilize such nominalizing tendencies extensively in this project, for example, as seen below in terms like secular-ism or a hard constructiv-ism, attempting to bring together various modes of praxis under banners that highlight only one particular aspect of their labor. Such is the nature of philosophic thought.

[9] Campany, "On the," 291.

[10] Ibid., 291-299.

When the term ‘religion’ is applied to human religious formations, particularly outside Abrahamic traditions, there is a danger of imputing the common metaphorical resonances associated with the term to alternate religious formations. For example, in the final chapter of this project, philosophy and religion scholar Bin Song argues that a Ru (“Confucian”) orientation does not correlate with notions of bounded containers, or with confessional enterprises.[15] In the penultimate chapter, Indigenous religiosity is seen to emphasize *ways of living* embedded in physical environments—among the spirits and animals that also inhabit lands—rather than in doctrinal formulations. Asian traditions in general may emphasize spiritual depth and virtuosity of practice as more important than being in this or that container, this or that 'religion.'[16] There is simply no reason why other human religious formations should correspond to particular Western metaphorical resonances of 'religion,' based as they are primarily upon Christianity.

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[11] Ibid., 295.

[12] And if one doesn’t belong in any of the containers, we create new containers that function more like throw away bins, such as “secular,” “nones,” or “spiritual but not religious.”

[13] “spiritual fluidity,” see Bidwell, *When One Religion is Not Enough: The Lives of Spiritually Fluid People.*

[14] Thatamanil, *Circling*, 35.

[15] Song, “Comparative Theology as a Liberal Art.”

In early medieval China, for instance, Campany tells us that *dao* is "probably the most ubiquitous way of nominalizing what we would call 'religions.'"[17] Other terms are also used, such as *fa* ("laws" or "methods") and *jiao* ("teachings," usually applied as "teachings of X"). None of these, however, imply the extent of reification seen above in the term religion. *Daos, fas,* and *jiaos*—ways, methods, and teachings—are not personified, and rarely express agency. Campany brings attention to Western translations that exchange *fojiao* ("teachings of the Buddha"), or *fodao* ("the way of the Buddha"), for the "doctrine of the Buddha," or worse, "Buddhism."[18] Such translations lose the metaphorical resonances of *fojiao* and *fodao,* while at the same time imputing those of the Western term 'religion,' revolving around entity-like containers, theological systematicity, and "beliefs" as doctrinal or confessional stances. Note that I am not criticizing Western religious stances here, but merely expanding our idea of the religious.[19]

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[16] See Neville, *Religion,* 58. This point is explored further in chapter six.

[17] Campany, "On the," 300.

[18] Ibid., 307.

[19] Let me also state from the outset that I am not criticizing "confessional" religious orientations. I have deep respect for those in traditional, confessional religions, and have been oft mentored by them. I am simply pointing out that such concepts, easily embedded in the Western term 'religion,' do not necessarily correspond to other religious persuasions. That is just a fact. As a greater appreciation for this fact is gained, one might reassess the nuances of a religion/secular binary and its corresponding institutional structures—utilizing an expanded understanding of religiosity—which of course also transforms the meaning of its co-constructed category, the secular.

Campany notes how in the West “belief” has become synonymous with “religions in general,” where “participants are summarily labeled as ‘believers.’” However, “This complex of assumptions is strikingly absent from Chinese discourses.” Chinese discourse around human religiosity, at least in the medieval era, focuses on “practices and values, not propositions or doctrines and not people’s inner attitude towards these.” What is of concern is a path’s viability for transformation into our full humanity, enlightenment, and/or aligning one’s life harmoniously with the nature of reality. In Campany’s words, “the language tends to emphasize practice or some mode of active participation rather than either simple membership in a container-like set or assent to a set of core doctrines.”[20] One walks along a ‘way,’ a path, a *dao.* One learns from “teachings,” *jiaos,* perhaps continuously, where deeper meanings may arise as one’s practice and understanding matures. There is an enactive, metaphorical resonance that is embodied, process-oriented, and participatory, more so than notions of belief or static containers.[21] As Campany puts it, “people’s relations to *daos* is not one of passive containment, membership, or sheer belonging. People seek, travel, follow, abandon, or deviate from *daos,* rather than simply being contained in them; the verbs are verbs of doing, not copulae.”[22] A path may change directions, come into new vistas, intersect with other ‘ways,’ all as one *walks*. Metaphors enact felt resonances that are part of their meaning, and help direct the ways we think about them, and thus the questions we ask…or the explorations we undertake.

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[20] Ibid., 310-311.

[21] This does not mean that Western religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, don’t also have ways of understandings themselves as paths that one walks, or as teachings that one continually matures in. However—and this is the overall point of the project, as is made clear below—*discourse* around religions in the West, *particularly around a religion/secular binary,* do tend to imagine religions as bounded “membership” communities revolving around assentation to “confessional” statements of doctrine—and not as ways or paths or teachings. More on this below.

[22] Campany, “On the,” 305.

Let me note for now how the two qualities of the Western term ‘religion’ that Campany contrasts with *daos* and *jiaos*—i.e., membership in container-like sets, and a confessional perspective—are more or less precisely the two aspects of the Western concept of religion utilized to create and maintain a *religion/secular binary* in academia today.[23] As these arguments go, religious perspectives in general should not be part of broader academic discourse because they assume, *a priori*, certain truths about the world. This happens before evidence is marshaled, critical thinking performed, or reflective thought engaged. Since these truths are not shared by everyone, religious persuasions are unable to fully participate in broader communities of inquiry. This is the “confessional” argument against religion in a public, secular academy. As opposed to a public discourse open to all, religious discourse is seen to be an exclusive, insider discourse, one that is meant only for those who share similar beliefs, and who are members of the religious tradition. This is the “membership” argument against religious persuasions in academia.[24] These arguments, made from both religious and secular perspectives in order to uphold a religion/secular binary, supposedly show that religious persuasions are unable to participate in broader communities of inquiry, which are the life-blood of academia.

At this point, however, one might already begin to ask, what do such arguments mean for religious persuasions that do not correspond to such notions of ‘religion,’ (e.g., ones that are neither confessional nor exclusively membership oriented)? Further, if confessional or membership stances are not universal religious persuasions (which they clearly are not), but rather simply one religious persuasion amongst others, how might one reassess long-standing arguments around a religion/secular binary? (The latter emerging directly from the West's complicated history with an encompassing Christendom.)

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[23] I address my use of a “religion/secular binary” directly below.

[24] We will see both the “confessional” and the “membership” argument in chapter one, explicitly in the context of political philosophy around the socio-political structures of democracy and a religion/secular binary.

The careful reader will notice that I continue to use the word "religious," though in a somewhat different way from 'religion' (as in the prior paragraph). I do so throughout this project, yet not until the penultimate chapter will I bring a more formal definition of the "religious" into view. Until then, the religious will retain a type of common-sense linguistic meaning, and perhaps a more liminal texture. It is helpful to point out from the beginning that, in my framing, someone can be involved in *religious* labor without necessarily belonging to a 'religion.' I consider those seriously involved in Buddhist meditation practices, for instance, to be participating in human religious formations, whether or not they formally consider themselves to be Buddhist. Indigenous cultures participate in human religious formations, even though they may only correspond to the Western category of religion in particular ways, for instance as entailing views of reality and concomitant practices.[25] Certainly, indigenous religiosity, as well as most Eastern and African religiosities, never delineated reality into "secular" and "religious" spheres (at least not before colonialism and modernity). The growing

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[25] The religious understood as entailing qualitative views of reality and concomitant practices will be seen in Thatamanil's definition of the religious as "comprehensive qualitative orientation" in chapter six. See Thatamanil, *Circling,* 152-192.

“spiritual but not religious” crowd in Western cultures I also consider to be participating in human religious formations, even if they seem to reject the moniker of ‘religion.’ In any case, as will be seen, formal definitions and analytic categories are not really the goal of this project. In fact, the opposite might be said to be true. The blurring of too easy categorizations is at the heart of a liminality of democracy, which embraces contaminating encounters, as well as liminal religious possibilities, as essential for democratic becoming. More on that to come.

What I do intend, quite formally, is to expand the social imaginary of human religiosity—and hence of what one might mean when utilizing terms such as religion, religions, or the religious. Much scholarly ink has been spilled on the latter, interrogating and reassessing Western discourse on religion, often pointing out colonial, racist, and Christian supremacist entanglements within it, and/or turning a critical eye towards the complex stance of the scholar who works with human religiosity.[26] This project does not necessarily add to this labor, except perhaps tangentially. It is not a critical genealogy of formations of religion or the secular, nor a historical analysis, nor an analysis of power relations that emerge from such formations, at least not primarily. While such practices will be utilized at times, this project is much more focused on a different kind of investigation, perhaps even a different type of scholarly praxis—a more liminal adventure, to be sure. Such an adventure traverses the following line of thought: What does (and should) a “religion/secular binary” mean in academia today? Given the ongoing shifts in how we understand each term, the time seems ripe to begin pondering such a question directly. These shifts deviate substantially from the West’s long-running, common-sense notions of these terms. ‘Religion’ and the ‘secular’—as well as the institutional structures that revolve around them—developed within cultural conditions of a hegemonic Christianity, which included assumptions of White, Christian, Male, and Western superiority. Projections of religion, a term predicated upon the superior religious dispensation of Christianity, were then cast onto alternative human religious formations.

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[26] See fn 3 above for references of this literature.

Yet, we no longer live in the world of a hegemonic Christendom, nor a hegemonic Protestant Christianity, nor with assumptions of Christian, White, Male, and Western superiority (or at least we try not to…which does not mean we are always successful). We live, in the U.S. at least, in a world of vibrant religious, racial, and ethnic diversity. We live also in a world with much contestation as to how to adjust or even reinvent socio-political structures (including scholarly praxis) to address past wrongs enacted by various supremacist stances—wrongs that continue to function in current institutional structures, bodily dispositions, and cognitive frameworks. Further, it is not just a matter of changing socio-political structures, but also of changing culture. New cultural conditions are needed in birthing what Eddie Glaude Jr. calls a “third American revolution,” and what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as “ese sueño,” a dream of democratic becoming as an interweaving of minds and hearts. This is what, in chapter four, I will refer to as the “liminality of democracy”— a funk-filled womb-place from which new cultural conditions might be born. Thus, one of the central questions of these explorations is the following: *Given scholarly labor that deconstructs the category of religion, as well as its co-constructed category of the secular—and with an eye towards democratic and decolonial praxis within the context of a religiously diverse democracy—what does an* *evolving understanding of religion, religiosity (and, as we will see, spirituality) mean for reassessing a religion/secular binary in Western culture? More specifically, what does it mean for reassessing academic practices and disciplinary formations in a 'secular' university, particularly around religious studies, philosophy, and theology?*

The majority of scholarship deconstructing formations of either religion or the secular tend to stay more or less strictly within the bounds of secularity, as seen for example in the work of Asad, Fitzgerald, or Masuzawa. As for my own approach, I see no need to continually enclose scholarly praxis within the bounds of secularism, given a deconstruction of our understandings of religion and the secular. This becomes especially true when attached to a need for democratic and decolonial praxis (as well as shifting demographics and the changing nature of religio-spiritual practice, as addressed in chapter three). What exactly this might mean, of course, is not self-evident. What is evident is the need for a reassessment of these terms and a grappling with corresponding implications for societal structures. This project is one such grappling.

Thatamanil's scholarly praxis, done from a (complicated) Christian theological perspective, is refreshing in this regard. He deconstructs the category religion while also participating in a constructive, interreligious, comparative theological project. One of the insights Thatamanil gleans from critical genealogies of 'religion' and 'religions' is how these concepts tend to operate in the construction of identities:

> Having defined multiple spheres of Western life as secular and hence not "religious," and then defining the religions as clearly demarcated and reified entities, our customary modes of discourse assume that singular religious identity is the norm and that religious multiplicity is an aberration. Our configuration of the category "religions" tutors us to imagine that we live within a prison house of

> bounded homogeneity and face radical incommensurability only when we step outside our religion.[27]

What happens when one moves from bounded containers into more liminal and fluid concepts of religion or the religious? Such is a central focus of my project here. Thatamanil notes that constructions of religion are not just the imaginative play of scholars, as Jonathon Z. Smith has suggested, but have serious material and political consequences: “The use of the categories religion and religions actually creates new realities on the ground.”[28] In terms of identity, the “coercive power” of the category makes syncretistic or multiple religious identities appear as aberrant, while obscuring the “widest and wildest kinds of difference” that exist internally within any given religious tradition.[29] Thatamanil also notes work from religious studies scholar Jason Ānanda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan,* on the political dimensions of religion.[30] Josephson shows how the Japanese were forced to find a word to translate ‘religion’ after receiving a letter from American warships that appeared along their shores in 1853, which promised to allow “freedom of religion.” The Japanese didn’t know what the word meant, nor did they have a similar word for translation. Josephson goes on to trace the complex situation that ensued, as Japan comes to “invent religion” thru complicated struggles of state power.[31] In another work, Josephson-Storm discusses directly how scholarly work on religion can create “new realities on the ground,” for instance in “neoshamanic" traditions that have arisen from cultural anthropologies, as seen in the writings of Carlos Castañeda for example.[32] Our conceptions of religion have significant real-world consequences. These consequences extend today, in colonial and racial ways, to academic disciplinary formations instituted around a religion/secular binary, as I attempt to demonstrate throughout this project.

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[27] Thatamanil, *Circling,* 16.

[28] Ibid., 127.

[29] Ibid., 130.

[30] Ibid., 123-126.

[31] Josephson, *Invention.*

In addition to identity formations and cultural conditioning, Thatamanil shows how the category 'religions' also generates, "without anything so blatant as an assertion, the stark demarcation between the religions themselves."[33] In contrast, as Campany explains, in early medieval China what we often call the three 'religions' of China—with our Western-isms of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism—were not conceived in such a way: "Chinese texts assume that what we call 'religions' are fully commensurable and easily mappable one to another." While a particular *dao* or *jiao* is often argued for as superior to other paths or teachings, they are not conceived of as bounded containers with stark demarcations. A *dao* may even have a kind of teleology, but "not so much with regard to the inevitable direction of the history or development through time of the *dao* itself as with regard to the goal of the practitioner who 'practices' or 'walks' it."[34]

What is important for my purposes lies in keeping an eye on the expansion of the social imaginary around the religious. This is different from making an argument for a correct or incorrect way of thinking about human religiosity, or of developing a definition of what religion is.[35] I'm not suggesting that human religiosities are easily mappable to one another (at the same time, the notion that mappings between religions may be possible cannot be dismissed out of hand). I'm not positing one 'way,' or doctrine, or methodology, as superior. I do, however, wish to point out different ways of imagining what is considered 'religious.' What is the *felt-orientation* of a social imaginary where religions are easily mappable to one another? Where one walks a 'way' or follows a teaching, instead of confessing or belonging? What are the differing reverberations felt between the phrases "Buddhism," and "the way of the Buddha?" Between being "Christian," and one who "walks the path of Jesus, following his teachings?" Such thought experiments help expand the social imaginary of the religious.

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[32] Josephson-Storm, *Myth of Disenchantment.* (His last name was changed to Josephson-Storm)

[33] Thatamanil, *Circling*, 130.

[34] Campany, 312.

It is often an intensified presence of difference that instigates the need for reification. As Campany notes, this is as true today as it was in medieval China (even *fodao* is a form of reification). But not all reifications are created equal. The contrast between religion as opposed to other, non-religious (secular) things, "is largely absent" in Chinese discourse. Contrasts between 'religions' are as well. One may walk "deviant *daos*," but without "implying that such *daos*…are another kind of thing than *daos*…proper." The container model is simply missing here. As I work to expand notions of human religiosity throughout this project, particularly in contemplative directions, I also continue to gravitate around the question: as our notion of the religious transforms and expands, what does this mean for a religion/secular binary in a religiously pluralistic democracy? It is here that some of the novelty of my own approach arises.

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[35] Though I come close to this later in my use of Thatamanil's definition of the religious, in chapter six.

Thatamanil traces helpful implications specifically for Christian theological practice, articulating a "vision of constructive theology 'after religion.'"[36] He develops what he calls a "comparative theology of religious diversity," and offers a brief exemplification of its constructive nature in a "Hindu-Christian-Buddhist trialogue" that generates a "new trinitarian theology of religious diversity."[37] Along the way he investigates how "our unexamined ideas about 'religion' and 'religions' play a critical role in erecting, maintaining, and policing the border lines between religious traditions."[38] Important to this development is recognizing that religious traditions are, and always have been, "porous and constituted by their interactions with others."[39] Thatamanil worries about theological practices that allow one to "give an *account of the other* without being *transformed by the other*." Such practices will be seen in chapter two to participate in what South Indian scholar Arvind Mandair calls the "repetition of the colonial event," an objectifying stance that turns others into data rather than interlocutors. As Thatamanil states the problem, "we need not entertain the possibility that what we say about others and what they say about us may change how we think about ourselves." To embrace those with differing perspectives from our own, as authentic interlocutors, is to affirm their humanity. Such encounters risk, of course, "contamination," even syncretism, long a problematic term in the West for religious identities.[40]

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[36] Thatamanil, *Circling*, 34.

[37] Ibid, 17.

[38] Ibid., 35.

[39] Ibid., 28.

[40] Ibid., 34.

However, as Thatamanil also makes clear, all of our religious traditions have always been, and always will be, syncretisms. Christianity itself is a sophisticated and syncretic blend of the teachings of Jesus, Judaism, and Greek philosophy, which simultaneously utilizes many tropes from "pagan" religiosities in constructing a narrative of Christianity (e.g., "the three magi" or "the virgin birth"). The Way of the Buddha is constructed in explicit dialogue with various Indian religiosities and philosophical perspectives, and changes as it blends with other cultures, creating Chan and Zen Buddhism in China and Japan, for instance, with their own distinctive teachings and felt-orientations towards the world, or Tibetan Buddhism and its syncretic formation with the indigenous Bon tradition in Tibet.[41]

In an insight that becomes particularly important in the latter chapters of this project, Thatamanil points out how Christian theology "can be read as a sustained conversation with a variety of non-Christian philosophical traditions," including Greek and Hellenistic philosophy, the rediscovery of Aristotle in the middle-ages through encounters with Islam, and the secular philosophies of the Enlightenment period. Traditionally, these are not considered "interreligious encounters," but why? As

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[41] For an illuminating historical tracing of the ways in which numerous religious traditions have evolved their senses of ultimacy or salvation, often by coming into contact with other cultures or religions, see James L. Ford, *The Divine Quest, East and West: A Comparative Study of Ultimate Realities*. I should also note that the truth of religious syncretism does not necessarily mean there is nothing common underlying such changes, i.e., something that might be intuited in what we call for instance "Buddhism." I could point to various material forms, "texts" for instance of the teachings of the Buddha, or perhaps widely seen practices such as forms of meditation. However, this might only move against some of my larger concerns in this project, as that something "common" may not lie purely in material forms or other 'analytical' objects. The commonality might lie in more liminal intuitions, textured by affective registers of being. Once a flatland, materialist, hard constructivist view of reality is relinquished, such commonality may even consist of a kind of energetic transmission within a multi-dimensional cosmos. Surely, this is how many Buddhists would conceive of it. In acknowledging Buddhists as authentic interlocutors, transmission must be considered at least a possibility (noting that an 'energetic transmission' is not the same as an "essence," as it is also entangled in embodied realities and cultural contexts).

Thatamanil puts it, “much rests on which traditions are regarded as ‘religious’ as opposed to ‘philosophical.’” He goes on to write that perhaps it is much “safer” to think of “pagan wisdom traditions as narrowly philosophical rather than as religious,” in order to abject contaminating encounters with religious others, rather than acknowledge “a kind of religious hybridization” taking place.[42] I return to this pertinent insight below, integral in many ways to my project here.

While Thatamanil concentrates his arguments on fields within Christian theology, I attempt to funnel many of these insights into an alternate exploration. My own approach is not based within a particular religious tradition, nor is it theological instead of philosophical, or *vice-versa*. My interests lie more in reassessing a religion/secular binary in academia.

However…just what is meant by such terms— “theological,” “philosophical”—is also dependent on what is meant by religion, the religious, the secular, and so on. Hence, there is more going on than a simple denotation of categories or disciplines. One of the enduring marks of my exploration will be how these categories become continually blurred, at least when taking into account current cultural conditions (particularly in the U.S.), as well as contemporaneous needs for democratic and decolonial praxis. It is in the “in-between” spaces, those liminal interstices between theology, philosophy, and religious studies—between religion and secularity—that I begin to discover untapped, and necessary, resources for democratic and decolonial praxis. This project thus situates itself along the slash of a religion/secular binary, rather than on one or another side.[43] It is along the slash that a liminality of democracy is discovered, and perchance inhabited.

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[42] Thatamanil, *Circling*, 26.

A Brief Tour of Terms

As I begin to discuss the contours of this exploration more formally, it will be helpful to take a brief excursion touring some of the key terms/concepts I utilize in the pages ahead.

Religion/Secular Binary: As discussed above, and articulated throughout the project, I will refer fairly consistently to a 'religion/secular binary,' despite its grammatical indiscretions.[44] On one side of this binary I have in mind the Western construction of 'religion,' predicated upon Christianity as the exemplar, and revolving around assentation to beliefs ("confessional" stances), as well as container-like, "membership" structures.[45] I will often write 'religion,' with the single quotes, to signal this type of construction, and have already discussed above how its narrower meaning contrasts with a more capacious sense of the "religious." On the other side of the binary is the secular, a term, indeed often a noun, of co-construction with religion, which will be explored in depth in the first three chapters.

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[43] In chapter five, I discuss Gloria Anzaldúa's *nos/otras* ("us/others"), which she describes as a liminal space of living "on the slash" between them. I envision something similar here.

[44] A religion/secularity binary is grammatically correct, but costs too much in terms of the flow of the writing to constantly repeat. Neither does a religious/secular binary work, since the religious and religion signal different conceptual constructions for me, as discussed above. In any case, the 'secular' can also be utilized as a noun ("the secular is…"), and other authors I am in dialogue with utilize a similar linguistic construction. Boaz Huss, for instance, whose work I discuss in chapter three, refers to a "religion/secular divide" as the "fundamental discursive category of modernity" (Huss, "Sacred", 101).

[45] This does not mean I am criticizing such religious formations. See fn 19 above in this Introduction.

Secular, Secularity, Secularist: The secular will be a term that attaches to different meanings based on various contexts in which it is discussed. In the first chapter I recontextualize the secular, following scholars such as Charles Taylor, as denotive of the pluralistic cultural conditions of our contemporary *saeculum*, as opposed to (reductive) ontological orientations. Reductive ontological orientations, in the forms of a scientific materialism or a hard constructivism, have become somewhat synonymous with uses of the secular, unfortunately. However, it is not at all clear that reductive ontological orientations operating in hegemonic fashion are appropriate for a secular university today, especially in light of decolonial and democratic praxis. Much will be said about this in the pages that follow.

Following the first chapter, I will write ‘secular’ at times, again with single quotes, to signal most often a particular construction of the secular that imputes ontological reductionism as normative for scholarly praxis. I will also use terms such as a *secularist gaze,* and sometimes *secularity,* to signal such normativity—which will eventually be described as unhealthy, colonial, and as working against democratic praxis. Throughout my critique, it is not taking a secular perspective *per se* that I am critiquing (such as adopting forms of materialism or constructivism). Though I express worries about objectifying tendencies displayed in certain methodologies, as I discuss in chapter two, my critique is aimed squarely at plays for hegemony. *What I call a secularist gaze is* *the attempt to make particular ontological orientations normative, in a hegemonic fashion, for scholarly praxis.*

Constructive, Constructivism, and Hard Constructivism: “Constructive” work is imaginative labor that constructs new narratives, with potentially emergent insights into the nature of reality, into social relations, and into the depths of our humanity. In this sense, this project is unabashedly constructive, especially in its final two chapters. Thatamanil’s “comparative theology of religious diversity” seen above is constructive as well, in that it looks to construct new theological narratives after intimate, transformational encounters with religious others.

Constructivism normally means something different. What I mean to signal by constructivism will become increasing nuanced in each chapter that follows, reaching a culminating clarity in chapter six. In general, constructivism is a view of reality that encases human meaning-making and consciousness within social constructions. One way to get a sense of a constructivist orientation is to ask the following: why is it that religio-spiritual views of reality are considered out of bounds for a secular academy? The answer, I hypothesize, lies in an often unconscious constructivism, a constructivist *ideology* that underlies scholarly praxis in the humanities (one not unrelated to that incipient delineation between theology and philosophy at the hands of Christendom). A constructivist position would normally be considered ‘secular’ in a kind of common-sense way. This project examines why this is so. In the end, constructivism posits in one way or another a nature of reality that is indifferent to human life, and encompassed with human social constructions for any sense of meaning. Hence, there is often a nascent relativism present in constructivist positions.[46]

This is not the same as saying that our "contexts" are part of everything we do or think, for our "contexts" might include religio-spiritual realities, and vastly exceed the identity categories of social constructions. Below I contrast a contextual, contemplative perspective with a constructivist one, and these differences will become clear in the chapters ahead. Jeffery Kripal, writing from the field of history of religions, articulates the ideological dimensions present in what I am calling constructivism:

> Almost everything we do so well in the humanities and the study of religion—from historical contextualism and constructivism to Marxist, postcolonial, and feminist critique—demand that we understand the human being as locked down tight to a particular space-time coordinate, to a specific body and to a particular ethnic or religious identity. … We are asked to believe that nothing about the human being escapes or overflows the socially constructed body-ego and its local language games.[47]

This comes close to signaling what I mean by constructivism, and the subtlety of its embeddedness in academia is a major focus of this project. It is a type of flatland view of reality, one that denies or collapses the possibilities of a multi-dimensional cosmos with religio-spiritual potency. Kripal goes on to describe such a perspective as an "ideology, that is, an unconscious operating system of assumptions and beliefs that determine everything we can think, feel, or imagine."[48] Reality is defined, in other words, within the bounds of human social construction. It is this type of *ideology* that I most often mean to signal by the term "constructivism," and thus I will often refer to it as a *hard constructivism*, emphasizing its ideological nature.

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[46] Louis Komjathy, who I follow below in developing a contextual, contemplative perspective, writes that "constructivism" is often "presented as a form of 'postmodern' and 'deconstructionist' discourse, rooted in hyper-relativism" (Komjathy, *Introducing Contemplative Studies,* 6).

[47] Kripal, *Secret Body,* 371. Kripal calls this "physicalism," a term that does not work for me due to my concerns with embodied, felt experience.

[48] Kripal, *Secret Body,* 372.

Religious studies scholar June McDaniel also helps to expose some of the ideological implications of constructivism. In her study on academic treatment of mystical and ecstatic experience, she describes a constructivist view of reality as one where "there is nothing to be found beyond history, culture, language, and the body." She tells of how scholars turned away from notions of religious experience towards "analyzing discourses about experience, power, and privilege," driven in part by a fear of suggesting "an experiential essence to religion." The current antagonism often shown towards religious experience, "is the sort of hostility that used to be found in theologians talking about heresies."[49] This juxtaposition of a hegemonic Christianity with a hegemonic secularism is another of the touch-points of this project. As McDaniel notes, constructivism leads to an irrational fear among academics—a fear that someone actually "might believe 'something religious about religion.'" Scholars may be suspected of "cryptotheology, implying that somebody somewhere is secretly believing in something non-material, even if nobody is quite sure what it is," and hence they "become academic outlaws."[50] I embrace such illicit bravado here.[51]

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[49] McDaniel, *Lost Ecstasy*, 3.

[50] McDaniel, *Lost,* 12.

[51] While both McDaniel and Kripal concentrate on extraordinary experiences in their work, such as mystical, ecstatic, or paranormal experience, these are not a focus of this project. The arguments in this project do not rely upon extraordinary experiences, and my interests lie more in assessing a religion/secular binary.

Ontological Orientation: Constructivism is, in the sense above, an *ontological orientation*, or a view of the nature of reality. Since it has a generally hidden theology ("theology" in this sense understood as an articulation of the nature of reality and its consequences for human life, utilizing various types of evidence), and in fact many reasons to avoid explicit theological development, it is not always easy to pin down its machinations. Much of this project revolves around exposing such machinations. I will offer many examples of a constructivist operating system in academia in the chapters ahead, and one of its functions is to knit together a wide range of divergent expressions as "secular." Wildly diverse examples of scholarly praxis that receive the moniker 'secular' are uncritically assumed to have passed an imaginary test of secularity, guarding against what Arvind Mandair calls a "return of religion."

But what does this 'test of secularity' actually mean? Why, for instance, might Michel Foucault's or Judith Butler's philosophy and social critique be seen to pass a certain test of secularity, while Howard Thurman or Gloria Anzaldúa might fail? This is a key area of concern in this project, especially in its second half. This project will show that there are racial and colonial dimensions in attempts to make normative particularized ontological orientations for scholarly praxis, such as a hard constructivism.[52] It will show as well that many 'secular' orientations are also *religious* orientations, in that they posit an orientation towards the nature of reality and proscribe concomitant practices.

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[52] Although I do not cover this in the chapters that follow (a long section on this point fell victim to the editing process), it is worth noting that genealogical work shows that historical constructions of the categories of 'race' and 'religion' are deeply entwined (see Thatamanil, *Circling*, 114-119). In fact, the categories of race and religion are not only entwined with one another, they arise simultaneously with the very concept of "constructivism" itself, implying both racial and religious dimensions to constructivism (see Vial, *Modern Religion, Modern Race*).

Situating this Project

To better situate this project, let me take a brief foray into the field of philosophy. I find myself in alignment with scholars who are working to open up academia to more capacious—and diverse—understandings of reality. This is happening in many different discourses, including so-called secular ones, such as affect theory, new materialism, cross-cultural philosophy, contemplative studies, and multiplicities of area studies. Area studies marks an interesting case. First conceived of as highly specialized, highly secularized, religious-studies based areas with strict boundaries, scholars are now beginning to voice displeasure with constructivist straight-jackets, wondering why cultures outside of Western historical trajectories are unable to serve as normative bases for scholarly praxis.[53] Womanist AnaLouise Keating, as seen in chapter four, describes Gloria Anzaldúa's indigenous-inflected scholarly praxis as so "innovatively decolonizing" precisely because she does not just write "*about* 'suppressed knowledges and marginalized subjectivities,'" but rather writes from "*within* them." It is in such illicit scholarly praxis—"from writing about to writing within"—that Keating locates the power of Anzaldúa's democratic and decolonial praxis.[54]

In the field of philosophy there is also brewing discontent over its insularity from other forms of philosophic thought, a debate spilling over into the highly public spaces of opinion pieces in major U.S. newspapers.[55] A movement for “cross-cultural philosophy” has emerged, which aims to take seriously philosophic thought from diverse cultures.[56] These debates intersect with ones seen above. For example, at the 2021 American Academy of Religion annual conference an area studies panel, on “Buddhist philosophy,” revolved around the difficulty of finding positions in most U.S. philosophy departments, where their ‘brand’ of philosophy is often seen as unwelcome.[57]

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[53] Such displeasure is seen in the chapters ahead, such as from Arvind Mandair in chapter two.

[54] Keating, "Editor's Introduction," xxix.

Philosopher Jay Garfield has written about the reaction he and Bryan Van Norden received after publishing an essay that called for greater inclusiveness in academic philosophy departments for non-Western philosophies. His account is deeply disturbing.[58] In their original essay, Garfield and Van Norden suggest that if calls for greater inclusiveness are ignored, then current philosophy departments should perhaps recontextualize themselves also as “area studies.” Their suggestion is a response to an oft heard rebuttal to greater inclusiveness—that if one wishes to study the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, or Kongzi (Confucius), or Indigenous philosophy, they belong in religious studies or area studies—not philosophy. Garfield and Van Norden humorously suggest renaming non-inclusive philosophy departments as “departments of Anglo-European philosophy.” In response, they received a flood of blatantly racist and ignorant responses, including from other scholars. Responses included one scholar who wrote that

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[55] See Cornel West and Jeremy Tate, "Howard University’s removal of classics is a spiritual catastrophe"; Rachel Poser, “He Wants to Save Classics from Whiteness: Can the Field Survive?”; and Damon Linker, “Cancel the Classics?”

[56] See Van Norden, *Taking Back Philosophy*, and Maharaj, *Infinite Paths*.

[57] Cite AAR Panel…

[58] Garfield, “Foreword.”

"Native Americans have not been literate long enough to produce philosophy," many connections made between Kongzi and fortune cookies, and arguments "that there is simply nothing valuable in any non-Western tradition."[59] These responses are indicative of a *sickness of superiority* in our culture, one that manifests on both sides of a religion/secular binary. Living on the slash, in more liminal spaces, might help to ameliorate such sickness, at least to some degree. Garfield refers to such responses as an "invocation of White Privilege," casually assuming that an "ocean of texts with which one is unfamiliar contain nothing worthwhile, nothing worth studying, nothing worth teaching, and could not possibly measure up to Western philosophy in profundity or rigor, and even that they could not possibly be doing the same thing."[60]

One of the formally published responses Garfield and Van Norden received was from a political philosopher, who claimed that discourse outside the West is not philosophy because philosophy is a unique tradition emanating from Greece. Kongzi, or the Buddhist philosopher Candrakīrti, so this philosopher claimed, might be better categorized as "sages…on mountaintops" than as philosophers. Garfield points out that Kongzi taught throughout cities in China, and Candrakīrti taught at the largest university in the world at the time (Nālandā). The fact that such "information is easily available," but European scholars don't "bother to get it right"—since they "don't have that burden to bear"—is an instance of the White Privilege spoken of above.[61]

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[59] Ibid., xiii.

[60] Ibid., xiv.

[61] Ibid., xv.

Garfield goes on to note that there are not “departments of ‘wisdom traditions,’ because we don’t value what we take them to be—nonrational exercises in mythopoetic thinking, or something like that.” Thus, to “praise Kongzi and Candrakīrti by putting them in that category is to justify ignoring them as sources of reflection, consigning them to the status of the objects of anthropological research.”[62] Garfield finds the argument that “no other culture was capable of philosophical thought” in the end to be a deeply offensive and racist one, even if at times well-intentioned.[63]

Garfield’s response appears as the foreword to an impassioned book by Van Norden, *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*, which argues for more inclusiveness in academic philosophy departments. While aligning myself with these efforts to open up academia, I also depart from certain stances seen by Garfield and Van Norden. Thus, for my present purposes, it is perhaps most interesting to point out what becomes elided in their arguments—namely, any response to the implied distinction above between ‘sages’ and ‘philosophers.’

One might wonder, what about those sages (on or off mountaintops)? Should sages really be discounted from the worlds of philosophic discourse? Candrakīrti can be (and certainly is by many Buddhists) seen as a ‘sage,’ why not also a philosopher? The same might be said of Kongzi, Nagarjuna, and many other thinkers, both Western and non-Western. What about Howard Thurman, for instance? In chapter five, I will take a direct look at Thurman’s, as well as Anzaldúa’s, contemplative forms of philosophy as decolonial praxis. At play here, I suggest, is an unhealthy religion/secular binary, parlaying an uncritical test of secularity, and therefore working against its own efforts to open up academia to a truly "cross-cultural" philosophy. These efforts, as well as ones seen below, may be strategic attempts at pragmatic change, which I support. However, for the purposes of this project, I must consider whether they are, at the same time, reinforcing a faulty religion/secular binary.

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[62] Ibid., xvii-xviii.

[63] Ibid., xx.

I was struck that in Van Norden's generally excellent arguments throughout *Taking Back Philosophy*, which consistently discuss the efforts of Confucian scholars in academia (and in particular the dismal number of positions available in philosophy departments), there is no mention in the entire book of a host of scholars who have done extensive work with Confucian philosophy, such as Robert Neville, James Miller, or Bin Song. I am speculating here, and it may just be an oversight, but a suspicious reader might infer they are left out because they do not confine themselves to secularist philosophies. Rather, these authors traipse between disciplines of religious studies, theology, and philosophy, refusing to domesticate religious and philosophical discourse, theorizing in the more liminal interstices between and among disciplines.

Van Norden and Garfield arguably guard against a 'return of religion,' offering arguments for a "cross-cultural" philosophy more or less aligned with secularist gazes, attempting to fit Confucian or Buddhist discourse into secularized Western philosophical categories.[64] At the same time, the more transgressive elements of these discourses, such as religio-spiritual experience in awakening (*bodhi*) or sagehood (*sheng-ren*), are left out of the narrative. In fact, these more transgressive elements may even be denigrated, perhaps as “wisdom,” or “nonrational exercises in mythopoetic thinking.”

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[64] Ayon Maharaj, who also aligns himself with these efforts towards cross-cultural philosophy, offers a healthier approach by not shying away from the more transgressive elements of the discourse he works with, including using experience as evidentiary in scholarly praxis. Maharaj's work on the Hindu spiritual virtuoso Sri Ramakrishna is seen in chapter six (see Maharaj, *Infinite Paths*).

The thing is, we may just need a little more “wisdom” in academia today. No doubt we need more in our democracy. In performing an erasure of the more transgressive, religio-spiritual elements of these discourses, one domesticates them. And as Keating wrote of Anzaldúa above, it was her refusal to domesticate the transgressive elements of her indigenous ancestry that makes her work so “innovatively decolonizing.” (Not to mention that those stemming from that ‘unique’ Greek lineage styled themselves as, well, “philosophers,” *philo-sophia*—*lovers of wisdom.*)

The constructivism seen here is subtler than the more obvious problematic and racist stances seen above. Here appears a test of secularity through which one must pass, in order to make academic arguments appear acceptable to a reigning ideology of constructivism—even in efforts to open academia up in decolonial directions. A similar phenomenon is seen in Bradley Onishi’s work in philosophy of religion, *The Sacrality of the Secular*. In it, Onishi argues for a scholarly orientation where “secularism” might be bypassed in favor of a secularity that can ‘think with’ religious phenomena. Taking religious phenomena seriously, Onishi argues, allows philosophers to offer more “compelling interpretations of religious phenomena.” In addition, it may lead to “enlarged and enriched accounts of secularity.” Onishi, however, goes on to make various efforts to assure readers that such work is not contaminated by religion. He is careful to explain how examining religious and mystical reflections “neither infects philosophy with theology nor attempts to abstract…religious phenomena from their context for intellectual exploitation."[65] Onishi's book marked another pivotal moment in the genesis of this project. I enjoyed many of the arguments he makes, but kept asking, why this incessant need to inoculate oneself from being "infected" by religion? Why this fear that someone, somewhere, "might believe 'something religious about religion'"?[66] Once again, while I find myself in alignment with Onishi's goal of opening up academia to a world beyond secularism, I still discern a trenchant need to domesticate religious phenomena, and to 'always already' prescind oneself from 'theology'—ever the black sheep. This project asks, "Why?"

Met/Hodos—*'Thinking With'*

One detects in the above examples a continual need to define secular perspectives as 'not-theology,' even among "enlarged and enriched accounts of secularity." Onishi wants there to be philosophical encounters with religious phenomena, ones that allow "thinkers to philosophize *with* religion, among other resources, as a means for inheriting, creating, and mediating visions of the human, world, and cosmos."[67] At the same time, one must take extensive precautions not to be "infected" in this process of 'thinking with.'[68] What, exactly, is going on here?

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[65] Onishi, *Sacrality.* 22.

[66] McDaniel, *Lost,* 12.

[67] Onishi, *Sacrality,* 19.

[68] As seen above, Onishi also mentions not allowing religious phenomena to be abstracted for "intellectual exploitation." This concern for appropriation is noble, but what it means in practice is that religious phenomena can only serve the purpose of creative 'data' for the secular philosophers' articulation of a secular reality. Religious thinkers become data, rather than authentic interlocutors.

And here’s the rub, to *think with* Eastern, Indigenous, African, Asian, and other non-Western modes of thought is, almost a priori, to think outside a religion/secular binary. Such a binary was only created along the unique historical trajectory of the West. It is my contention that ‘thinking with,’ often contrasted with ‘thinking of,’ ‘thinking from,’ or ‘thinking about,’ is a mode of scholarly reflection that contains powerful decolonial potential, and might be called my principal “methodology” (despite my aversion to methods, as seen below). However, to ‘think with’ implies in some sense an ‘interweaving’ of minds. One has to first ‘listen to,’ and one cannot authentically ‘listen to’ if one has already objectified the other. The other must be considered worthy as an interlocutor, as a fellow human involved in scholarly praxis with whom one ‘thinks with.’ Is one really ‘thinking with’ Anzaldúa, for instance, if one a priori domesticates her thought to pass thru an imaginary test of secularity? In such a scenario, Anzaldúa’s indigenous sensibilities become domesticated, not necessarily silenced, but rather relegated to a safe place (perhaps “area studies”) where it can serve as potentially creative data for (Western, secularist) philosophic thought.

Again, I align myself with these attempts to open up academia to be able to ‘think with’ religious phenomena, but this project also asks the question of what do we really mean, and what *should* we really mean, when positing a religion/secular binary today? The liminality of democracy is not afraid to embrace more capacious, and liminal, visions of contaminating encounters with religious others. Critical thinking cannot be reduced to particularized ontological orientations, nor to the adoption of any specific “methodology,” perhaps other than its etymological roots—*met/hodos*—“in pursuit of a way," or even "with on the way."[69] *Met/hodos* connotes a sense of "betweeness" and "process," as well as a participatory "withness," a communal (ad)venture of 'thinking with'—a nod to those who accompany one along a 'way.' This kind of methodology is more an atmosphere than definitional, more a liminal praxis than a particularized method.

There is one last point I simply can't move on without making (it's almost too juicy). Those origins of "Greek philosophy" in Western culture mentioned above…you know, the ones that Western philosophy traces its roots back to, unlike those sages on mountaintops…what about those old Greek 'lovers of wisdom'? Apparently, they can love wisdom, but one shouldn't think of them forming a (mythopoetic) "wisdom tradition." Thatamanil spoke above of how Christian theology prefers to think of Greek philosophers as "pagan philosophers," rather than as involved in "religious" work, so as to avoid notions of "religious hybridity." Too many secular Western philosophers are just as content to do the same, in order to trace their best-in-show lineage as outside of 'mythopoetic religion' altogether. However, there is a dirty little secret in this wink-wink handshake between secularist dreams and Christian theologies, namely that ancient philosophy was thoroughly religious. As Pierre Hadot's work shows, ancient philosophical discourse was a form of spiritual praxis, and ancient philosophy revolved around inducing embodied transformations of human consciousness.[70] One might say that those old lovers of wisdom practiced their philosophy much more like sages on mountaintops than contemporary philosophers in ivory towers (or in allegorical caves).

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[69] *Meta,* "in pursuit or quest of;" *Hodos*, a "path" or "journey."

[70] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life.*

Arguably, Greek philosophers hold a closer affinity to thinkers like Kongzi, Candrakīrti, Nagarjuna, Anzaldúa, and Thurman—*precisely* in the religio-spiritual transformative 'ways' of their philosophic activity—than they do with modern Enlightenment philosophers such as Kant or Descartes (and almost certainly than with contemporary secularist philosophers). So much for the "difference-in-kind" argument, as well as the pedigreed lineage.

From "Disciplinolatry" to Wisdom-Sophia

Helping to further situate my project is John Cobb Jr., a process philosopher and theologian, and Herman Daly, an economist, who speak of "disciplinolatry" in a critique of the organization of disciplines in the modern university. What Cobb and Daly call "disciplinolatry" is the "confidence that human needs are being met" through the disciplinary organization of academia. This "unexamined faith" allows for "the task of the university, its relation to society, its structural organization, and the concomitant organization of knowledge" to avoid being a proper study in itself.[71] This project is meant to add to such an examination.

Daly and Cobb's critique, found in *For the Common Good,* centers around the development of new economic system oriented towards a sustainable ecological future. Economics is shown to be a "deductive science" that "abstracts from everything to which a monetary value cannot be assigned."[72] This leads to serious oversights with catastrophic real-world consequences. For example, economics may ignore real world consequences of economic growth, "not because it has been shown that these relationships are not important," but because they are seen as outside the scope of the discipline.[73] It is the *disciplinary boundaries* that prevent proper consideration of real world consequences. What is perhaps unique, and certainly revealing for this project, is how Cobb and Daly show that "interdisciplinary" work is in some sense also bound to fail, and in any case not a solution to the problem of "disciplinization," as Andrew Schwartz calls it.[74]

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[71] Daly and Cobb, *For the Common Good,* 124-125. Cobb and Daly call the faith in disciplonlatry "religious in character," and the "overwhelmingly dominant religion of the university." To challenge it becomes "sacrilege." (Ibid., 125).

Disciplinization is not unique to economics, but a matter of "the nature of deductive sciences in particular, especially when the formalizations are applied to a subject matter that changes relatively rapidly."[75] Religion, as a concept, term, practice, is surely such a "subject matter" today, as is the secular. The idea that interdisciplinary work is a solution—that by adding up abstracted, concretized quantities of information we get a picture of the whole—is seen to be an "unexamined faith." To have such a faith, according to Cobb and Daly, is to

> assume the real world is made up additively of the elements and aspects into which it has been divided by the disciplines. But since each has been abstracted from its relations to all the others, what are here added together are not the elements and aspects themselves but only those features that for some particular purpose were abstracted from those relationships.[76]

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[72] Ibid., 121.

[73] Ibid., 33. As also quoted in Schwartz, "Philosophy is not just for Philosophers," 39.

[74] Schwartz, "Philosophy," 32.

[75] Daly and Cobb, *For the Common Good*, 121.

[76] Ibid., 127.

The relational reality of life is ignored. Life is not disciplinizied, nor could it ever be. Yet the disciplinization of knowledge has vast consequences for human life. The problem with disciplinary knowledges are numerous, but at a most basic level they suppose that the whole is the sum of the parts (or as is too often the case, yet even more insidiously, that the part is the whole). As Cobb and Daly show, adding the results together from each discipline does not undermine the basic problem of concretizing deductive concepts (such as “economic growth”)—and abstracting them from the whole. Only in this way, for instance, can economic growth appear as the fundamental value-system of an entire discipline, in complete abstraction from real world consequences. Letting go of the notion that the whole is the sum of parts leads one into what Andrew Schwartz calls a “philosophical way” that “considers the situation as a whole, employing the work of the disciplines only with full recognition of the consequences of misplaced concreteness.”[77]

I do not feel there is much hope in reorganizing a university system away from disciplinization, as both its strengths (which are many) and its failures (which are catastrophic) are deeply engrained in current systems. However, introducing *new* disciplines that do not hold to familiar disciplinary boundaries might be of great benefit within the current system. In the final two chapters, I look more closely at novel scholarly formations.

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[77] Schwartz, “Philosophy,” 33. Schwartz goes on to describe a “process-relational philosophical way” that flows with Alfred North Whitehead’s process thought. One of the goals of “philosophical” work more generally is the working out of an attitude towards life. As Schwartz points out, there is no reason that the work of philosophy in academia cannot also serve this purpose (Ibid., 31). My point is that this is *also* ‘religious’ labor, and the distinction between the two can no longer be taken for granted. Thus, to return to a guiding thread, what does it mean to reassess a religion/secular binary today? Particularly in academia?

Cobb and Daly also utilize Whitehead’s concept of the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” in their critique, referred to by Schwartz in the quote above. Schwartz’s essay offers an insightful explication of Cobb and Daly’s arguments in greater detail, with its connections to process thought, and with relevance for the current project.

Cobb and Daly turn towards "wisdom" in explicating more capacious, pragmatic, and pertinent scholarly praxis. Wisdom orients itself towards the whole. It does not treat subject matters as "self-contained," and its goals are not concretized objects of knowledge.[78] As contrasted with interdisciplinary work that presents "the findings of several value-neutral and autonomous disciplines," a discipline oriented around wisdom takes part in "human discussion of shared human problems among people whose socialization and special information have been diverse."[79] It is not a discussion that sums up the parts, but one that looks to the whole (liminal as it may always be), and perceives the parts clearly as abstracted aspects of the whole. Wisdom embraces complexity, contradictions, and insights without concretizing them, in some sense learning to live within the liminal, within the "in-between" spaces that crack open between abstracted, concretized concepts. It is in these "cracks," *rajaduras* (Anzaldúa), that wisdom might be found, and once again, inhabited.

In an essay aligned with Cobb and Daly's critique of the university, process theologian Catherine Keller speaks of the possibility of an "emancipatory wisdom" in academia. For Keller,

> When systematically linked…to principles of social justice for the vulnerable and poor, the quest for wisdom avoids the pitfalls of spiritual individualism and becomes the source of an emancipated and emancipatory imagination. When emancipatory wisdom gets conveyed in and around the academy, it smacks of subversion. But it also alters the form and function of the academy, taking

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[78] Daly and Cobb, *For the Common Good,* 130.

[79] Ibid., 132.

> advantage of the free spaces to open up the world, the world as we and our students bring it with us and as we and our students bring ourselves to bear upon it. [80]

Keller foregrounds feminist resonances with *Sophia* ("wisdom"), "the only clear female image of a divine creative principle in the Bible."[81] Embracing a quest for wisdom—one that does not abstract from cultural conditions or issues of justice—can help support a flourishing of students (and professors) that is too often missing in the university (and, I might add, necessary for our democracy). While the university offers "an indispensable space in which self-understanding, social criticism, and utopian imagination can and do sometimes take shape," one must also ask why doctoral students and junior faculty can rarely be described as "flourishing."[82] Part of the problem lies in a "cultural system, uncritically reproduced in the university, in which performance and production are valued over creativity and community," thus "stifling any inclinations to poetry or to prophecy." The nature of objectifying, concretizing principles in academia has correlations with patriarchal denigrations of the feminine, claiming superiority over embodied, spiritual, intuitive, and relational ways of knowing—as well as a domineering stance over nature herself.[83]

Wisdom, however, cannot be rushed. It "requires time for perceiving, circumambulating, hearing, intuiting, attending, becoming."[84] This is a long dissertation, yet part of its length is a need for such circumambulating, intuiting, attending. Critical points may be made in passing, only to return with force in a future paragraph, chapter, or musing. Less an analytical analysis (though chock-full with such praxis), more a liminal exploration, this project sees itself as ‘in tune’ with a search for Wisdom-Sophia. Important for my purposes are Keller’s feminine resonances with the term. Rather than an abstract idea, wisdom, “at least as practiced in indigenous religions and in the biblical tradition, is irredeemably implicated in the sensuous, the communal, the experiential, the metanoic, the unpredictable, the imaginal, the practical.”[85] All of these qualities appear in the chapters ahead, not only as ideas, but also as *ways of knowing.* Thus, a certain attending to in this project revolves around affective, sensual, visceral, relational, intuitive, spiritual, and liminal feeling-toned registers of being—and not always in the traditional scholarly sense of analyzing such registers, but also in performing them.

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[80] Keller, "Towards," 144.

[81] Ibid., 143.

[82] Ibid., 126, 128.

[83] Ibid., 133.

[84] Ibid., 137.

A Contextual, Contemplative Perspective

This project embraces at once a contextual and contemplative perspective. Louis Komjathy, working within the field of contemplative studies, marks a difference between “contextualist” and “constructivist” perspectives. While constructivism posits that “human consciousness is thoroughly conditioned and limited, in which every insight and experience is completely constructed,” a contextualist perspective “simply recognizes various influences on a given phenomenon, including one’s [own] life.” Komjathy goes on to describe a contemplative perspective with regards to contextualism and constructivism:

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[85] Ibid., 143.

> From a contemplative perspective, contextualism reveals the embedded and relational nature of contemplative practice, while constructivism suggests that human being is inherently limited and overdetermined. Unlike constructivism, contextualism does not necessarily preclude the possibility of "liberation," or even the possibility that context-specific (e.g., community specific and tradition-specific) contemplative practice could be a source of liberation.[86]

A contextual, contemplative perspective allows for the possibility of other "contexts" to be present. These might include religio-spiritual states, such as those induced by shamanic practices, "awakening" (*bodhi*), "liberation" (*moksha*), "divinization" (*theosis*), Confucian sagehood and relational virtuosity (*sheng-ren* and *li*), Daoist *wu-wei*, etc.—all of which are not simply new social constructions—but also embodied, transformative modes of being that affect the world on ontological, as well as political, registers.

My perspective also resonates with recent questioning of the dominant role of "critique" in the humanities. I reject, for instance, a line of thought that posits scholarly praxis as consisting of only "two options: a stance of opposition, negation, and critique, or else the consent to, and co-option by, a larger system."[87] Critique today usually takes place within an underlying constructivist ontology, as well as with explicitly negative affective tones.[88] It is a far cry from what "critique" originally meant, and how it is still defined in the Oxford dictionary today, as “a detailed analysis and assessment of something, especially a literary, philosophical, or political theory.”[89] Today, critique tends to bring up notions of “a detailed analysis” only if it is accompanied by oppositional affects and accusatory modes of praxis. Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski, in a sweeping introduction to *Critique and Postcritique,* speak of “growing doubts” about both the claims of “political efficacy” stemming from oppositional critiques, as well as “the romantic image of the critic as heroic dissident.”[90] While I also participate capaciously in critique throughout this project, which I find to be an essential mode of academic praxis for many reasons, I also do so without a ‘devotion to method,’ and hopefully with some more hopeful and, well, liminal affect. Perhaps a bit paradoxically, I approach critique with a borrowed ‘hermeneutics of suspicion,’ directed towards critique’s own, too often hegemonic, use of a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion.’ This orients me in general more towards a “calling-in” than a “calling-out,” as Black feminist Loretta J. Ross describes it in chapter four, as well as Jane Bennet in chapter six. I also align

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[86] Komjathy, *Introducing,* 6.

[87] Anker and Felski, "Introduction," 18.

[88] Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski write, "[critique] has often encouraged an antagonistic and combative attitude toward the public world…critique has often been synonymous with a pronounced

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aversion toward norms and an automatic distrust of instrumentality and institutions.” They also point out problems with such a stance today. First, as humanities programs are “under siege” in higher education, the confrontational, negative affect of critique, “accustomed to a rhetoric of dismantling and demystification,” lacks the vocabulary and rationales to mount effective defenses. Second, due to its aversion and distrust of norms and institutions, critique becomes “sequestered within the ivory tower, thereby working to ensure its lack of impact or influence on the public sphere.” Anker and Felski go on to extrapolate on the latter insight, “As long as critique gains its intellectual leverage from an adversarial stance, it will continue to presume a populace deluded by forces that only the critic can bring to light. Such a mind-set, however, is hardly likely to influence or persuade that same populace” (Ibid., 19).

[89] Oxford English Dictionary, accessed February 9, 2022.

[90] Anker and Felski, “Introduction,” 8. Anker and Felski’s introduction offers an insightful historical tracing of the history of critique, its changing nature as an academic practice, and its liberative potentials, as well as problematic assumptions it carries, psychological dynamics it portrays, and current practices of both critique and “critiques of critique.” I recommend it to anyone looking for a better understanding of the practice of critique in academia.

myself with what womanist AnaLouise Keating calls a "post-oppositional politics," discussed in chapter four.

Some of the growing reactions against critique today, such as from Saba Mahmood, argue that critique "is poorly equipped to engage seriously with spiritual beliefs, sacramental practices, and attachments to the sacred that remain central to the lives of countless individuals, especially in the global South."[91] Authors such as Mahmood, Eve Sedgwick, and Adam Frank have emphasized the linguistic and deductive nature of critique. Sedgwick and Frank also connect critique to constructivism. The emphasis on the "social construction of subjectivity," means that constructivism "remains caught in the very dualisms that it strives to oppose."[92] One might say both critique and constructivism might benefit from partaking of more liminal sensibilities. The contemplative orientation I bring to bear situates itself somewhere in the midst of these concerns with critique, especially as a hegemonic scholarly praxis.

So does a contemplative perspective extract itself from a world of problems, contestations, racializations, oppressions, and marginalization? Certainly not. As Stephanie Corigliano writes in chapter six, scholar-practitioners today are deeply concerned about issues of "race, class, empire, sexuality, gender, and the environment."[93] Gloria Anzaldúa's work, as well as Howard Thurman's, are exemplary forms of contemplative scholarly praxis that do not abstract from social conditions or marginalized identities. A contextual, contemplative perspective embraces these dimensions of our shared social lives, including analysis of ensuing power dynamics and structures of oppression, but does so from a "contextualist," and not a "constructivist," perspective.

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[91] Ibid., 14. Quotes are of Anker and Felski's description of Mahmood's work. See also Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age.*

[92] Ibid., 11. Quotes are of Anker and Felski's description of Sedgwick and Frank's position. See also Frank and Sedgwick, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold."

[93] Corigliano, "Religious Studies, Theology, & the Scholar-Practitioner."

Contours of an Exploration

Having now charted a field for exploration, I offer a few contours of the journey ahead.

In the first chapter, I introduce my thesis in dialogue with political theory and contemporary work on the secular, with an eye towards academia. At its most basic level, my thesis is that the secular, as a term of discourse, capitalizes today on its associations with prized forms of democratic norms in order to fund ontological reductionisms that no longer make sense in academia today. Such delineations are based upon anachronistic notions of religion and secularity, stemming from the West's long-running history with a hegemonic Christendom. In dialogue with theorists such as Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor, I situate academia as a locus of professional thinking and educating within a religiously pluralistic democracy, explore the secular as a constructed realm, and recontextualize the secular as denotive of the pluralistic cultural conditions we find ourselves in today. Timothy Fitzgerald's work on the construction of the secular is helpful here, clarifying how the secular is constructed as a neutral space of rationality and exchange, yet only in abjection of its 'other'—religion.

In chapter two, I build on my narrative through in-depth, critical, linguistic analysis of two essays in the academic study of religion. These essays, from Russell McCutcheon and Robert Sharf, allow me to offer concrete examples of a nascent concept introduced in chapter one, *rhetoric of the secular.* When terms such as *secular, rational, scholarly,* and *academic* are linked as metonyms, they form an unconscious bond that perpetuates itself through rhetoric. This is what I call ‘rhetoric of the secular.’ Sharf’s essay also allows me to rehabilitate the category of “experience,” important for the latter stages of my project, as well as introduce another concept I call *essentializing non-sequiturs,* often seen in analyses of power. Chapter two concludes with a discussion of two essays from South Asian scholar Arvind Mandair. Mandair provides key concepts for my project, extending critiques of coloniality into secularist methodologies, such as sociology and analyses of power, as well as into the functioning of academic disciplines around philosophy, religious studies, and area studies. My arguments overlap and resonate with Mandair’s, who locates an initial act of objectification as a “return of the imperial as the empirical,” which then induces a “repetition of the colonial event.”

In chapter three, I begin to flow ever so slightly into more liminal arguments, a trend that will continue to build in following chapters. After discussing the story of the founding of religious studies at Princeton (following William Hart), I point out overlaps between the founding of religious studies departments and subsequent critiques of “sui generis” religion—namely an inveterate need to prescind oneself from “theology.” I take a closer look at this inveterate need, and question its worth today. Work from Hart, as well as John Thatamanil, is helpful for me in this regard, as is Jewish studies scholar Boaz Huss’ sense of “spirituality” as an emergent cultural category that actively subverts a religion/secular divide today. Comparative theology, as a field of scholarly praxis pursed amongst differing perspectives on matters of great import in people’s lives, will be seen to embody liminal practices with strong democratic resonances. Contaminating encounters across radical difference are not just allowed, but actively embraced here, with strong ethical sensitivities simultaneously deployed.

I conclude chapter three discussing the spiritual concerns of many students who enter into religious studies classrooms, following work from religious studies scholar Linell Cady. The decline of traditional religious institutions—which no longer have the legitimacy, for many, to form lives of meaning—means that young people are often thrown back upon their own resources for such development. Many enter religious studies classrooms with a yearning to explore their own religio-spiritual orientations, in dialogue with religious traditions, philosophy, and communal reflections on our shared socio-political realities. To pursue religio-spiritual formation in dialogue with an interested group of peers, particularly ones who hold differing orientations (both in a religio-spiritual sense as well as on our shared socio-political life together)—is a quintessential practice of democracy, or so I argue. The need to be ‘caretakers,’ not for any particular religious persuasion (including a hard constructivist one)—*but for our democracy*—means caring for students who enter into religious studies (or area studies, or philosophy) departments with a longing to explore for themselves, *and for society*, a greater depth and meaning to life.

An Inflection Point

I have spoken much of democratic praxis up to this point. As such, I need to put forward an articulation of what I mean when using such a phrase. Chapter four begins a process of constructive work, attuned to more affective registers, liminal interstices, and performative modes of praxis. Jane Bennett speaks of “atmospheric flows” as “a field of forces tending to infuse themselves into porous bodies."[94] This chapter reverberates around an influx of many voices and vibrations in a liminal exploration of the ideal of democracy itself, in atmospherics of democratic praxis.

Coming from a contextualist, contemplative perspective, two aspects arise immediately to the surface. One is religious undertones to democracy. Not as an institution, even less as a form of government, but as *a way of being-ness*—as a way of living, or a way of life. This brings forth contemplative aspects to the liminality of democracy. Democracy in this sense is not to be confused with formal institutions of Western democracy, nor as a concept of Western political discourse. Rather, as comparative theologian Hyo-Dong Lee uses the term, it serves as a "cipher for the notion that people and ultimately all creatures have the power to rule and to create themselves."[95]

However, it is also a contextualist perspective, and thus I write to, from, and for "our" democracy, in the context of the United States. My contextualization is not meant to connote any sense of "American exceptionalism," other than in the sense that all peoples, cultures, etc. are 'exceptional' in their own, unique ways. My talking to, from, and for my country is a practice of speaking into, from, and for our own contexts, at least to some degree. It is an acknowledgment of the land and soil and society that has bred me. This land claims mysterious obligations upon me, to which I consent…at least for the time being.

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[94] Bennett, *influx,* 28-29. Bennett writes here specifically to Walt Whitman's sense of "sympathy."

[95] Lee, *Spirit,* xii.

And there is no way that one can talk about democratic praxis in my context without talking about race. I have always found within my own ‘local history,’ at least since high school, the greatest forms of democratic embodiment in the voices of African-Americans. With Nikole Hannah-Jones, I tend to see Black Americans as “the most American of all,” often believing in the ideals of this country when its own founders did not—in spite of a country whose institutions, nearly two-hundred and fifty years after its founding, continue to belie its professed ideals. For me, there has always been a greater embodiment, even a greater *incarnation* (keeping those religious undertones afloat) of the ideals of America—that land that has “never been yet, and yet must be”[96]— in what Vincent Harding calls the “rugged, often blood-stained hope” of a “dark-womb beauty,” struggling for the “transformation of ‘ordinary’ women, men, and children.”[97]

Thus, it is voices from the African-American community (though not the only ones heard) that make up the majority of reverberations flowing through these atmospherics, ones which also aim to bring liberative energies into the project. Cornel West, Eddie Glaude Jr., Vincent Harding, and Gloria Anzaldúa speak of imaginal, liminal, and empathic dimensions of democratic praxis, without losing the funk of tragedy that always already accompanies such praxis. Extended reflections on Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, revolving around late work from each shortly before they were assassinated, offer their own thundering insights for democratic praxis. Nikole Hannah-Jones’ opening essay for the New York Times “1619 Project” also makes essential contributions, along with James Baldwin. In conclusion, I turn to two “sages” of democracy, Walt Whitman and Howard Thurman. While Whitman and Thurman did not live “on mountaintops,” they certainly spent time there—as Thurman’s vision at Kyber Pass in the Hindu Kush mountains attests to, as well as Whitman’s well-documented traipsing across the vastness of this land—and our vistas of democracy have been greatly enhanced because of it.[98]

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[96] Langston Hughes, “Let America Be America Again.”

[97] Harding, *Is American Possible*, viii.

Within chapter four is also the first appearance of the term, the *liminality of democracy* (outside this introduction). Atmospherics of democratic praxis are most certainly marked by extensive critiques of power, which have always been essential to democratic struggles. These critiques are exemplified in the African-American struggle, as well as in the work of Anzaldúa. Yet, in the voices I have chosen to highlight, critiques of power are but one aspect of democratic praxis, giving rise to cracks and liminal spaces in which the positive, hopeful, and constructive work of democratic becoming also takes place. Hence, a liminality of democracy not only consists of critique, but is also marked by *imagination*, *empathy*, *hope*, *failure* and *funk*. It thus avoids some of the objectifying and caricaturing tendencies sometimes seen in other methodologies, and brings attention to qualities such as particularity, equality, multifariousness, decolonial praxis, and even undergirdings of a religio-spiritual nature.

In chapter five, I give further voice to the democratic and decolonial praxis of Thurman and Anzaldúa. A deeper exploration of their work provides grounding examples for many of the more abstract arguments made. Thurman and Anzaldúa represent a contemplative orientation to democratic and decolonial praxis that is also profoundly contextualist, emerging from the struggles of oppressed and marginalized identities. In particular, I will look at how Thurman’s religio-spiritual experiences guided his democratic and decolonial praxis, his scholarly work, and his religious life. It is an experience at “the root of one’s being” that for Thurman was the greatest form of resistance, the most powerful antidote to racism and oppression, and a fecund source of democratic becoming. Anzaldúa’s concepts of *nos/otras* (“us/others”) and *las nepantleras* are seen to emerge from the many marginalized identities Anzaldúa inhabited (Chicana, queer, lesbian, activist, woman, scholar), as well as her indigenous ancestry and spiritual practice. Yet these concepts, as Anzaldúa intended, also speak to peoples outside the particular identities she inhabited. Anzaldúa points towards the liminal, the “in-between” spaces in the cracks (*rajaduras*) of identity categories and abstract concretizations. Her use of *nepantla*, a Nahuatl word that connotes “in-between-ness” with shamanic reverberations, has perhaps the greatest influence on my use of the term ‘liminality.’ My exploration of Thurman and Anzaldúa also furthers the work of making explicit colonial and racial dimensions to secularist gazes, bringing home a number of arguments made in earlier chapters.

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[98] I also review a few other modes of democratic praxis in this chapter, including Catherine Keller’s “apophatic assemblage” and political philosopher William Connolly’s “affinities of spirituality.”

Chapter six begins with a somewhat idiosyncratic review of arguments made thus far, a “setting of the table” for the constructive work to follow. Pierre Hadot’s articulation of ancient philosophy as a ‘way of life’ helps to further complicate boundaries between theology, religious studies, and philosophy. Given the importance of more liminal spaces for democratic and decolonial praxis, I explore the spaces ‘in-between’ these disciplines. This is the realm of the scholar-practitioner, who cannot be placed within a religion/secular binary. While the scholar-practitioner may or may not have a ‘religion’ identity, they most often have a ‘religious’ one. Scholar-practitioners also generally recognize that one’s journey takes place today amongst diversity, amongst difference, and as scholars they are called to be in communities of inquiry across such difference. In conclusion to this chapter, I propose a contemplative discourse (not a discipline) that might take place *across* academia, similar to other discourses, such as “deconstruction,” critique, analyses of power, or sociological labor.

This project hopefully lays groundwork for future endeavors within more liminal scholarly formations. Indeed, the time appears ripe for such an emergence. At the 2021 annual American Academy of Religion Conference, I observed many young scholars complaining about academic disciplinary formations. They blatantly professed their stance as scholar-practitioners, searching to find a way forward for such perspectives. They inspired me to reframe this chapter specifically around the scholar-practitioner—or at least offer one ‘vista of a scholar-practitioner’ (namely me). The panels I attended included a diverse array of disciplines, perhaps most surprisingly a panel on American pragmatism and democracy, revolving around themes of “democratic faith” and “catastrophe.”[99]

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[99] The panel was on “Democratic Faith, Catastrophe, and Truth in a (Post)- Trump Era**,”** in the “Pragmatism and Empiricism in American Religious Thought Unit,” American Academy of Religion Annual Conference, 2021. Particularly noteworthy for their mentions of scholar-practitioners were papers from Jason Cabitac and Greylyn Hydinger. Other scholars on various panels who mentioned problems with constructivist positions and/or spoke of scholar-practitioners included June McDaniel, Jeffery Long, Stephanie Corigliano, and Jacob Kyle. A panel on the use of one’s life experience as relevant for theological thought also addressed similar topics (“The Theological Relevance on One’s Life Experience,” in the “Theology Without Walls Group,” American Academy of Religion Annual Conference, 2021).

Chapter six adds significantly to arguments already begun in this introduction, regarding the peculiar question of why do we consider the writings of the Stoics, Epicureans, Plato, or Aristotle, for instance, as philosophy and *not* as religion? What is the difference here? And what does it mean to take other formations of human religiosity, such as Eastern, African, and Indigenous ways of being religious, seriously? Classifying ancient philosophers on one side or another of a religion/secular binary is all well and good, but why is it pertinent? The real question is, what might this mean for a religion/secular binary today?

A more apt inquiry might ask, why is contemporary discourse considered 'secular' in a kind of common-sense way? For instance, the work of Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, William Connolly, or Jacques Derrida—all are considered 'secular,' particularly in the sense of being generally appropriate for a secular university. Why is this the case? As opposed to, say, Thurman or Anzaldúa's discourse? Or the yearnings of many of the scholar-practitioners mentioned above? Or the similar yearnings of those students in religious studies classrooms, who wish to explore lives of meaning, depth, and spiritual growth, as an aspect of democratic praxis? Where does the dividing line fall?

Continuing to explore along that liminal slash of a religion/secular binary, I now bring many of these arguments home to roost. John Thatamanil's definition of the religious as "comprehensive qualitative orientation" will prove a culminating cherry on the top of a sundae thus far prepared, showing that any difference should not be understood as involved in the work of doing "religious labor." One of the strengths of Thatamanil's definition is how it reveals the religious work accomplished by secular ways of being, an example of which he explicates by way of exploitative economic practices. For Thatamanil, our neoliberal economic practices do some of the greatest religious work of our times, perhaps of any time.

I find that secular discourses tend to adopt the view of an indifferent nature of reality, so that in one way or another human meaning comes to be encompassed by social construction. Thus, they pass thru a test of secularity revolving around constructivism, and once again guard against a return of religion. Social construction is all we have, and up against hegemonic structures of power, our micro-resistances may be vastly outgunned. A contemplative perspective, however, like the liminality of democracy, does not assume a nature of reality predicated upon constructivism, and thus discovers resources for democratic becoming that go beyond social construction—in an ameliorating nature of reality. Contemplative traditions well-neigh declare ‘macro-resistances’ (what else would one call *bodhi*?).

One of the guiding questions of this project now begins to focus squarely at the secular academy: how *should* a religion/secular binary function today? Why should an indifferent nature of reality be more acceptable than other orientations towards reality? Exposing the underlying ‘ontological orientations’ that give rise to current religion/secular delineations is one of the major goals of this project—including where they come from (struggles with a hegemonic Christendom), how they function (e.g., *rhetoric of the secular*), and what our common-sense notions of secularity actually refer back to (an indifferent nature of reality). In doing so, I am not necessarily “deconstructing” the secular. Rather, I am simply bringing clarity to ways in which it is utilized—while opening up liminal, interstitial spaces in order to ask the question, is this how we (the academy) *want* to use it? Particularly given the many concerns around democratic and decolonial praxis that appear along the way?

In chapter seven, I bring this project to a close by stepping into these liminal, interstitial spaces, offering preliminary sketches of something like a discipline revolving around a diverse array of scholar-practitioners—or what I call a *beloved community of religious diversity* (BCRD). The term "beloved community" was first coined by classical American philosopher Josiah Royce, which he described as primarily a "community of interpretation." The beloved community was one in which a free play of hermeneutics takes place, yet in such a way that interpretive praxis is also undergirded by religious realities. The willingness to stay in conversation with one another, what Royce called the "will to interpret," becomes a crucial aspect to beloved community. In the opening epigraph to this project, Anzaldúa states a similar sentiment, expressing another of its long-running arguments, "*La compasión es una conversación sostenida.*"[100]

Given my liberative and interreligious leanings, further developments of beloved community by Martin Luther King Jr. and Howard Thurman are also brought to bear, as well as significant contributions from Ru philosopher Bin Song and comparative theologian Hyo-Dong Lee. Thurman and King develop beloved community in different but overlapping ways, foregrounding what Walter Fluker calls "different dimensions" in the creation of beloved community.[101] Bin Song adds to many of the arguments seen throughout the project, while also bringing interreligious energies into the development of BCRD, and placing it close to Aristotle's notion of a 'liberal arts education.' Lee's sensitivity to numerous religious traditions, as well as to postcolonial, decolonial, and democratic praxis, offers an exemplary approach of comparative work that is non-appropriative, respectful of traditions, deeply contextual, and liberative in its leanings.

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[100] Anzaldúa, *Light,* 92.

[101] Fluker, "They Looked for a City," 48.

The interpretive praxis of BCRD is grounded in experience, receptivity, historical embeddedness, profound respect, and transformative encounter. In the process of interpreting the novel ideas of *others*—both to ourselves as well as to those around us—we begin to build an empathic solidarity with one another, in time creating widening circles of community that can extend across radical difference. This type of intimate interpretive praxis, performed in empathy, love, compassion, and courage, is characteristic of a beloved community of religious diversity—as well as at the heart of a liminality of democracy.

Eihei Dōgen, thirteenth century founder of Sōtō Zen in Japan, speaks to this type of interpretive praxis in numerous ways, continuing to build interreligious resonance in my project. Dōgen might seem a strange place to turn in my conclusion, yet in many ways he was at the genesis of this project. The current project emerged out of another one (my originally proposed dissertation), in response to questions I received at the prospectus defense. After writing a fair amount, I realized that two projects were taking place, and thus the original one had to be shelved for now. Dōgen was at the center of that original project, and as such, has stayed with me throughout this one (lingering in a liminality 'in-between' the two). Dōgen's concepts of *genjōkōan* ("a kōan realized in life") and *kattō* ("twining vines") offer important reverberations for scholar-practitioners, and hence for a beloved community of religious diversity. Dōgen was a rascally creative thinker, constantly playing with, changing, and even contradicting traditional Buddhist concepts and stories, all while practicing philosophy not only as a way of life, but also as a "kōan realized in life" (to use Hee-Jin Kim's poetic translation).[102] In addition to offering important concepts for scholar-practitioners and BCRD, Dōgen provides a fecund runway for a closing, liminal section on *demosophy,* or "democratic wisdom."

Walking Along the Slash of a Religion/Secular Binary

Though this is a liminal exploration, there is perhaps a kind of 'wisdom' to the linear flow of arguments from one chapter to the next, each building on the work that comes before. Yet such a linear flow itself takes place in walking along that liminal slash of a religion/secular binary.

Returning to Robert Ford Campany's essay, one of the ways he offers for imagining religions—as opposed to reified containers or systematized networks of language and practices—is as "repertoires of resources."[103] This is a theme that Thatamanil picks up on as well.[104] One of the "repertoires," if you will, that Anzaldúa speaks of is learning to live within the liminal, to become what she calls a *nepantlera.* When one chooses to walk in interstitial spaces—when liminality becomes not just a transition, but a home, a path, or a way of living—then one becomes a bridge-builder between worlds, at least as they mature. Such a liminal space, for Anzaldúa, is one from which new communities and cultural conditions can be born:

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[102] "a kōan realized in life" is Kim's poetic translation of *genjōkōan*. See Kim, *Mystical Realist.*

[103] Campany, "On the Very Idea of Religions," 317.

[104] Thatamanil, *Circling,* 176-182.

> It is precisely during these in-between times that we must create the dream (el sueño) of the sixth world. May we allow the interweaving of all the minds and hearts and life forces to create the collective dream of the world and teach us how to live out ese sueño. … May we do the work that matters. Vale la pena, it's worth the pain.[105]

This perhaps comes closest to signaling what I mean by a liminality of democracy…an efficacious, liminal place—full of hope, funk, failure, imagination, and even love—where an "interweaving" of minds and hearts might take place, and where one might be taught how to live out "ese sueño." Lord knows democracy needs it.

Perhaps a camel's back breaking is not so bad after all. It's also bridge building. No need to rush to put it back together. Maybe I'll just stay here a little longer, in this "cracked" space—listening…learning…I know not what for sure—meandering along that liminal slash of a religion/secular binary.

After all, it was just a straw.

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[105] Anzaldúa, *Light*, 22.

CHAPTER ONE

SECULARITY, RELIGION, AND DEMOCRACY

Charles Taylor: *When we say "religion," we mustn't think of just Christianity. There are Buddhists, there are Hindus. A lot of the things…don't apply to the other cases at all. That should really give us a pause before we make general remarks.*
Craig Calhoun: *Right. This is being argued from within the Western experience. There would need to be a bunch of different discussions within other historical trajectories.*
Charles Taylor: *And they're all here now.*
Craig Calhoun: *Indeed they are. And they are us.*
—Dialogue between Taylor, Calhoun, and Jürgen Habermas, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*[1]

For I say at the core of democracy, finally, is the religious element. All the religions, old and new, are there.
—Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*[2]

Reassessing the Secular

In this opening chapter I begin a critique of certain notions of the secular, a critique that spans this project. As the opening epigraph attests to, we live in an emergent *saeculum*. Our age differs from past ones in which the secular was first invented and then lived out as an inherent aspect of socio-political structures. We no longer live within an encompassing Christendom, for instance, out of which the secular as a sphere separate from religious authority was first imagined. Nor do we live in an age representative of the first two hundred years or so in which the newly constructed concept of secularity emerged and existed side-by-side within a more or less encompassing Protestantism. If anything, our current *saeculum* bears an increasingly striking resemblance to the on the ground conditions foretold by that queer sage of Democracy nearly 150 years prior, Walt Whitman, in one of the quintessential expressions of democratic writing and praxis, from which the second epigraph is taken.

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[1] Butler, Habermas, Taylor, and West, *The Power of Religion*, 68-69.

[2] Whitman, *Walt Whitman*, 949.

Changing demographics in the West and on-the-ground realities of emergent forms of multifarious religio-spiritual practice—"all the religions, old and new"—present a challenge to antiquated notions of secularity. The radical increases in cultural, ethnic, religious and racial diversity, combined with an awareness of the necessity for cultural change wedded to decolonial vistas, add urgency to such a critique. There is a need for a transformation of colonial thought-patterns that help to perpetuate systems of structural racism and socio-political-economic arrangements that continue to serve the interests of the few as opposed to supporting the whole. Critique alone cannot accomplish such a transformation, even if it is a necessary aspect. The imaginative work of democracy itself is also called for, where such labor involves creative, constructive work in imaginal, liminal, and religio-spiritual keys.

What is called for today is what Eddie Glaude Jr. has referred to as a "3rd American revolution," the enactment of a truly multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and religiously pluralistic democratic culture.[3] To move materially—and spiritually—towards such a vision necessitates cultivating an ability to 'think with' multiplicities of ontological orientations. To 'think with' a diversity of orientations towards the nature of reality is enactive of decolonial vistas—in the sense that it opens up scholarly praxis to trajectories outside of normative Euro-Western thought.

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[3] Glaude Jr., *Begin Again,* especially 202.

The imaginative work of democracy today entails a reorientation of the secular. The secular has historically been defined in opposition to ‘religion.’ For instance, the Oxford dictionary defines ‘secular’ today as: “Denoting attitudes, activities, or other things that have no religious or spiritual basis.”[4] The *secular* is not defined by what it *is*, but rather by what it is *not,* namely whatever doesn’t have a ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ basis. However, as highlighted in the introduction, the term ‘religion’ has increasingly come under critical scrutiny in the last decades. If the secular is defined as ‘not-religion,’ then as our understanding of religion changes, so must our co-constructed notion of the secular. I aim to explore the changing nature of both religion and the secular, with a focus on how they function in the context of a secular academy within religiously pluralistic democracies, especially in the case of the U.S.

I mean to contest assumed, common-sense meanings of the ‘secular academy.’ These meanings stem from antiquated notions of the secular, which developed along a unique historical trajectory. While this development made sense in a past *saeculum,* it no longer serves pluralistic democracies today in the same way. These supposed common-sense meanings are often utilized without even thinking about them, and in so doing inscribe (il)licit relationships between an assemblage of terms such as *secular, rational, scholarly,* and *academic*. I am concerned that these terms—secular, rational, academic, scholarly—have become uncritically linked as metonyms of one another, forming an unconscious bond that perpetuates itself through rhetoric. They can often be found juxtaposed with their “other,” usually vague ideas about ‘religion.’ I wish to draw out what I see as the underlying, yet rarely stated, logic behind such discourse. This logic serves to inculcate certain Westernized forms of knowledge production as the only acceptable modes of academic labor. *Rhetoric of the secular,* as I call it, not only hampers decolonial work, but actively works against it by (re)inscribing a colonial gaze into our educational system and culture. I am interested in reassessing the ways such terms are employed, specifically in light of scholarly work, as well as emergent religio-spiritual practice. Such a reassessment entails, as we will see, the destabilization of a religion/secular binary, a binary at the very heart of the modern social imaginary. I place this discussion within the context of the role of the academy as the locus of vocations for professional thinking and education within a religiously diverse democracy. My general arguments along these trajectories span the first three chapters.

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[4] Oxford English Dictionary, accessed Jan. 6, 2022.

My hypothesis is that today (as opposed to past historical moments) the secular as a term of discourse capitalizes on its association with democratic practices and cherished forms of constitutional norms in order to fund an ontological reductionism under the pretense of objective neutrality. This reductionism appears most often (in the humanities) in the guise of social sciences or encompassing critical theories of power relations, based respectively on analogies with the hard sciences or with a hard constructivism. Often these two work in tandem, so as to discredit and ostracize anything that doesn’t fit into their reductive ontologies as threatening and ‘non-academic.’

A “hard constructivism,” as discussed in the introduction, essentializes the notion of social construction, conceiving of social construction as an encompassing reality which is definitive of what it means to be human. In this sense, a hard constructivism is an orientation towards the nature of reality, and thus I will often refer to it as an “ontological orientation.” At times I may use “secularist” or a “secularist gaze” to refer to such an orientation, particularly when it is wedded to the attempt to make such an orientation the only normative one for academia.

On one hand, the secular is utilized to refer to the democratic values we have grown accustomed to taking for granted. This includes the separation of church and state, the freedom to engage in religious practices without coercion, the right to not be discriminated against for engaging—or not engaging—in such practices, and the freedom *from* religion in the sense that the coercive powers of the state cannot be utilized to endorse or provide preferential treatment for any particular religious orientations. These democratic values I aim to uphold and even extend.

On the other hand, the secular becomes conjoined to form the term ‘secular academy,’ whose development has a particular history related to Western academia’s long running, complicated relationship with religious authority and theology. Here the secular academy gets juxtaposed with a kind of theological imposition or evangelization; it becomes ‘not-theology.’ This use is fundamentally different from (though not unrelated to) the democratic values described above, though this change in semantics is rarely stated explicitly. We can recognize that the historical development of the secular academy might reasonably be characterized as an attempt to uphold democratic principles, specifically freedom *from* religion as regards the public education of citizens. Key to the present argument, however, is what has not yet even entered into the conversation, viz., any sense of the reductive ontologies we now so easily inscribe as academic norms. Reductive ontological gazes however, and democratic practice, are *not* the same thing.

This latter use of the secular—namely that of inscribing a normative ontologically reductive gaze onto the cultures of professional thinking and education within society—is now an anachronistic notion. While arguably an important historical development that admirably served certain needs of its *saeculum,* such a notion no longer serves a religiously diverse, democratic society. Equating the secular academy with Westernized ontological reductionisms fails to serve a pluralized democratic society in three main ways: 1) It assures the academy remains unrepresentative of the diversity of norms existing within the society it serves; 2) It fails to inculcate democratic norms and develop practices necessary for the maintenance of a pluralized democracy, a responsibility that falls to academia in its role as society's professional educators and thinkers; 3) It circumscribes resources and actively prevents decolonial modes of thought, thereby reinscribing what Arvind Mandair calls a "repetition of the colonial event."[5]

As seen in the first epigraph, we live in an age of radically diverse democratic milieus. The same tropes that once served a healthy diminishment of hegemonic Christian authority no longer serve our current *saeculum.* The nature of democratic practice should be reassessed in the current cultural context of a religiously diverse society. The purpose of this first chapter will be to inquire into the nature of democratic praxis amidst such diversity and its relationship to a secular academy. The secular will be reinterpreted as denotive of the very diversity within which our cultural, socio-political, economic, and educational structures subsist—rather than as representative of particular ontological reductionisms that supposedly create a “neutral space” for theorization. Once such a semantic shift is made, a secular academy can be re-envisioned based upon the needs and purposes it serves within a pluralistic democracy. While the first three chapters concentrate on making such a semantic shift, the last four lean into the more constructive, liminal process of envisioning. The second and third chapters will extend arguments made here, applying them specifically to scholarly praxis in religious studies, theology, and philosophy. It will be helpful before turning to these more particular arguments to first spend some time examining how the secular functions within theories of democracy and culture.

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[5] Mandair, "Unbearable." Mandair's essay is featured in the following chapter.

The Aporia of Pluralistic Democracy

I begin with Jürgen Habermas’ thoughts on religion in the public sphere, which serve as a fulcrum for exploring of the role of religious consciousness within a democratic polity. In line with his philosophical leanings, Habermas is known for placing “rational discourse” as the basis for a democratic polity.[6] For my purposes here, this means that political arguments must be couched within a secular language that everyone can reasonably assent to (an assertion often made by another theorist of political liberalism, John Rawls). While this stance has received much criticism, some of which will be explored below, the *aporia* it emerges out of is fairly straightforward—while not, perhaps, so easily dealt with. The issue, what we might call the "*aporia* of pluralistic democracy," arises immediately in a pluralistic democracy, perhaps most acutely in a religiously pluralistic one: *How to conceive of public political space when those who are called to participate in such space do not necessarily agree on a shared worldview (often metaphysical) as a basis for argumentation, dialogue, and the formation of law and governmental policies?*

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[6] Habermas considers himself a defender of “Kantian republicanism” in the line of political liberalism, which he describes as “a nonreligious, postmetaphysical justification of the normative foundations of constitutional democracy” (Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 102).

One might note a certain playful circularity associated with our *aporia,* in that this public political space not only looks to uphold a fecund milieu for argumentation and dialogue amidst difference, but also means to encode within the milieu protections for such disagreement in the first place. That is, one might question whether the *aporia* is oriented towards fashioning "agreement" amongst different perspectives, or whether it points towards a need to uphold *the ability to disagree itself* as constitutive of democracy.[7]

For Habermas, the United States is an example of a modern constitutional state "invented with the aim of promoting peaceful religious pluralism." As such, according to Habermas, it is only the exercise of authority by an "ideologically neutral" government that allows for different communities to "coexist on a basis of equal rights and mutual tolerance, while nevertheless remaining unreconciled at the level of their substantive worldviews or doctrines."[8] Such a government can (in theory) both protect citizens from unfair intrusions regarding interreligious conflict amongst themselves, as well as insure that the power of the state does not infringe on religious liberties, nor tip the scales in the direction of particularized religious persuasions.

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[7] I am indebted to comments from Catherine Keller for this "circularity" of the aporia.

[8] Habermas, *Between,* 2, 3.

Nevertheless, such a stance runs into its own difficulties, even disregarding questions of whether an "ideologically neutral government" can exist in principle (governments, as they are, being made up of those strangely difficult, decidedly non-neutral and "ideological driven" creatures—human beings). Habermas envisions public political space as a forum where citizens engage in vigorous reason giving on matters of political import, translating their democratic intuitions into secularized discourse. People do not come pre-packaged, however, to participate in such debate (in fact, modern evolutionary psychology has shown human beings to be genetically predisposed *against* such debate, with cognitive biases that make us much more comfortable with tribalism, for instance).[9] Therefore, a certain disciplining of citizens into democratic practices is needed. Citizens would have to be inculcated into such norms. Yet, an "ideologically neutral government" is precisely one that is unable to inculcate its citizens into any single form of the "good life," even a democratically responsible one. This leads Habermas to conclude that "the liberal state depends in the long run on mentalities that it cannot produce from its own resources."[10]

Michael Sandel makes a similar point in *Democracy's Discontent.* Given the inability for an ideologically neutral state to sustain democratic values, Sandel argues for a more robust sense of the "good life" within democratic politics. He contrasts liberalism, or what he calls the “procedural republic,” with what he calls a “republican democracy,” or one that embraces the inculcation of citizens into forms of the good life. A “procedural republic” concentrates its power in upholding “negative liberty,” or the right to not have one’s own freedom infringed upon by others, especially by the government. This lineage of Kantian liberalism marks a distinction between the “good” and the “right,” prioritizing the right. People should be free to pursue their own versions of the good life. Thus, “the right” becomes a “framework of basic rights and liberties” that allows for such individualized pursuit, and which marks the true locus of governmental authority. The government’s role is to prevent an infringement of rights, where such rights themselves can never be “premised on any particular version of the good life.”[11] Habermas and Rawls come to a similar position, not necessarily through prioritizing the right over the good, but as a result of a pluralistic society composed of competing visions of the good. Without choosing one, a government must remain neutral towards all.

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[9] See Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*; and Wright, *The Moral Animal*.

[10] Habermas, *Between*, 3.

These two divergent theories of democracy can lead to very different interpretations of basic rights. For example, free speech becomes important for a “republican democracy” because it increases the common good and encourages citizens to participate in public political discussion. For liberalism, free speech is protected not out of concern for the commons, but rather in order to provide a fair and equal framework within which “individuals and groups can choose their own values and ends.”[12] This notion of neutrality towards any form of the good life is a relatively recent innovation in

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[11] Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent*, 10-11.

[12] Ibid.

U.S. politics, distinctive only in the last 60 years, as Sandel shows by painstakingly tracing its historical trajectory through an extensive series of court cases and judicial reasoning.[13]

The failure of a procedural republic to form sensible habits of democratic value amongst citizens may be one of the reasons for the extreme partisanship of our politics today, which only seems to be growing worse. Many of our citizens have not only lost the ability to dialogue with those who have differing perspectives, but don't even care to cultivate such an ability, which may be seen as a weakness by fellow partisans. It seems doubtful that we will ever reach a point where our public political dialogue takes on the character of a somewhat antiseptic "rational reason giving." At the same time, it does seem eminently the case that robust and passionate argumentation—colored by differing perceptions of the "good life," as well as competing visions of the government's role in establishing such forms—will continue to characterize our public space. Hence, the way in which such argumentation is embodied and performed is perhaps more important than developing a common basis for argumentation itself (such as whether argumentation is translated into secular ideas or not, for instance). Does the way in which we perform our democratic praxis embody the circularity of our *aporia* above? Does it uphold the ability to disagree itself as constitutive of democracy?

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[13] Before this, Protestant Christianity served in many ways as a base version of the "good life" since the founding of the U.S. Part of what I am exploring in this project is not only the question of whether an orientation towards something like the "good life" is needed for a functioning democracy—which I tend to answer in the positive—but what would such an orientation look like today? Within a religiously, ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse democracy, the "good life" is certainly not found purely in Protestant Christianity, but perhaps it could be found in a "beloved community of religious diversity."

This is where I see a need to stress that much of the responsibility of inculcating democratic norms falls to the academy as locus of professional thinking and education within society. Citizens of pluralistic democracies need *to learn* to be in dialogue within one another on issues of greatest importance in their lives. This learning needs to take place without necessarily agreeing to an *a priori* ontological reductionism (such as a supposed universal form of "postmetaphysical" or "detranscendentalized" reasoning), because this is precisely how we are called upon to operate in public space within a religiously pluralistic democratic society. The academy can function as one such space of learning, in allowing for a vibrant multiplicity of voices with varying norms to be in dialogue with one another. Such spaces not only cultivate democratic virtue, but also help to construct decolonial cultures in embracing multiplicities of ways of knowing.

It is significant to note that the strong emergence of a "procedural republic" in the U.S. appears to dovetail with the beginning of vast cultural changes. These cultural changes are seen first in the emergence of traditionally marginalized voices in the civil rights movement (which paved the way for other movements such as feminism and LGBTQ rights), followed by the cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, an influx of religious teachers from the East, and finally massive demographic shifts that are currently transforming the U.S. into a majority minority country, as well as the most religiously diverse country on Earth.[14] As voices from traditionally marginalized groups become heard, prior notions of the "good life" are either challenged outright, or shown to be fictive hypocrisies far from being instantiated (as African-American critiques have long professed). Adding to these voices are demographic changes that continue to accelerate in our *saeculum*, challenging societal norms. A retreat into the "procedural state" might reasonably be conceived as a subliminal reaction to these changing circumstances. A strategy of retreat made in order to *prevent* changes to society's sense of the "good life" (or a strategy to insulate ourselves from "contaminated others" working to "destroy our heritage").

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[14] See Eck, *A New Religious America*.

Returning to Habermas, he bases his theory on two main wagers. First, that democratic public space should consist of nonreligious, secularized argumentation. Second, that a democratic government must remain ideologically neutral towards any particular version of the "good life." We saw above how this leaves democratic institutions dependent upon, according to Habermas himself, "mentalities that it cannot produce from its own resources."[15] What are these mentalities? And how are they to be cultivated? Habermas has evolved on this question, recognizing that the liberal state's call for secularized, rational discourse may result in an "asymmetrical" and "unreasonable *mental and psychological* burden for its religious citizens." In his essay, "Religion in the Public Sphere" (and in general in his later work), Habermas attempts to mitigate this burden by both diminishing and extending it. He diminishes the burden by no longer calling for all citizens to express political arguments in secular language. Those who "operate within state institutions" must still strictly adhere to an "institutional translation proviso," while those who merely participate in public debate should feel free to "express themselves in a religious idiom," yet "only on the condition that they recognize the institutional translation proviso."[16] An important point arises here, which marks a delineation between 'state institutions' that enact governmental laws, and a secular academy. While a secularized translation proviso makes sense for state institutions enacting laws (one wouldn't want laws written which quote the Bible or the Quran, for instance), such a stance need not hold for a secular academy. In fact, the academy might play a greater role in cultivating democratic praxis by *not* necessitating a "translation proviso"—that is, in allowing for rigorous debate amongst varying perspectives without demanding all positions be couched in secular language. The academy after all, is not legislating. Driving a wedge between these two uses of the secular—one towards government institutions involved in law-making, the other towards a secular academy—is important in beginning to reassess our current cultural conditions, the state of our democracy today, and the most beneficial way to position the locus of professional thinkers and educators in society.

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[15] Habermas, *Between*, 3.

Since it is in the interest of a democratic state to encourage public participation in debate, Habermas acknowledges that (religious) citizens should not have to "split their identity" into public and private parts in order to participate in the political process. He also acknowledges that there may be worth in religious reasoning for secularists or for those of differing religious persuasions, "when they recognize buried intuitions of their own in the normative truth contents of a religious utterance."[17] Habermas attempts to extend the burden of translation by calling on secularists, and indeed anyone who participates in the institutional structures of the state, to participate in this work of translation. This necessitates recognition of the potential value of religious reasoning for democratic life. Such a "postsecular" worldview challenges secularists to overcome "a rigid and exclusive secularist self-understanding of modernity," which sees religions as "archaic relics of premodern societies persisting into the present."[18] With such an extension, Habermas now believes that his demand for an "institutional translation proviso" has become an equally shared cognitive burden on all citizens.

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[16] Ibid., 130, emphasis in first quote original.

[17] Ibid., 131.

A 'Difference in Kind' Between Philosophical and Religious Reasoning?

While Habermas is explicit that "reason" operates within religious traditions, he does see a "difference in kind" between secular and religious reasoning. Kantianism, utilitarianism, Hegelianism, and other philosophical stances are, for Habermas, secular reasons that can be expressed in a shared public language. They are "distinguished from any kind of religious tradition by the fact that it doesn't require membership in a community of believers." Religious reasoning, for Habermas, implies appeal to "membership in a community," a community which by necessity excludes others, and thus cannot be a basis for democracy. Philosophical reasoning, as well as broader "secular" reasoning, on the other hand, is open to everyone. Habermas argues further that there is a difference in kind between a "path to salvation" and a "profane ethical project." He believes that religious reasoning depends not only on cognitive beliefs, but also on existential beliefs that are "rooted in the social dimension of membership, socialization, and prescribed practices." Secular reasoning, on the other hand, depends only on cognitive beliefs but not existential ones.[19]

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[18] Ibid., 138.

I remain unconvinced that secular reasoning is universal in some way that religious reasoning remains incapable of, and address this argument below. Nonetheless, I remain sympathetic to the way Habermas stubbornly keeps his eye on the "*aporia* of pluralistic democracy," as well as his practical insistence that legislation itself must not contain religious reason-giving (hence his "institutional translation proviso"). I also appreciate Habermas' evolution towards respect for the democratic potentials of religious reasoning, as well as his insight that democratic values and practices must be inculcated within society itself, rather than through the coercive power of the state. Hence, the need for academia to play a strong role in the inculcation of democratic values and practices. However, there are other issues lurking within Habermas' thought that, when not handled carefully, tend to obstruct certain horizons of democratic possibility. These include the collapsing of the secular into the rational, and the construction of the secular as a universal basis for public reason-giving.

Constructing the Secular

For Rawls, Habermas and other enlightenment thinkers aligned with Kant, the process of "secularization" refers to the progressive removal of religious propositions as standards of truth—in science, politics, ethics, etc.—a process that can generally be traced from the Enlightenment into the establishment of modern democratic states. This includes the removal of religious reason-giving from the public sphere in favor of “rational” discourse, for important reasons seen above. Mainly, that to utilize religious reasons in invoking the coercive power of the state is to inherently oppress those who do not share one’s beliefs. Yet, this narrative of secularization sometimes implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) merges the ‘secular’ with the ‘rational.’ The narrative may assume that as religious hypotheses about the world recede, a secular (think ‘non-religious’) rationality comes to the fore, giving the impression of a universal secular rationality that cuts across human difference.

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[19] Butler, et al., *Power of Religion*, 61, 62.

Habermas’ ‘difference-in-kind’ between philosophical and religious reasoning plays into such a narrative. In later chapters, especially in chapter six, this difference-in-kind will be seen to be even more spurious, as the philosophical is shown to clearly participate in what I call the ‘religious,’ and vice-versa. I also note, importantly, how Habermas’ difference-in-kind argument is predicated on Western notions of ‘religion’ as discussed in the introduction. Religion is continually defined as a “membership community” of “believers” (i.e., as “confessional”). Yet, as initially seen in the introduction, these descriptions are based on particular versions of Christianity—and do not accurately portray other religious persuasions, particularly from Eastern and Indigenous traditions—a recurring point of emphasis in this project.

Other scholars, such as Charles Taylor, have confronted Habermas’ distinction between secular and religious reasoning. Taylor argues that there is no need to single out religion as a special case. Just as one wouldn’t cite Biblical passages in the forming of state laws, neither would one cite Marx or Kant in the forming of such laws. Taylor points out that one would not begin a law with something like “As the Bible states…,” or

"As Kant said…," or "As Marx made clear….," as all of these framings would be equally problematic. Thus, the "institutional translation proviso" does not correspond with singling out religion as a special case. Further, arguments about the proper secular positioning of the state and its use of power should proceed along different lines from that of a secular academy. It is one thing to state a need for an "institutional translation proviso" in law-making, quite another to posit a difference-in-kind between religious and philosophical reasoning (particularly when the meaning of "religious" cannot be based solely upon Christianity, and thus remains fluid and even somewhat undefined today).

According to Taylor, the idea that the secular represents a type of reason that "everyone speaks and can argue and be convinced in," posits a faulty logic. Such a "common language" simply doesn't exist. I would add that the positing of such a common language as an answer to the problem of diversity represents its own hegemonic imposition, ironically paralleling the past imposition of Christian religious authority as normative. Taylor recognizes that the more fruitful stance is not to seek a specific answer to our *aporia* of pluralistic democracy. Rather, it is to recognize that there are no easy answers. One might even say he suggests living in the liminal a bit more. To live into healthy and life-giving forms of democracy requires that lines be continually "drawn anew."[20] Today, such lines should not be the same as those drawn in the past.

Taylor notes, for instance, that while the secular originally formed amidst contestations between different versions of Christianity, this is no longer a valid formulation of the secular today. The original construction of the secular may have denoted a separation of church and state, yet it also continued to express Christian hegemony. As late as 1892 the Supreme Court of the United States was able to declare—unanimously—that the United States was a “Christian nation,” while judges throughout the 19th century argued that Protestant Christianity could, or even should, be used to interpret the law (while also making clear that Catholics did not count as “Christian”).[21] These actions of a so-called ‘secular’ state, with its penchant for Protestant Christian superiority, show that past concepts of the secular had yet to face the “basic problem” of contemporary democracies, which is the issue of pluralism—especially religious pluralism. Concurrently, academia also has yet to face up to the “basic problem” of religious pluralism. This requires taking account of the historical formation of the secular, and what this means for the life of the academy today. To this point, Taylor speaks of a continued “fetishization” of favored, historical institutional structures, especially in academia.

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[20] Ibid., 49-51.

These institutional structures (such as the normative religion/secular binary in academia), developed in a different historical moment that faced different problems. These problems were oriented around issues of Christian religious authority and its proper relationship to the state, while at the same time assuming a Protestant Christian superiority as normative for society (as well as White, Male, and Western superiority). The institutional structures that developed, as well as the construction of the category of “the secular” itself, dealt with problems akin to that historical moment, a moment we no longer find ourselves in. In our continued fetishization of such norms lies a failure to address the basic problems of a pluralistic age.

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[21] Ibid., 38.

Today, the religion/secular binary is something of a false dichotomy, a fetishization of historical concepts and institutional arrangements. This fetishization leads us to fixate on ‘religion’ as the problem of secularity, without recognizing that we have moved on from the “hard won achievement of warding off some form of religious domination,” as Taylor puts it. Today, given that we live within pluralistic democracies that embody a “widespread diversity of basic beliefs, religious and areligious,” the focus of our institutions should not be upon an anachronistic religion/secular binary, but rather on a need “to balance freedom of conscience and equality of respect.”[22]

Habermas’ ‘difference in kind’ between religious and secular reasoning also offers an opportunity to underscore ways in which the secular is always a co-construction with the modern category of religion. His argument relies upon what John Thatamanil calls “fictive and unhelpful” definitions of religion.[23] As seen above, Habermas leans into the notion that religious reasoning necessitates “membership in a community,” that these communities are bounded and by definition exclude others, and that assentation to particular practices and dogmas constitute the basis for religious reasoning. In so doing,

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[22] Ibid., 48. It is worth noting that Habermas, while continuing to insist on a (faulty) epistemic distinction between secular and religious reason-giving, nevertheless continues to alter his position so as to provide more accommodation, legitimacy, and even necessity for religious reason-giving. That Habermas’ political theory allows more room for the normative contents of religious thought (at least in certain instances) than much of the secular academy, speaks volumes for the need to open up academia to a wider range of ontological dispositions.

[23] Thatamanil, *Circling*, 191.

Habermas *invents* a neutral space of secular reason giving. But what happens when one does not adopt faulty (and colonial) definitions of religion?

Thatamanil, for instance, deconstructs the modern category of religion, favoring instead a historical analysis that takes into account other religiosities, such as Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta. He shows religious traditions to be “porous, permeable, and perpetually fluid realities,” lacking solid boundaries.[24] The porosity between religious borders is further reflected in the internal diversities of religious traditions themselves, whereby the idea of homogenous belief structures becomes a fictive invention rather than an authentic description of religious realities. As Thatamanil argues, “If every one of our religious traditions is a porous multiplicity, then appeals to religious purity and homogeneity must be recognized as fictive and unhelpful.”[25] Once we surrender conceptions that “privilege singularity and homogeneity,” we are able to recognize that religiosity today is much messier than the fictive notions we often ascribe to it. The idea of bounded containers of ‘religion’ within which religious labor proceeds is untenable. Secular orientations also perform religious labor, as seen for instance in fundamentalist notions of neoliberal economics, where such positions may be held ‘religiously.’[26] In the sixth chapter, I will take a closer look at Thatamanil’s definition of the religious, and consider further the ways in which religious labor is accomplished by supposedly secular regimes of knowledge production.

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[24] Ibid., 15.

[25] Ibid., 191.

[26] Ibid., 182-190.

In addition, the changing nature of religio-spiritual practice today, which I explore more fully in the third chapter, once again belies notions of bounded, fixed religious identities. In many instances, such practices emerge *interreligiously.* Interspiritual practitioners, the "spiritual but not religious," multiple-religious belongers, and other syncretistic religious practitioners complicate traditional notions of 'religion,' and hence also of "religious reason-giving." Even without such emergent religio-spiritual practices, Thatamanil points out that in pluralistic societies, religious formation "is never done in isolation from analogous work that persons in other traditions are also doing." Thatamanil goes on to acknowledge that "persons routinely draw upon resources from more than one repertoire in doing the work of comprehensive qualitative orientation," while "the boundaries between traditions are themselves always under construction and revision."[27] Thatamanil notes that all cultures engage in the labor of "comprehensive qualitative orientation," or what he defines as "the religious," yet only some do so within a separation between secular and religious domains.[28] In the West, our problematic assumptions about the bounded nature of religions parallels, for Thatamanil, our construction of racial identities. Just as we often implicitly assign a type of ontological or biological reality to our categories of racial identity, we do the same with religions.[29] In the U.S. today, not only do we find ourselves awash in differing racial identities, but, as seen in the first epigraph, all the religions are also "here now," and "they are us." In neither case do our identity formations take place within bounded spheres of influence.

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[27] Ibid., 181.

[28] Ibid., 156.

[29] Ibid., 114-119.

I have honed in then on two related problems with an often assumed, normative understanding of the secular. The first comes from associating the secular with either a neutral space of rationality or, in an anachronistic way, as a “bulwark” (to use a Taylorian phrase) against a hegemonic Christian religious authority—a bulwark that then gets transferred to a secularist guarding against a ‘return of religion’ in any form. While Taylor himself is interested in a type of neutral space in which public debate can happen, and in this sense is in agreement with many of Habermas’ arguments, Taylor also recognizes (rightly) that what Habermas refers to as “the secular” is *not* that neutral space.

The second problem comes to the fore in defining the secular over and against a fictive and unhealthy definition of ‘religion’ itself, especially in the presence of a religiously diverse, democratic society aiming to decolonize its culture. What Habermas sees as an essentially “neutral” space, Taylor sees as a constructed one—and what Habermas defines as ‘religion,’ Thatamanil finds to be not only wanting, but also based upon fictive and problematic assumptions of Western colonialism.

As I see it, what we often denote as the secular is actually not at all neutral, and its problematic construction can be seen precisely in its delineation of a particularized version of ‘religion,’ in order to define itself over-and-against. This particularized, problematic version of religion is then extended in such a way as to collapse the tremendous variety of religious difference. Thereupon, it singles out this particularized version of religion as a special case of categorical difference. Such problematic constructions uncritically lump together an overwhelming variety of syncretistic religiosities (for all religiosities are syncretistic) in order to define them as ‘non-secular.’

The end result, particularly in the case of the secular academy, is that this construction of the secular promotes particularized ontological orientations, while simultaneously projecting a fictive normativity onto all other ontological orientations by calling them "religious."

The construction of the secular often ascribes a universal rationality to humanity, and then places such a rationality *outside* of 'religion.' This happens implicitly, for instance, in constructing a space of secular dialogue that exists outside of religious reason-giving, while at the same time claiming a naturalized, universal status for such a space. The implication is that the rational-secular space is not "constructed" in the first place. It is as if a secularized rationality *reveals* itself when religious belief becomes bracketed—as if it was loitering there in the shadows all along yet we were unable to notice it due to the religious coloring of our thought worlds. The secular presents not so much as an emergent reality as an undiscovered background lurking beneath the veil of religious belief, consonant with the rational.

Once we recognize the secular as a category co-constructed with religion, it is easy to see how collapsing the rational into the secular, which is then defined as 'not-religion,' also caricatures religion as 'not-rational.' Timothy Fitzgerald's work, known for deconstructing the category of religion, concentrates in *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity* on how the secular becomes co-constructed along with the category of religion. Fitzgerald remains at pains to point out that when we use the term religion, especially without an awareness of its (Western) constructed nature, we concurrently imply "something that is essentially different from the neutral, objective, tolerant, nonreligious space that today we call the secular." For Fitzgerald, one of the most important functions performed by current discourse in the academic study of religion lies in embedding "the superior nonreligious space of objective neutrality deeper into our…unquestioned assumptions about the world. We feel we are in touch with natural rationality, with ordinary reasonableness with which any normal person would agree," and thus we disguise the "persuasive role of rhetoric" secular discourse achieves, while simultaneously "concealing the origins of this rhetoric."[30]

And that is precisely the point. The idea of a nonreligious, secular space is co-constructed with the very idea of 'religion,' yet when we do not state this explicitly, "it slips unnoticed below the radar screen and in this way acts far more powerfully as a tacit organizer of the rhetorical flows which we inhale in our day-to-day discourse." Examples in the following chapter will make clear how such a constructed notion of the secular operates at times in the academic study of religion, assuming a form of rationality that is simultaneously withheld from an imagined space of religiosity. Thereby, a secular space is invented which functions to normalize certain ontological orientations, orientations which tend to conveniently align with the preferred ones of certain scholars. Those who do not share the preferred ontological orientations are relegated to the status of "data," as opposed to dialogue partners. Previewing arguments to come, this initial act of objectification and othering elides the self-reflexive moment crucial to a decolonial encounter with difference. The lack of self-reflexivity also further concretizes the construction of the secular. The result, as Fitzgerald puts it, is that "The secular is not itself a constructed arena of values, an expression of collective commitments. The secular is that neutral, natural, given, commonsense reality that we all (especially highly qualified professionals) inhabit (unless we are mavericks, eccentrics, trouble makers, or subversives).”[31]

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[30] Fitzgerald, *Discourse,* 31-32.

Offering an example from the study of religion, Fitzgerald goes on to critique the general thrust of sociology of religion. He notes how sociology delineates itself in reference to its other, namely theology, and defines religion as a phenomenon that can be objectified, and thus serve as data for the sociology of knowledge. The implications of this methodological move “seem to be that, whereas theology can only offer partial and metaphysical claims about ultimate truth based on speculation rather than real knowledge, only sociology as a secular science can be objective, neutral, and truthfully descriptive.” Theology only makes truth claims, it cannot bracket them, but sociology “can achieve neutrality and objectivity.” Or as we will see religion scholar Russell McCutcheon claim in the following chapter, sociology “naturalizes” categories in a way that theology never could. Theology is about beliefs, while sociology is rational. Theology can make metaphysical claims and construct a “sacred canopy, but only sociology can tell you accurately how and why it has done this.” Fitzgerald calls this the active “construction of the concept of secular knowledge,” which serves, at the same time, to co-construct ‘religion.’ That is, by “*inventing* the secular by means of that very activity whereby we claim to be neutrally describing what the world is really like, we are also inventing ‘religions’.”[32]

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[31] Ibid., 32.

[32] Ibid., 98-99.

The construction of the secular insinuates that the secular academy, including the academic study of religion, is somehow not involved in religion. Whatever religion is, what we know is that the secular academy is ‘not-religion.’ As Fitzgerald goes on to say, we assume “It is in the nature of religions that they can be studied by nonreligious people, or by people who in their private life are religious but who adopt a nonreligious educational standpoint.”[33] The secular academy becomes a value-neutral space, a space of rationality, or of common sense, or of how human beings might “rationally” interact with one another once we leave some imagined sphere of religion behind, along with its pesky metaphysical orientations. Hence, Habermas’ insistence on a “postmetaphysical” and “detranscendentalized” rationality.[34]

Once the secular is seen as a constructed realm, then one can see that such a version of the secular is not a universal space that encompasses difference, as might be hoped for in a pluralistic democracy. Instead, the secular becomes an oppressive space that collapses difference, functioning with problematic (and colonial) assumptions. Most often the secular represents a constructed realm of particularized *ontological* orientations (even when calling themselves “postmetaphysical” or “detranscendentalized”). This version of secularity, which prioritizes certain ontological orientations, does not function as a space of neutrality within which difference can be instantiated and encountered. Rather, it represents a hegemonic orientation towards the nature of reality, paralleling the religious authority the secular was originally constructed to free itself from. In this sense, secularity, as an ontological orientation towards the nature of reality, can reasonably be seen today as a *religious* orientation—or a particularized, ontologically loaded, felt-orientation towards the nature of reality. This is not just a theoretical construct, but can also be seen in demographic surveys of religiosity, for instance, where participants might categorize themselves as “secular” as opposed to Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, Buddhist, etc.

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[33] Ibid., 32.

[34] See fn 6 in this chapter.

Further, it should be recognized that this version of secularity—as a constructed space separate from religion that can generally be traced historically to the founding of the United States—is not a space that was, or has been, constructed amidst the diversity we live amongst today.[35] There existed nothing like the contemporary cultural, racial, religious, and ethnic diversity we experience. In addition, the secular was initially constructed, at least in its socio-political forms, almost exclusively by economically advantaged white men, many of whom were slave holders. In fact, certain differences that were present were considered, for the most part, unworthy of both the secular and religion! I speak here, of course, of the presence of Native Americans and African Americans, who were considered barbaric and to not have discovered ‘religion.’ Neither did they possess “reason,” at least not to the degree needed to participate in secular institutions. Women as well were deemed unworthy of much secular and religious participation. Thus, we cannot assume that the secular, as it has been traditionally constructed, is necessarily a fecund space for difference.

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[35] Fitzgerald, *Discourse*.

Fitzgerald makes the point that originally, the secular was able to open up space for democratic practice by creating a rift between church and state, and “thus to allow alternative forms of thought and expression to develop” (a sentiment I heartily agree with). However, we can no longer take it for granted that the secular “still serves the interests of human rights and democracy, or even of freedom of thought and expression.” In fact, it may be “plausibly argued” that a religion/secular binary today “serves interests which are in conflict with advances in democratic practice.”[36] The secular is often imagined as something like a neutral space, one that allows for difference to be present without authoritative hegemonic impositions, especially of a “religious” nature. But is that really the case? Living within vibrant, religiously diverse democracies, can we assume that the so-called “secular,” as it has been constructed in the past and in the ways in which it continues to function today, is anything like a proper sphere of activity for democratic practice amidst radical difference?

In all likelihood, the secular as a naturalized category continues to function in many ways that we are not even aware of, perpetuating colonial mindsets and actively preventing the cultivation of decolonial spaces. The construction of the secular, when it becomes normative, hinders the liminal work of *imagining* new ways of being and living together amidst diversity. It seems to me that we have to be willing to let go of at least some of our cherished secularity—without losing the underpinnings of our democratic ideals—in order to allow for the creative emergence of new spaces that are incarnated together amidst radical difference. And we simply do not know what those spaces might look like. Because they must be co-created, they cannot be pre-defined by any particular orientation, and thus require a letting go of what has been, and hence more liminal constructions. They are spaces where radical difference can exist and be heard, and in which tentative constructive work can be explored in 'thinking with' such difference. Out of this, new ways forward can emerge. Such spaces are imaginative and liminal by design. Within them, Habermas' universal, postmetaphysical, detranscendentalized rationality is but one ontological orientation amidst a vast multiplicity of such orientations. If we were to redefine religion as something akin to Thatamanil's "comprehensive qualitative orientation," then *Habermas' stance is itself a religious orientation.*

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[36] Ibid., 67.

Pluralizing the Secular

There does arise, however, a need for some understanding of secularity, particularly regarding the coercive power of the state as seen above. It is not simply a deconstruction of the secular that is needed, but also a recontextualization—one that does not begin and end with a religion/secular binary. 'Postsecular reasoning,' as seen above, is simply not up to this task. While recognizing value in religious reasoning, postsecular reasoning still remains ineluctably tied to reductive ontological horizons as a fictive *a priori* space of neutrality for dialogue across difference. Liminal spaces disappear in such reasoning. A multi-dimensional cosmos is flattened, colonized by a stubbornly secularist, Westernized rationality. Fortunately, scholarly work redefining the secular has been ongoing for some time. There are other ways to understand secularity outside of a religion/secular binary, ways more amenable for a pluralistic democracy. While the "secularization of society" is an influential trope in our times, such a trope is not univocal, and its myriad ways of conceptualization carry consequential suppositions.

Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age,* describes secularization not as a decline of religious belief, or as the retreat of religiosity in public spaces, but rather as "new conditions of belief … a new context in which all search and questioning about the moral and spiritual [and political] must proceed."[37] This new context includes exposure to a multiplicity of religious and spiritual beliefs, as well as an emergent choice whether to believe in a "transcendent" reality at all. Similarly, political theorist Jeffery Stout describes secularization as an "increasing need to cope with religious plurality."[38] Such accounts undercut notions of a universal, secular rationality that cuts across human difference, waiting to be liberated from the confines of overzealous religio-mythical thought.

Taylor's work specifically engages in a "continuing polemic" against just such a "subtraction story," one told "in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside."[39] Secularization, then, can describe the natural consequences of an increasing diversity of worldviews, the crowding together of an array of (more or less) reasonable belief structures. This includes newly formed humanist, agnostic, and atheistic strands of belief alongside an increasing multiplicity of religious and spiritual orientations. Such an understanding of secularity resonates with Walt Whitman's "democratic vistas," eliciting a multifarious *religious* becoming that Whitman envisioned at the very core of democracy— “all the religions, old and new, are there.” The secular in this sense is no longer defined over-and-against a Western construction of religion (or as ‘not-theology’). Consequently, such an understanding destabilizes a religion/secular binary.

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[37] Taylor, *Secular*, 20.

[38] Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 102.

[39] Taylor, *Secular*, 22.

Stout embraces a pluralistic understanding of secularity in arguing directly against Habermas’ notion of reason. Disputing the existence of a shared rational basis for decision-making and public discourse—Stout argues instead for respect towards democratic sensibilities formed by differing traditions. For Stout, who utilizes a pragmatist theory of identity, traditions develop their own, variable modes of rational thought, which emerge out of differing experiences. To offer my own examples of Stout’s argument, Catholic theological thought and the Black Power movement can be seen as differing traditions that develop their own idiosyncratic ways of reasoning within unique historical trajectories. Both can be respected as embodying rational discourse, which emerges from the unique viewpoints of their respective traditions. Accordingly, rationality is not a free-floating, neutral basis for public reason-giving, but is always instantiated within singular historical trajectories and embodied in diverse ways. Stout aims to substitute a pre-established, universal Kantian basis of “reasonableness” with what he sees as a more Hegelian, embodied, pluralistic and pragmatic understanding of reason—bequeathing to the public sphere not so much a common basis for discourse as an agonistic struggle of deepening respect for other viewpoints. Stout’s vision of democratic praxis lies in evoking jazz-like “series of exchanges [that] need not operate on a single common basis, tailored to all, but might well involve improvisational expression of one's point of view and ad hoc immanent criticism of one's interlocutors."[40]

Instead of limiting ourselves to "the quest for a *common* basis" of reasonability, Stout asks, "why not view the person who takes each competing perspective on its own terms, expressing [their] own views openly and practicing immanent criticism on the views of others, as a reasonable (i.e. socially cooperative, respectful, reason-giving) person?"[41] He feels other theorists have "distorted" democratic cultural values by "wrongly taking a sensible, widely shared, vague ideal [of public reason-giving] to be a clear, fixed, deontological requirement built into the common basis of our reasoning."[42] Stout's vision of democratic practice imbued with improvisational conversation and "ad hoc immanent criticism," emerges out of respect for a multiplicity of reason-giving trajectories. Such democratic practice endeavors to uphold, in his words, a "contextualist account of justification with a nonrelativist account of moral truth."[43] Overall, Stout offers a powerful argument for a pluralistic, contextual understanding of rational democratic reason-giving.

Implications for Academia

Once again, I wish to draw attention to the need for academia to allow for such spaces within itself. If Habermas is right about the inability of an "ideologically neutral state" to inculcate its own citizens into democratic life, then the academy, as locus of society's professional thinkers and educators, should not only reconsider the nature of the secular, but reconsider it *specifically in reference to a secular academy*. Much scholarship today questioning formations of the secular remains itself relentlessly 'secular' in its approach (including Fitzgerald's work).[44] This reconsideration should be attempted with an eye towards taking on at least some responsibility for the formation of democratic character in society *today*. The formation of democratic character includes not only the ability to engage in respectful dialogue, but also the ability to shepherd creative emergence amidst critical difference in order to continually (re)create publics that can serve fluid democratic processes.[45] Recognizing that no universal basis of rationality exists within which to coax such debate, but rather a variety of multi-valent lines of reasonability—the secular should henceforward be understood as descriptive of our pluralistic historical situatedness, rather than as a neutral-space of rationality within which dialogue can take place. Such an understanding of the secular is much more "reasonable" than the secular understood as fealty to particularized ontological reductionisms, such as a scientific materialism or a hard constructivism.

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[40] Stout, *Democracy*, 80.

[41] Ibid., 73.

[42] Ibid., 77.

[43] Ibid., 240.

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[44] Scholars such as Talal Asad, Timothy Fitzgerald, Tomoko Masuzawa, and others, who have interrogated Western constructions of religion and the secular, suggest not an opening up of academia to multiplicities of ontological orientations as I do, but rather a relentlessly secularized scholarly praxis of critical analyses of power relations. For example, Fitzgerald ends *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity* with the following, "the proper study of 'religion' is the category itself in its discursive relation ship [*sic*] to 'state', 'politics', 'secular', 'sacred', 'profane', 'civility', 'barbarity'" (Fitzgerald, *Discourse,* 312). A similar sentiment is seen from Masuzawa in chapter three. Such positions arguably work to reinstitute constructions of the secular back into academia, guarding against a 'return of religion.' See the introduction of this work for a further discussion of these points, as well as chapters two and three.

[45] See Glaude Jr., *In a Shade of Blue,* and Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems,* for discussions of the "eclipse of the public," and the need to continually (re)create publics amidst changing social contexts.

When it comes to ‘religious orientations’—which is to say orientations that diverge from the ontological reductionisms so often associated with secularity—there is an uncomfortableness with what is acceptable and what is not in a secular university.[46] It becomes difficult to harness a diversity of ontological orientations as normative for academic thought within current understandings of the secular, resulting in a poverty of democratic praxis. The funneling of scholarly labor into a category of ‘not-religion’ is also associated with issues of colonialism, which will be explored more fully in the following chapters.

I worry that a concretized religion/secular binary is partly responsible for the increasingly toxic and highly partisan politics we experience today in the United States. One might even see a continued fixation on this binary as productive of *precisely* the kind of highly polarized political atmosphere we find ourselves in—one where we seem incapable of being in dialogue with those who hold different perspectives on matters of grave importance in our lives. Religion in the public sphere today often resembles the caricatured and virulent expressions of religiosity projected by secularists as the reason for a concretized religion/secular binary to be upheld in the first place. It is as if our own abjection reappears with greater affective empowerment due to our maintenance of an anachronistic, and now unhealthy, religion/secular binary. In maintaining an artificial boundary based on faulty and virulent notions of religion, secularists may empower that very same version of religion to take center stage in our public life. Its manifestation being all the more insidious now due to the large chip on its shoulder for being shunned so publicly, handicapped by its inability to be in dialogue with others (and for others to be in dialogue with religious perspectives in general), and empowered by what it deems (rightly) are forces aligned against it that are vital to our nation's future and well-being. I wonder how these oppositional embodiments of religion might change if they were to come into greater contact with non-oppositional others? Others willing to embrace and be in dialogue and friendship together, even across radical difference? Of course, it does take two to tango—though it doesn't to wonder how might I change as well by coming into greater contact with these 'others.'

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[46] “Religious orientations” in this sense are defined by the secular in a purely negative way, as ‘not-secular,’ which could be further defined as diverging from certain reductionistic ontological orientations. This, of course, completely collapses the vibrant multiplicity of religious persuasions seen throughout the human family into a faulty category of sameness. The vast diversity of the religious becomes collapsed into a faulty Western category of ‘religion.’ This does not mean that the category of religion does not have value moving forward, but rather that it cannot be defined or understood as over and against the secular. Mutatis mutanda, the same can be said for the secular, which should no longer be defined or understood as somehow ‘not-religion.’

I do not have any easy answers for these issues. No doubt there are many 'ontological orientations' which should be deemed out of bounds for scholarly endeavor (an obvious one would be white supremacy, a perhaps more difficult question arises in the case of orientations that are themselves exclusive, and thus by nature anti-pluralistic). Others, such as Gloria Anzaldúa's indigenous orientation or Howard Thurman's contemplative one (both the focus of chapter five), seem to be clear examples of valid orientations for scholarly praxis in decolonial settings, even though they fail to pass thru a test of secularity. Matters of disciplinary corralling, in any case, need not proceed through fidelity to particular methodologies or ontological reductionisms. In practice, boundaries are policed more through culture, mediated by general social arrangements, as well as idea(l)s, imagination, empathy, and openness—or a lack thereof. Part of the focus of this project is an attempt to stretch the (scholarly) boundaries of each of these, without falling into relativism.

I must admit to being haunted, for some time, by Judith Butler's reflections on "cohabitation" (a concept originally put forth by Hannah Arendt).[47] The 'choice' of whom we get to cohabit the world with is not one of our making—nor is it a choice we have any right to make, lest we champion genocide. The idea that one could make such a choice was one of the great sins of Nazi Germany, for instance. Butler's notion of cohabitation assumes an a priori demand upon our humanity. As opposed to a "social contract" position, which assumes a self-possessed subject making something like an independent "choice" of belonging (namely to the social contract of a nation-state), "that with whom we cohabit the world is something given to us, prior to choice—and even prior to any social or political contract." Cohabitation "remains the unchosen condition of all political decisions, if those political decisions are not to be genocidal."[48] What does it mean for democratic praxis to recognize that I cohabitate with others not of my own choosing? Others who are under no impetus, nor should they be, to agree with me on matters of upmost importance?[49]

According to Butler, this means "we must actively preserve the unchosen character of inclusive and plural cohabitation; we not only live with those we never chose and to whom we may feel no social sense of belonging, but we are also obligated to preserve their lives and the plurality of which they form a part."[50] This is not so much a methodology as a somewhat troubling, imaginative, empathic, and tenderly regulating idea(l). Perhaps one might call it more an atmosphere than a prescription. Atmospherics of sensitivity and intimate encounter, making way for liminal spaces of democratic and decolonial praxis. Such atmospherics will be the focus of chapter four.

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[47] Butler, *Parting Ways*. Butler develops her theory specifically in the context of Israel and issues of bi-nationalism and the Palestinian people.

[48] Ibid., 100.

[49] This, once again, is the *aporia* of pluralistic democracy.

First, however, I wish to take a closer look at how *rhetoric of the secular* operates in the academic study of religion. In the following chapter, I will hone in on ways in which this rhetoric is utilized, as well as why it inhibits decolonial praxis. In the third chapter, I investigate more closely the relationship between secularity and its abjected other, namely theology. Having then drawn a capacious landscape of the issues, a more liminal, constructive, and imaginal exploration might commence—beginning with such atmospherics.

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[50] Butler, *Parting Ways*, 151.

CHAPTER TWO

RHETORIC OF THE SECULAR AND THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF RELIGION

> *Can the subject of South Asian religions, normally regarded as a particular, be regarded as something that actively shares in the universal? Can we consider South Asian religious phenomena sharable with the rest of humanity?*
>
> —Arvind Mandair, "The Repetition of Past Imperialisms"[1]

Introductory Thoughts

The academic study of religion occupies a unique space in the ecology of university life, in that it is centered precisely around the Western construct of a religion/secular binary. Today, for some working in the academic study of religion, to take religious referents, ideas, philosophies, and orientations as normative sources for theorization is seen as inappropriate, a transgression of the secular academy. The claim is that the presumption of certain ontological reductionisms should be normative for the academic study of religion. In the previous chapter, I argued that such an understanding is beholden to an anachronistic religion/secular binary, and that today such a binary should be reconsidered.

In this chapter, I concentrate on revealing some of the problematic assumptions that come with presuppositions of secularist ontologies. The main part of the chapter consists of an analysis of two essays from well-known scholars in the study of religion. The first comes from Russell McCutcheon, on the study of religion and its relationship with theology, and thus a relevant essay for my purposes here. The second is an influential essay by Robert Sharf on the category of "experience." Sharf's essay was part of a larger trend in academia, continuing to this day, that rejected the category of "experience" as having validity for scholarly praxis. My critique of these two essays is not a critique of McCutcheon's or Sharf's work in general, and certainly is not meant in any way as a review of their overall contributions to the field (I limit myself specifically to these two essays). The essays rather offer me strategic ways to present examples of what I call *rhetoric of the secular,* putting some sinews, flesh and bones on the nascent term introduced in chapter one.[2]

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[1] Mandair, "The Repetition of Past Imperialisms," 298-299.

The critique of Sharf's essay also serves as an introduction to another concept related to rhetoric of the secular, that of *essentializing non-sequiturs*, often seen in analyses of power. In particular, I will examine how appropriate, or not, analyses of power are when directed specifically towards the category of "experience." I conclude that when such analyses attempt to become hegemonic, they become problematic. The play for hegemony is seen to proceed through impositions of hard constructivist frameworks. By calling them 'problematic,' I mean to signal that such analyses can (even unintentionally) move against atmospherics of democratic and decolonial praxis—and hence their own potential—when they work to collapse liminal spaces that open up. Such liminal spaces are essential for democratic praxis, as will be argued extensively in chapters four and five. While acknowledging the helpful insights brought to bear through such analysis, I hope to increase their effectiveness for democratic praxis through a sober reckoning of problematic elements. I do not mean to eliminate them.

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[2] For another essay that analyzes rhetoric of the secular, see McEntee, "Theology Without Walls's Potential as Decolonial & Democratic Praxis."

After performing a somewhat detailed analysis of the essays, I undergird my arguments with work from religious studies' scholar Arvind Mandair. Mandair's work introduces what he calls "the return of the imperial as the empirical" as a "repetition of the colonial event," highlighting the objectifying nature of a Western, scholarly, secularist gaze—as well as ways in which such a gaze hinders decolonial praxis. Overall, this chapter gives form to much of the critique of the secular found in chapter one. As such, a review of the arguments found there is in order.

In the previous chapter I articulated two different concepts of the secular. One concept was undergirded by democratic principles in a religiously pluralistic society, specifically freedom *of* religious practice and freedom *from* religious coercion. A second concept was undergirded by reductive ontological gazes, which I dub now a *secularist gaze*, which often appears in the guise of a hard constructivism (essentializing the notion of social construction as encompassing of human meaning and understanding) or scientific materialism. As we saw, this second concept of the secular remains beholden to a religion/secular binary. My claim was that these two conceptions of the secular form an unconscious bond when they are uncritically collapsed into one, a bond that works against robust democratic praxis in academia. I also argued, for reasons related to the need for an "ideologically neutral" government in pluralistic democratic societies, that much of the responsibility for inculcating democratic norms and practices falls to the locus of professional educators and thinkers within society, namely to the academy. In latter chapters, I will explore more amenable possibilities for democratic praxis, investigating liminal spaces between religious studies, comparative theology, cross-cultural philosophy, philosophy as a way of life, and contemplative studies. Part of my argument is that in a decolonial, religiously pluralistic democracy, the naturalized delineations between religious studies, philosophy, and theology undergo significant blurring, and liminal spaces which speak to new disciplinary possibilities arise.

Within this second understanding of the secular, I went on to investigate the secular as a constructed space of values and preferred ontological orientations. The secular as defined in opposition to 'religion' was seen as an anachronistic understanding today, contributing to unhealthy practices of an arguably colonial nature, as is demonstrated further below. Finally, I concluded with a recontextualization of the secular outside modernity's religion/secular binary. In this sense, the secular becomes denotive of our historical situatedness and its embeddedness in a pluralistic, religiously diverse democracy. I also claimed, importantly, that so-called secular perspectives are also *religious* stances, when seen as orientations towards the nature of reality (or what I called "ontological orientations"). This argument continues to gain legs in this chapter.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the secular should not be used as a metonym for the rational, the scholarly, or the academic. If anything, the secular should be interpreted today as a sociological reality that accents the rise of emergent cultural spaces amongst increasing pluralization. These emergent cultural spaces—seen as liminal, empathic, and imaginative spaces of encounter amongst difference—are needed for democratic praxis. Such a need will be articulated by numerous theorists in chapter four. I argue that the term 'secular academy' should thus signal a need to inculcate democratic praxis amidst radical diversity, and not a naturalization of secularist gazes. As a consequence of this reorientation, no particular ontological orientation should be uncritically assumed as normative for the secular academy. A further corollary can be stated as the following: particularized ontological orientations should be stated outright rather than hidden behind ‘rhetoric of the secular.’

My aim in this chapter then is to highlight how rhetoric of the secular operates within the academic study of religion, and to further point out some of the problematic consequences. Rhetoric of the secular often slips in “unnoticed below the radar screen,” as Timothy Fitzgerald put it so well in the last chapter.[3] By doing so, a neutral, secular space of rationality is invented. This supposedly neutral space “naturalizes” specific ontological orientations and collapses diversity. Often, this is accomplished through a secularist denial of ontology all together, thus repressing their own ontological orientations from public contestation. However, to loosely paraphrase William James, “we all have an ‘ontological orientation’ under our hat.”[4] The problems with such stances will hopefully become clear in the analyses that follow.

When vast differences of religious thought, East and West, North and South, are collapsed into a single category of religion, complex problematics arise. In addition to the collapse of difference itself that occurs, an even more insidious problematic arises when such a collapse is then juxtaposed with reductive ontologies (i.e., placed within an unhealthy religion/secular binary). While the collapse of difference under a category of religion is somewhat mitigated by an understanding that there are vast differences amongst religious traditions, expressions, and practices (and hence I do not believe the category of religion is itself hopelessly problematic), the same cannot be said about an unhealthy religion/secular binary. This is precisely where the "colonial" problem arises.

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[3] Fitzgerald, *Discourse,* 32.

[4] James was referring to specifically to philosophy. On this point, see also Schwartz, “Philosophy is Not Just for Philosophers.”

Given that the secular only arose along modern, Western trajectories of thought, perspectives from outside such a trajectory—for example those arising from Indigenous thought-traditions, Buddhist, Sikh, Hindu, Ru (Confucian), Daoist, and other Eastern ways of thinking—are in some sense ipso facto "religious" modes of thought. Yet, they are not "religious" in the same sense as say, Christianity, and thus are not "religious" in the sense that they can be juxtaposed with "the secular." In other words, many modes of non-Western thought are often religious in both a kind of common-sense understanding, as well as in the sense that a secular sphere was never invented within their thought-worlds. However, they are *not* religious in the sense of subsisting on one side of a religion/secular binary.

To utilize such modes of thought as normative sources for scholarly theory is to then simultaneously complexify the notion of a secular academy. For example, to 'think with' indigenous modes of thought *is* to think "religiously," at least in some sense, just not in the sense of a religion/secular binary. This is why an understanding of secularization as pluralization, as opposed to some binary notion with the Western constructed category of 'religion,' is so important. Concomitantly, to exclude religious thinking from a secular academy is to *a priori* exclude many modes of thought, such as Indigenous and Eastern ways of thinking, as unworthy of scholarly praxis. To dismiss out of hand modes of scholarly praxis because they transgress Western trajectories of thought can surely be described as colonial, and is not a stance that a secular academy should take (or so I argue).

Not only does this stance exclude Indigenous, Eastern, and many other modes of thought, it also utterly collapses them into a singular category of ‘religion.’ Religion, in this sense, becomes ostensibly defined by what it is not, namely the secular. The secular in turn becomes defined by particular ontologically reductive orientations, orientations which developed along uniquely Western historical trajectories. Thus, the preferred ontological orientation of the secularist is made both implicitly and explicitly normative for academic knowledge production, while simultaneously ostracizing all ‘other’ orientations from which scholarly thought might be performed. My claim is that such (il)licit relationships are unsuited to the education of a radically diverse, democratic society, and particularly to the inculcation of democratic praxis as outlined in future chapters. To normalize multiplicities of ontological orientations as acceptable for scholarly labor is one way in which such democratic praxis might proceed. This chapter thus sets up consideration of emergent spaces of theorization and academic disciplinary formations in the following chapters. First however, I must show how these subtle yet powerful impositions act, as Fitzgerald put it, “far more powerfully as a tacit organizer of the rhetorical flows which we inhale in our day-to-day discourse.”[5]

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[5] Fitzgerald, *Discourse,* 32.

McCutcheon's Theodicy

Russell McCutcheon has produced voluminous work critiquing a *sui generis* construction of religion, and argues instead for a social science and critical theory approach to the study of religion. In doing so, McCutcheon embeds the study of religion within reductive ontological orientations that deny the reality of religious referents and experiences. I would like to emphasize, as mentioned above, that my intention here is not a review McCutcheon's extensive work. Rather, I analyze a single essay in order to draw attention to what I see as clear example of how rhetoric of the secular operates. The rhetoric gets encoded in terms that carry with them a certain weight and respect, such as *scholarly*, *academic*, *rational*, *natural*, *secular*, or the context of a *public secular academy*. They carry with them a certain cultural cache that unconsciously perpetuates rhetoric of the secular. The essay I analyze, "The Study of Religion as an Anthropology of Credibility," appears as the opening essay of the edited volume, *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain.* Given my overall focus, it is thus a relevant one to highlight.

McCutcheon begins the essay by expressing a "weariness" in having to address questions on the relationship between theology and religious studies. He believes that such questions have been answered long ago, "possibly as early as David Hume's theory."[6] Yet today we live in a radically different milieu from Hume, where multitudes of diverse religious, ethnic, and racial orientations exist side by side. In addition, we live within a democratic state (in the U.S.) that has encoded a sophisticated break between hegemonic religious authority and the coercive power of the state (the continued existence and power of white Christian nationalists notwithstanding). The very fact that the answer to such a question—as to the normative stance for the study of religion—could have possibly been decided by Hume, given his own *saeculum* more than two hundred years past, should alert us to the possibility (or even probability) of problematic presuppositions. If we already knew how to study religion before even encountering religious 'others' respectfully—or at least others outside of Christianity—it is highly unlikely that such studies might aid decolonial work.

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[6] McCutcheon, "Study," 13.

McCutcheon tells us:

> [I]t seems with the arrival of every new generation of scholars, we find a renewed assault on the distinction between scholarship on the enduring meaning and value of religion, *scholarship aimed at promoting one or another form of the object under study*, on the one hand, and, on the other, scholarship on the origins and functions of religion, where religion is conceived as but one among a species of ordinary cultural practices. (emphasis mine)[7]

Notice how McCutcheon characterizes scholarship on religion by constructing a binary of such scholarship. On the one hand is his own preferred approach—a social-critical theorist approach where religion is conceived as "ordinary cultural practices" within a secularist framing—and on the other hand is an alternate approach that is 'not' his. This other approach apparently consists of "promoting" something. What does it promote? "An object of study." Already encoded into this short sentence are three glaring issues for the study of religion in a pluralistic democratic society.

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[7] Ibid., 13.

First, there is the issue of "promoting." The idea is that anything other than McCutcheon's approach to religion is, *a priori*, in some sense 'confessional' and even evangelizing ("promoting").[8] Second, what is being promoted has already become an "object," apparently something one can quite easily gain ahold of and study without "promoting" said object. Third, an entire range of diverse scholarly perspectives and their subtle multiplicities have been collapsed into a single catch-all—one that can only be described by what they are not, namely the 'other' of McCutcheon's approach to the study of religion. Further, all of this is accomplished under the guise of describing an *alternate* methodology to his own, in a sentence that might at first glance appear quite common sensical—which is precisely how rhetoric of the secular operates. Yet inscribed in this short sentence one already finds a caricaturing, homogenizing, and objectifying logic leaking in, ineluctably whistling past a (supposed) graveyard that stubbornly keeps appearing, like an apparition, in each new generation. Hence the "weariness."

McCutcheon goes on to relate an odd feeling he had attending a lecture by John Cobb as his university. Cobb, as we recall from the introduction, is the process philosopher/theologian who has offered his own sophisticated critique of the disciplinary organization of the academy. McCutcheon, he confesses, could not see himself "either as Cobb's colleague or dialogue partner." Rather, Cobb, for McCutcheon, is reduced to the status of data by the objectifying gaze of the anthropologist. This is not a polemical statement by me, but rather McCutcheon's own self-disclosure: McCutcheon sees himself as "gathering descriptive data for later theoretical reworking," as an "anthropologist might attend a ritual."[9] He describes theologians as privileged "elite religious practitioners" (can't argue there), involved in "influential mythmaking." An obvious question arises at this point: How is what McCutcheon calls "mythmaking" different from his own approach? This is a question McCutcheon attempts to address head-on, and as we will see below, his delineations are telling.

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[8] It is perhaps important for this discussion to simply state outright that I do not believe that evangelization of any religious stance has a place in our public university system, or for that matter in a private liberal arts college that is not explicitly oriented towards a particular religious outlook. However, evangelization is inherently different from 'thinking with,' or from developing one's own perspectives, and certainly cannot be correlated with ontological orientations that do not align with a hard constructivism. Again, we see a kind of rhetorically loaded binary construction here between a hard constructivism, and the piling together of everything else into some other category of 'not-hard-constructivism' that then gets pigeonholed as 'religious' and therefore as unworthy of scholarly praxis. 'Thinking with,' however, is not the same as 'thinking of' or 'thinking from' (see the introduction for more on this point).

The problematic nature of McCutcheon's stance lies not so much in developing a social-critical perspective *per se*, from which we all might have much to learn, but rather in claiming a privileged perspective for an objectifying methodological lens. To recall Cobb's disciplinary critique from the introduction, such an approach abstracts from the whole, concretizes what it finds, and then masquerades as a hegemonic methodology for a 'secular' academy. A further and perhaps more insidious problem lies in the way certain secularist perspectives function as to erode democratic sensibilities—objectifying others precisely in the areas that are of greatest value to them. Objectifying methodologies can inhibit (if not destroy) one's ability to be in respectful dialogue across differences (which, I might add, sounds a *whole lot* like our polarized, partisan politics today). Cobb could never be a dialogue partner for McCutcheon because Cobb's alternative orientation towards the nature of reality, his 'ontological orientation,' simply disqualifies him from a milieu of (secular) academic respectability. Given academia's place as incubator of democratic norms, one must wonder if such secularist gazes—and their objectifying logics—are contributing to a palpable lack of ability to be in dialogue across difference in this country more broadly.[10] In a religiously diverse, democratic society aiming to decolonize its culture, spaces for differing ontological orientations to exist in symbiotic relationships (sometimes synergistic, other times agonistic) is a crucial aspect of democratic praxis.

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[9] McCutcheon, "Study," 14.

McCutcheon goes on to explain the difference between "mythmaking"—what theologians or even humanists do—and "theorization," which supposedly is what he is doing. The difference seems to revolve around reflection on any "deeper truth or meaning," which appears as a kind of a definition for mythmaking. In other words, anyone who reflects on a deeper meaning of religion (or anything else for that matter) would seem to be engaged in "mythmaking." Alternatively, the first step on the road to "theorization" consists of relegating anyone (or anything) that reflects on "deeper truth or meaning" into concretized data for theorization. Above, for example, Cobb is not a living, breathing, human being with insight and critical thinking skills that one can be in dialogue with, learn from, and argue with—but rather becomes a kind of anthropological relic, a concretized object for the secularist gaze, a form of *data*.

I must admit that McCutcheon's section on this point, entitled "Mythmaking vs. Theorization," strikes me as a bit of an exercise in circular thinking. He begins by claiming that any system of thought which fails to presume an essentially hard constructivist position immediately becomes “a candidate for the status of data.”[11] Once a hard constructivist position has been assured—by relegating all else to the status of data—the second step in “theorization” consists of “situating [social or cultural or religious ‘worlds’] within their contexts, explaining their attraction to people, accounting for both their endurance and their change over time, etc.” Such “theorization,” of course, has already rejected the possibility of anything *other* than a hard constructivism seeping in. Thus, in situating, researching, and analyzing religious worlds, the only acceptable, normative ontological orientation for scholarly production is a secularist one. Anything other than the specific, ontologically reductive (and objectifying) gaze McCutcheon adopts, is immediately reduced to the “status for data,” and literally named “mythmaking” as opposed to “theorization.” That is, *any* perspective that might challenge McCutcheon’s secularist gaze is dubbed, a priori, as *non-theorization*. Thus, they should be specifically “excluded” from the “academic study of religion,” as what McCutcheon calls “totalizing discourses.”[12] Yet, might we not ask whether the ability to slip underneath the screen of the secular academy, as a supposed space of neutrality, rationality, and most importantly, 'not-religion,' constitutes its own totalizing discourse?

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[10] This does not mean I am blaming, as causative, certain secularist stances in academia for our partisan politics—and certainly not McCutcheon himself—merely pointing out that there may be a (perhaps stronger than we think) correlation between maintaining an anachronistic religion/secular binary and our current, heavily partisan, political manifestations.

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[11] McCutcheon begins this section with the following sentence: “Any system of thought and practice that fails to presume 1 and 2 is a candidate for the status of data.” “1” is essentially a hard constructivist perspective (which hinges in this case on one’s definition of what is “natural”): “Those approaches to be excluded (i.e., those approaches that are themselves instances of data) are those that (i) presume the natural world to be the tip of an unperceivable, supernatural, or ahistoric world and (ii) presume that the underlying principle, workings, meaning, or purposes of both this natural world and the supernatural world can be known by those possessing special, gifted, intuitive, or privileged knowledge/wisdom.” “2” is a “pluralistic methodological reductionism” that recognizes a “variety of methods” are needed to examine how and why (“in an academic manner”) people create such social constructions. Note that McCutcheon’s “pluralistic methodological reductionism” consists of techniques of analysis that one enters into only *after* a hard constructivist position has been assumed. In other words, the “pluralistic” part of the methodological reductionism is not very pluralistic, but rather very narrowly circumscribed to consist only of a “variety of methods” that assume, a priori, a particularized ontological orientation, namely of a hard constructivist variety (McCutcheon, 18).

[12] Ibid., 17-18.

It appears obvious that McCutcheon's "theorization" indeed embodies its own totalizing discourse, and thus is also "mythmaking." A discourse so breathtakingly totalizing that, by definition, all other perspectives are immediately and forever relegated to a dead, concretized status of "data." This is the exact opposite of the type of multifarious, religious and spiritual becoming envisioned by Walt Whitman at the "core of democracy."

McCutcheon writes that self-aware scholars, who contextualize themselves as also doing social construction in their work, obtain a certain kind of "ironic" objectivity by coming clean with "their own curiosities."[13] However, I don't think McCutcheon is actually coming clean in the way he perceives himself to be doing. At the same time, there are numerous scholars, including many theologians, who take seriously our contextual embeddedness and the important insights flowing from secular-critical discourse. Such scholars are able to *theorize* perspectives on our human embeddedness in 'worlds' that exceed yet interact with both the material cosmos and socially constructed human understanding (as, for instance, process-thinkers such as John Cobb have done). That is, they are able to take seriously the importance of social construction, yet do not necessarily adopt a hard constructivist stance, nor does thinking 'religiously' prevent them from thinking 'critically.' The fact that McCutcheon continually implies (or assumes) throughout his essay that a particularized ontological orientation of the hard constructivist variety is what constitutes something as "academic" is revealing of unconscious lines of power operating in rhetoric of the secular.

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[13] Ibid., 18.

Consider the following sentences scattered throughout the essay (with my own emphasis added to each):

1) "Although not all of the *scholar of religion's* data will come from the ranks of theologians … *all theologians are fair game as data*"[14] (first emphasis added)

2) "Unlike theologians, assorted other religious practitioners, and even liberal humanists … *scholars of religion* go beyond mere description and comparison as to inquire as to *why* people find such beliefs, behaviors, and institutions attractive, compelling, effective, and worthy of reproducing"[15] (first emphasis added)

3) "I provide the following assumptions that drive the *anthropological study of religion* as I understand it"[16] (emphasis added)

4) "the *academic study of religion*…turns out to be an exercise in (i) determining the limits of what social groups understand as credible and (ii) identifying the mechanisms used to police and contest those limits"[17] (emphasis added)

5) "our work presumes the ambiguous, ad hoc nature of all social activity—scholarship included—making the *academic study of religion* tactical, problem oriented, and ironic. As a cultural critic, the *anthropologically based scholar of religion's* contribution is therefore made as a *scholar of classification and social rhetoric*"[18] (emphasis added)

When looking at example 1), we may infer that anyone who does not adopt McCutcheon's hard constructivism will be classified as a "theologian," and thus *not* as a "scholar of religion." For to have an ontologically capacious, multi-dimensional perspective on reality is to be relegated to the status of data for the true scholar of religion. Regarding example 2), note that "scholars of religion" attempt to inquire as to "why" people find religious life compelling. What is excluded, a priori, from such inquiry is the possibility (even probability) that religious life is so compelling for so many because human religiosity has referents in reality, and human consciousness has the potential to experience, actualize, and orient around such referents. This would be a perfectly plausible hypothesis for which much evidence could be marshaled, yet is clearly excluded as a basis of reflection for the so-called "scholar of religion."

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[14] Ibid., 14.

[15] Ibid., 15.

[16] Ibid., 17.

[17] Ibid., 25.

[18] Ibid., 26.

Example 3) comes closer to the mark, yet still remains essentially problematic. Here McCutcheon self-identifies within the "anthropological study of religion." The "assumptions" of the field McCutcheon goes on to describe are those already discussed above, mainly a hard constructivist viewpoint along with the mythmaking vs. theorization binary. The problem with equating the "anthropological study of religion" with McCutcheon's hard constructivism is that not all anthropologists of religion adopt such a perspective. For example, the Sri Lankan anthropologist of religion, Gananath Obeyesekere, explicitly rejects a Westernized stance of hard constructivism in order to think normatively from his own Sri Lankan upbringing within a Buddhist worldview. Obeyesekere refuses "to be tied down" to Western epistemologies, and develops his position in detail (and in dialogue with Western philosophy), going on to theorize a kind of "trance consciousness" in religious experience that embodies different traits of knowing, such as multi-valent experiences of "time" and what he calls "aphoristic thinking." Obeyesekere notes, importantly, that "every society outside the European

Enlightenment held that…forms of trance were desirable experiences, even though difficult to achieve."[19]

My interest at this point is not in Obeyesekere's theory (though I do find it interesting). Rather, it lies in pointing out that McCutcheon's description of what constitutes the "anthropological study of religion" belies a kind of unconscious (and perhaps colonial) rhetoric of power. McCutcheon seemingly relegates a Sri Lankan anthropologist, such as Obeyesekere, to a marginalized corner of academia that is in some sense unworthy of scholarly production. I am relatively sure that this is not McCutcheon's intention, which is what makes bringing such things into awareness all the more important (this is a 'call-in,' and not a 'call-out'). Such rhetoric points towards unacknowledged ethnic dimensions in our constructions of a secular academy, dimensions we are *all* enmeshed in. I note the fact, as mentioned by Obeyesekere, that modern Western ontological orientations of a hard scientism or hard constructivism are something of an anomaly in all of human history. Given that they have emerged through problematic entanglements with histories of colonialism and racism, we should remain alert for rhetorical impositions that result in denigration or exclusion, or what Mandair calls below the "return of the imperial as the empirical."

Finally, in examples 4) and 5), we find the terms "academic," "scholarly," and "anthropologically based" clearly utilized as adjectives for the "study of religion," meant to denote such an endeavor as beholden to a relentless gaze of hard constructivism. Hence, McCutcheon once again (consciously or unconsciously) equates 'academic,'

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[19] Obeyesekere, *The Awakened Ones,* 1, 21.

‘scholarly,’ and ‘anthropologically based’ with a hard constructivism. What I’ve tried to show is how this hard constructivist gaze gets subsumed, particularly in the terms ‘academic’ and ‘scholarly,’ as a rhetorical performance that denigrates and delegitimizes any approaches other than its own. By homogenizing the terms ‘academic’ and ‘scholarly’ in this way, rhetoric of the secular induces a kind of hegemonic imposition upon alternative perspectives. Note as well that McCutcheon both implicitly and explicitly contrasts his approach with ‘theology.’ In the following chapter, I take a closer look at this incessant need to prescind oneself from theology.

McCutcheon makes clear that he views his methodological preferences as “the only viable option” for the study of religion in a public, secular academy. He makes such a claim while describing a religiously diverse society also composed of agnostics and atheists “who equally pay taxes to support the education system.”[20] Yet, he seems to fail to realize at this point that those who do not hold to a hard constructivism *also* pay taxes and support the education system. This is more or less precisely how the term ‘secular academy,’ so ubiquitous in its use, often undergirds particularized ontological orientations rather than democratic praxis. Rhetoric of the secular draws power from the secular’s encoding as a *treasured aspect of our democratic ideals* to establish, in the slippage of the term’s use, *a normative stance within academia*.[21] What happens, one might ask, when we continue to drive a wedge between these two uses of the secular?

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[20] McCutcheon, “Study,” 15.

[21] On the one hand, we refer to the democratic ideals enshrined in the U.S. Constitution as neither facilitating the establishment of a particular religious view *nor* prohibiting the free exercise of religious participation. On the other hand, we have a reductive and objectifying hard constructivism. One suggestion is that, at least in certain cases, we might substitute terms like ‘democratic ideals’ or ‘democratic practice’ for the first meaning, and ‘hard constructivism’ for the second, to make clear our meaning rather than subsuming both under the guise of ‘the secular.’ For instance, one might state “In a public university where

In other words, I am interested in what happens when we reframe the secular as descriptive of our *saeculum*, in which multifarious milieus embody multiplicities of reason giving trajectories.[22] From this perspective, a hard constructivism can be reencoded as a *religious* orientation. That is, as a "comprehensive qualitative orientation," or as an ontological orientation that delineates a particular view of the nature of reality.[23] Thus, a hard constructivism appears as one amongst a vibrant multiplicity of such orientations—and should be treated as such. Subsequently, a definition of academic viability that requires a particularized 'religious' orientation is uncalled for. For is such a stance not its own form of evangelization? Namely, evangelization of a hard constructivist ontology? Or does one accept that a hard constructivism isn't really an ontological orientation at all, merely a surprisingly convenient "methodological reductionism?" A methodological reductionism that just happens to correlate with the ('religious') views of a certain minority of the population who happen to play a highly outsized role in academia? Such a proposition begins to smell a little fishy—particularly for a supposed "neutral" space of "rationality."

I do not believe the matter can be relegated to methodological reductionism. I am not suggesting that the work McCutcheon describes is not "academic" (I leave aside for now arguments either for or against an objectifying gaze), but rather that it would be more appropriate to describe such work as something like "constructivist anthropological

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we practice democratic values the study of religion should be (so and so…)." Or on the other hand, "utilizing a hard constructivist methodological reductionism for the study of religion (so and so…)."

[22] As Jeffery Stout and Charles Taylor articulated in chapter one.

[23] "Comprehensive qualitative orientation" refers to John Thatamanil's definition of the religious, discussed more in chapter six. See also Thatamanil, *Circling*, 152-192.

studies of religion," or a "constructivist critical theory of religion," or "constructivist sociology of religion." At the very least, the insistent use of monikers like 'academic,' 'scholarly,' and 'secular' to signal hard constructivism as normative is problematic.[24]

What happens, however, once the secular becomes pluralized, as it were? Might McCutcheon himself appear as a closet "theologian?" In becoming aware of the constructed nature of the categories of religion and the secular something of a cosmic irony—as opposed to a self-aware one—begins to dawn. In the conclusion to his essay, McCutcheon begins to display something of this cosmic irony.

McCutcheon's conclusion looks to analyze theodicy, or the problem of evil. Evil, of course, for McCutcheon is not something real, but rather a way that human beings attempt to form totalizing theories. Evil is an invention humans use to make sense of why the "natural" world does not conform to their 'worlds' (i.e., their socially constructed theories about what the natural world should be). As an example, McCutcheon offers the following quotation from the *New York Times,* from a sixteen-year-old high school sophomore, discussing the 1999 Columbine school shooting massacre: "All those people died for a reason. God was with them every step of the way… He chose them for some special reason."[25] The girl's justifications, or her "theodicy," serve to insulate her from the paradoxes inherent in her religious orientations (e.g., God is good, yet bad things happen). This allows her to maintain her faith in the face of evidence to the contrary, and at the same time functions politically to maintain the power structures of her religious community.

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[24] I should also note, and to be fair, that McCutcheon is well-aware there are other fields that study religion apart from his suggestions for the field. In fact, he makes an intriguing point in a footnote that parallels my own suggestions in later chapters for a rapprochement of religious studies and non-evangelizing theology (particularly in its interreligious forms). McCutcheon notes that "academic theology" is similar in form to the work of "phenomenologists and liberal humanists in general," and thus might be considered as part of "*religious* studies," as opposed to what he is calling "the academic study of religion" (McCutcheon, "Study", 28 fn 11). This, of course, does not address the rhetorical issue, but does show McCutcheon's openness (perhaps?) to 'non-hard constructivist' modes of scholarly work. However, given what we have seen, it does not seem McCutcheon would want to allow any such work into public, so-called secular universities.

[25] McCutcheon, "Study," 22.

McCutcheon concludes that theodicy is thus an attempt "to make an ambiguous, natural world totally intelligible, knowable, and controllable." A theodicy is also a play for "overt political justification and the exercise of power." For McCutcheon, then, a theodicy is always "symptomatic of cognitive nausea," an attempt to make sense of a "divergence" between beliefs and experience. In summing up his position, McCutcheon describes theodicies as allowing "participants to gloss over anomalous experiences and observations," rationalizing them in order to legitimize their religious beliefs.[26] What McCutcheon calls the "public scholar of religion" studies how such tropes are artfully deployed in order to create "an economy efficiently managed by cognitive and social classifications that delineate this from that, important from unimportant…us from them."[27]

Once one is able to separate the rational from the secular, however (and in particular from a hard constructivism), one might reassess the distinctions McCutcheon makes between his own work, and that of "theodicy." Let's assume, for the sake of argument, a view of reality that diverges from a hard constructivist one, where the nature of reality and humanity's experience thereof exceeds both a scientific materialism and our limited social context (without necessarily discounting those aspects of the world).[28] For example, many of the world's contemplative traditions today embrace the importance of scientific thinking as well as social context, yet also experience the reality of religious referents, such as *theosis (*"divinization"), *bodhi* ("awakening"), or *moksha* ("liberation"). How might one view McCutcheon's theoretical work from such an orientation?

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[26] Ibid., 21-23.

[27] Ibid., 25. Certainly, there is something to McCutcheon's analysis here. However, his example is not really an example of a "theodicy," in the sense of engaging with a respected theologian who has thought through troubling issues, but rather the somewhat flippant (though perhaps deeply held) belief of a sixteen year-old. I remain troubled by the way in which this mode of analysis often finds itself not in dialogue with other scholars thinking deeply about religious matters, nor with sophisticated theological articulations of traditions, but rather with sometimes caricatured and (from my perspective at least) fundamentalist and immature forms of religiosity. As another example of "theodicy," for instance, McCutcheon refers to a Pentecostal snake handler who gets bitten by a rattlesnake, and then proclaims, "It was God's will but the devil's work" (Ibid., 20).

First, it would seem apparent that McCutcheon attempts to reduce the world, *a priori*, to a hard constructivist ontology, which he then utilizes for purposes of theorization. In doing so, he attempts to make sense of a "natural" world that perhaps does not conform to his own hard constructivist orientation. That is, within McCutcheon's 'world' (i.e., his socially constructed view of reality), religious referents clearly have no reality beyond their socially constructed utility.[29] Actual *experiences* of religious realities, such as of evil, or the presence of God, or awakening to nirvana, or the advaitic identity between *Brahman* and *atman*, or the *Dao* that cannot be named, or the literally thousands upon thousands (millions? billions?) of so-called "mystical experiences" reported throughout human history in every culture, language, and religious tradition we know of—are (within McCutcheon's 'world') nothing more than attempts by human beings to make sense of a kind of "cognitive nausea." A nausea that manifests when their views of reality do not match up with the "natural" world in which they live.

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[28] It is important to note that such a stance does not necessarily assume a complete break with materiality or social context, nor in any way a lack of empirical observation. For example, as seen in chapter six, Tibetan Buddhists practice rigorous empirical investigation and would have absolutely no notion that nirvana is *not* the "natural" world. Nirvana is explicitly the natural world rightly cognized.

[29] Or at the very least, for McCutcheon, human beings have no access to anything other than social construction, and thus cannot have any knowledge of whether religious referents are engaging actual realities.

However, one might equally say that such experiences simply appear as "anomalous" within *McCutcheon's* understanding of reality. That is, such happenings do not conform to his expectations of a "natural" world, perceived within a hard constructivist ontology. Consequently, McCutcheon experiences a kind of "cognitive nausea" in taking seriously such accounts. He thus feels a need to interpret such 'anomalous' experience, *a priori,* as nothing but socially constructed narratives, in order to legitimize his own worldview—and does so, one might add, in such a way that advances the "political justification" of his academic work and that of his peers.

In summing up this thought experiment, one might say that McCutcheon is attempting to create "an economy efficiently managed by cognitive and social classifications that delineate this from that, important from unimportant…us from them." Experiences which appear as "anomalous" to his own consciousness, worldview, belief-structure, ontological orientation, what-have-you, must be glossed over and rationalized in such a way as to legitimize his own professional work and the preferred ontological orientations of a hard constructivism. This might be done, for instance, by describing such experiences as fictional, or situating them in such a way that their real purpose is the maintenance of particular power structures. In other words, from this alternative perspective that does not assume a hard constructivist stance as normative, McCutcheon is clearly attempting to "gloss over anomalous experiences and observations," rationalizing them in order to legitimize his own ontological orientations, and attempting to deal with the "cognitive nausea" the reality of such experiences might produce.

Or, to put it more succinctly, by his own definition, McCutcheon is doing "theodicy."

The (Un)Construction of "Experience"

McCutcheon's essay showed how rhetoric of the secular attempts to link terms such as "scholarly," "academic," "natural," and "rational" to normative stances of a hard constructivism. This occurs without making an explicit argument for such a stance. Rather, a hard constructivism is assumed to be implied within the terms themselves, hence slipping in rhetoric of the secular "unnoticed below the radar screen."[30] As "experience" will be an important category for my project moving forward, it seems appropriate to extend my critique of rhetoric of the secular to Robert Sharf's popular deconstructive essay on the category of experience. Found in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Sharf argues that "experience" is no longer a valid category for scholarly use. Rather, the utilization of such a category signals an insidious imposition of power dynamics.

As Sharf narrates it, religious experience became an important concept for modern theologians as they were challenged by the imposition of scientific sensibilities, which claimed that arguments need to be verified scientifically. Consequently, theologians adopted a strategy: "By emphasizing the experiential dimension of religion—

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[30] Fitzgerald, *Discourse,* 32.

a dimension inaccessible to strictly objective modes of inquiry—the theologian could forestall scientific critique."[31] This strategy led to the inner, private, experiential world becoming the proper realm of religious truth claims, while the outside, objective world could be left to the scientists.

According to Sharf, religious studies also experienced a similar problem. The scholar of religion was challenged by more science-based disciplines, such as sociology or anthropology, as they began to study religion. These disciplines could claim to "possess the requisite tools for the analysis of religion," and hence "threatened to put the religion specialist out of a job. By construing religion as pertaining to a distinct mode of 'experience,' the scholar of religion could argue that it ultimately eludes the grasp of other more empirically oriented disciplines." Thus, Sharf concludes, scholars of religion utilized the concept of religious experience out of a "vested interest in the existence of irreducibly *religious* phenomena over which they can claim special authority."[32] Let me simply note for now how Sharf's argument hangs on accusations of the personal, self-serving motivations of theologians and scholars of religion. For Sharf, their use of the category of experience is more about political motivation rather than any authentic theoretical, or even religious, motivations. Let me also note how this analysis of power relations first embeds reality into a hard constructivist framework, and only then turns towards analyzing machinations of power. Subsequently, there is simply no need to consider the possible reality of actual religious experience. This is rhetoric of the secular in action, assuming a hard constructivism as normative. After making this assumption, Sharf applies a lens of power dynamics where self-interest becomes the primary motivation for human interactions.[33]

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[31] Sharf, "Experience," 95.

[32] Ibid., emphasis original.

The category of experience, according to Sharf, is able to engage successfully in power politics because the category itself "resists definition."[34] In referring to an "immediacy of perception," experience becomes what Sharf calls "nonobjective," and in this sense "resists all signification." For Sharf, what distinguishes personal experience from "objective reality" is precisely this "unremitting indeterminacy," and thus "the category of experience is, in essence, a mere placeholder that entails a substantive if indeterminate terminus for the relentless deferral of meaning." Because experience cannot offer any "possible discursive meaning or signification," and further, "cannot make ostensible a *something that exists in the world*" (emphasis original), the use of the term can only signal rhetorical machinations of power.[35]

What are these machinations of power? One of them, for Sharf, lies in applying the idea of religious experience cross-culturally and diachronically. Making reference to Wayne Proudfoot's work, Sharf makes the (somewhat jaw-dropping) claim that no other culture outside modern Enlightenment Europe has ever had a concept of "religious experience" (a notion Proudfoot traces to the 19th century German theologian Friedrich

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[33] Analyses of power dynamics often paint a highly negative image of the world. First, everything becomes encompassed within a hard constructivism. Second, everything moves according to selfish power dynamics.

[34] Sharf, "Experience," 94.

[35] Ibid., 113-114.

Schleiermacher).[36] Thus, Sharf sees what he calls "rhetoric of experience" not as being about experiential-transformative potentialities of embodied human consciousness (as I might), but rather as a tool that is used to "thwart the authority of the 'objective' or the 'empirical,' and to valorize instead the subjective, the personal, the private."[37] Note here how Sharf implicitly grants "authority" to the "objective" and the "empirical," an authority that then must be "thwarted" by a rhetoric of experience. This is another example of rhetoric of the secular, continuing to encode reality into a hard constructivist framework.

Sharf goes on to show that various Buddhist lineages argue about the actual nature of experiences. They contest terms such as *satori, samatha, vipassana,* and *kensho,* in order to argue for the supremacy of their particular lineage and practices. He then suggests that this definitively shows that "rhetoric of experience" is about power rather than actual experience. The validity of meditative experience is not based on actual experience, according to Sharf, but rather on "the basis of eminently public criteria." Such public criteria include the lineage of a practitioner, social and economic status, education, ideological commitments, etc. Thus, "In the end, the Buddhist rhetoric of experience is both informed by, and wielded in, the interests of personal and institutional authority."[38]

Granting that Sharf may be on to something in how Western scholars have sometimes viewed religious experience across traditions, I do not see how Sharf's reductive (and even hostile) conclusion follows. The fact that discourse on experience may operate at times within contested power relations does not equate to the statement that Buddhist religiosity has nothing to do with experience. (Or as Sharf has put it elsewhere, that Buddhist religious experience is not about actual experience but rather "ritualistic performances" or "public enactments of enlightenment").[39] This is an example of what I call an *essentializing non-sequitur*, a move that can often be found in other genealogical work and analyses of power. The conclusion simply does not follow logically from the premise. Given 'A'—that there exists a contestation of power relations inflected by social context over the nature of experience (e.g., over what experiences constitute awakening, or what practices are best to obtain awakening, etc.)—then 'B'—that *actual* experience is just a side show, a "rhetoric" for upholding social hierarchies. These things simply do not logically follow from one another, *unless* you are already locked into a secularist gaze that sees the world as primarily socially constructed contestation and struggle. Such a move is "essentializing" because it makes power games the *essential* thing about, well, everything. For one who does not already hold to a hard constructivism, it makes the second part of the argument ('B') the very definition of a non-sequitur ("a conclusion or statement that does not logically follow from the previous argument or statement").[40]

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[36] See Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*.

[37] Sharf, "Experience," 94.

[38] Ibid., 103-107 (last quote, 107).

There is also, I might suggest, simply nowhere one can look and *not* find power relations (just like experience…hmmm). That is, to be alive is to be involved in power relations. Or to say it another way, to be human is to be enmeshed and entangled in complex modes of negotiation, compromise, emotional complexity, social structures, cultural conditioning, the disciplining of consciousness (including the body) in both conscious and unconscious ways (which also means we have some degree of *choice* in disciplining ourselves, e.g. by what practices we perform, what we decide to spend our time on, who we associate with, how we attempt to treat others, how much we are willing to question our own positions, etc.), group-dynamics and peer pressures, economic fears and necessities, our biological inheritance, traumatic and complex relationships with our own selves and bodies and their emotional well-being, the effects (and affect) of how those around me display, embody, and project their own power towards me in both conscious and unconscious ways. For more adventurous thinkers—such as process-thinkers like Catherine Keller, William Connolly, or John Cobb, contemplatives like Howard Thurman, democratic prophets like Martin Luther King Jr, and indigenous thinkers like Gloria Anzaldúa—we are always already entangled with all of reality, with all happenings both past and present, in each moment, and in each moment express the power of our creative choice. In other words, *power* is one hell of a complex, slippery, ever-present category (not unlike experience) that can never be pinned down to any particular 'thing.' Yet, it seems perfectly acceptable, indeed crucially necessary, for scholarly use.

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[39] As quoted by Stephen Bush, *Visions of Religion*, 60.

[40] Oxford English Dictionary, accessed February 20, 2022.

There is no doubt that if one is looking for power relations one will find them, but this does not mean they are the essential nature of everything that happens! In assuming that the main motivation of all these Buddhist teachers and practitioners has nothing to do with transformative experience, but rather is about machinations of power, Sharf projects something like an encoded self, acting purely in its own self-interest, onto practitioners (strangely reminiscent of a “neoliberal self” perhaps?). Sharf doesn’t want to deny subjective experience, but rather “draw attention to the way the concept functions in religious discourse,” suggesting it is a mistake to approach “literary, artistic, or ritual representations as if they referred back to something other than themselves, to some numinous inner realm.”[41] However, in doing so, Sharf simply invents an ontologically reductive object—one that cannot refer “back to anything”—other than what is captured by the objective gaze of the critical theorist of religion. This object then functions in an ideological fashion to ostensibly set up, a priori, the authority of a hard constructivism, tinged with a projected neoliberal self, without necessarily making any of these machinations explicit. One might call this a *rhetoric of power*.

Such ‘rhetoric of power’ searches for places where terms resist a particularized, concrete definition, thus giving way to “slippage.” Theorists like Sharf then use this lack of concretization to, in a sense, “slip in” their own concretized notions of what is *actually* happening—mainly, machinations of power. Of course, it is true that machinations of power are happening (they always are), and it is helpful and important to continue to point out and analyze how they are happening. But it is nothing less than an ‘essentializing non-sequitur’ to claim this is *all* that is happening, or the most important thing that is happening, or causative of everything else that *does* happen. The reason most practitioners (and people in general) discuss and sometimes contest various religious and spiritual experience is not necessarily because they are trying to “thwart” the authority of objectivity (*sometimes* they might), but because they are interested in what is actually happening in their lives! In the case of many religious practitioners, especially of the contemplative variety, it is because they are fundamentally interested in what their lives could potentially enact *for the benefit of others*. Do we really believe that people's motivations are *always* about their own self-interest? And if so, where does that leave theorists of power themselves?

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[41] Sharf, “Experience,” 113.

When analyses of power proceed without acknowledgment of the greater complexity of human beings and their many competing interests (selfish, altruistic, and everything in-between), there occurs something like a double encoding of objectification, or what Mandair will call below "the colonial event." This is what I refer to as 'rhetoric of power.' As will be seen below, decolonial and democratic praxis desires more capacious and transformative means of mutual encounter, rather than a doubling down of objectification. Without this, analysis (especially of power relations) tends to slip into essentializing non-sequiturs. Transformative encounters always retain some element of self-reflexivity as well as unknowing within them, what I might call a type of apophatic aesthetic. The liminality of these democratic encounters comes to the fore in the second half of this project, with concepts such as Gloria Anzaldúa's *nepantla,* Vincent Harding's imaginal democratic praxis, and Howard Thurman's ideal of (beloved) community.

As to a lack of self-reflexivity, the most obvious example is to look at the concept of 'power' itself. Recall that Sharf described the category of experience as resisting definition, as "nonobjective" and "indeterminate" and thus a "placeholder" for the "relentless deferral of meaning," all due to its inability to "make ostensible a *something that exists in the world.*" Do not all of these also refer to the category of power? Sharf is not arguing that people don’t have experiences, merely that the category, because of its slippage, is not only of little use to scholars, but “destined to remain ‘well-meaning squirms that get us nowhere.’”[42] It seems to me that all of this could equally be applied to the category of power, a term, like energy or experience (or imagination, love, compassion, and justice for that matter) that is intrinsically slippery. No one sees ‘power’ in some kind of objectified realm or object. Rather, we *interpret* people’s actions, as well as societal structures and unconscious behaviors, as utilizing power in various ways.

Further, it would not be hard to show how those who work on analyses of power are, of course, also utilizing machinations of power to argue for their particular perspectives, ideas, and prescriptions. At the same time, they attempt to portray other approaches as unacceptable—approaches they view as suspicious or dangerous to their own ‘worlds,’ as it were. Sharf’s essay offers a case in point. Ideological power plays seem to exist for everyone who doesn’t adopt the preferred terms of analysis. Scholars of religion use a “rhetoric of experience” not because they find it inherently worthy—or even more radically because they have actually had powerful transformative experiences in their encounters with religious others (which actually turns out the be the case for quite a few)[43]—but rather to prop up their job security. Theologians talk about experience not because it has value, but in order to “forestall scientific critique.”

What happens, though, when one turns a discerning eye towards power theorists themselves? It is telling where Sharf takes his argument from here in the essay.

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[42] Ibid., 114.

[43] See Kripal, *Secret Body*.

After his conclusions on Buddhist "rhetoric of experience," Sharf acknowledges that readers may be getting antsy with his argument, thinking that "Surely, even if mystics and meditation masters cannot always agree among themselves as to the designation or soteriological import of their experiences, it is clear that *something* must be going on."[44] He goes on to state that such an objection is due to our "deep entanglement in the Cartesian paradigm." To prove his point, he turns to literature on alien abductions. Researches have determined that something is happening to those who claim abductions, but do we believe that abduction stories actually happened? Most scholars would not assent to that, therefore the "notion of an original event" cannot be assumed. Sharf states: "The question is unavoidable: Is there any reason to assume that the reports of experiences by mystics, shamans, or meditation masters are any more credible as 'phenomenological descriptions' than those of abductees?" He goes on to state that we should be wary of assuming that texts and reports of religious experience actually refer to "determinate phenomenal events at all."[45] The attempt to equate the experiences of people who have spent decades in extensive training under the guidance of established teachers within traditions passed down for thousands of generations (like many shamans, meditation masters, and mystics) with alien abduction stories, in order to perform an erasure of all reported experience, seems a clear case of ideological power play.[46]

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[44] Sharf, "Experience," 107.

[45] Ibid., 110.

[46] As if to prove the point on steroids, Sharf goes directly from this discussion to the thought of Daniel Dennett. The arguments Sharf makes utilizing Dennett are not relevant to the point I would like to make here. What is relevant is what is left out: there is a sum total of *zero* discussion about ideological stances when it comes to Dennett. Apparently, meditation masters are immersed in ideological power

To sum up, and to offer yet another example of rhetoric of the secular, I take a look at one final quote from Sharf's essay (adding numbers to each sentence for reference):

> *(1)* Scholars of religion are not presented with experiences that stand in need of interpretation but rather with texts, narratives, performances, and so forth. *(2)* While these representations may at times assume the rhetorical stance of phenomenological description, we are not obliged to accept them as such. *(3)* On the contrary, we must remain alert to the ideological implications of such a stance. *(4)* Any assertion to the effect that someone else's inner experience bears some significance for *my* construal of reality is situated, by its very nature, in the public realm of contested meanings.[47]

This quote captures nicely many of the points I've tried to make (while at the same time sounding quite common sensical, and thus performing the "slipping in unnoticed" aspect of rhetoric). 1) sets up an a priori hard constructivist and ontologically reductive orientation as normative for "scholars of religion." 2) and 3) tell us that anything other than such a reductionist gaze should be interrogated as an "ideological implication" (but not, of course, the imposition of a reductive ontological orientation). 4) recapitulates the stance of the first three while simultaneously extracting the author's stance from that very same realm of "contested meanings." At first glance, this sentence may be read to mean that everyone's "inner experience" enters a realm of contested

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games, and thus their testimonies, experiences, reflections, and thoughts should not be trusted, but someone like Daniel Dennett clearly isn't involved in such ideological power games, and thus can be quoted from and interacted with at length with no critical reflection. There is again something of a cosmic irony here. Dennett, of course, is well known for holding to a militantly reductive scientism, and his work is spotted like a leopard with bombastic ideological statements, yet this deserves *no* mention or reflection on by Sharf. Why? I will hazard a guess in the direction of a shared ideological drive to instantiate a reductive scientific materialism and hard constructivism as hegemonic perspectives for respectable 'academic' or 'scholarly' work.

[47] Sharf, 111.

meanings once it arrives in the public realm. This is a sentiment I would eminently agree with. However, in this context it works to insulate Sharf's hard constructivism from this very realm of contested meanings. How so? The general thrust of the sentence is that *others* experience should not hold water for theorists like Sharf, not that we are all involved in public contestations of meaning. His point is that experience itself should be reduced to the ontologically reductive gaze of the (hard constructivist) critical theorist, regardless of the ethical issues it raises.

Sharf makes this clear by going on to acknowledge the problems the scholar faces in applying "conceptual categories" and "theoretical constructs" to the experiences of others, and the danger of "effacing the very differences that separate us." Sharf feels that the one defense against "the tendency to objectify, to domesticate, to silence and eviscerate the other," is to "sanction" an individual's "irreducible experience of the world." Yet, to sanction this is "to abandon the hermeneutic suspicion that is the mark of critical scholarship."[48] The implication here seems to be that those who do not hold to a hard constructivism are somehow unable to think critically. That is, to allow one's own experience of the world to appear as evidentiary for their thought is to abandon critical thinking. Hence, by *definition,* to enjoy the "mark of critical scholarship" is to hold to a hard constructivist position that effaces the experiences of others. This is precisely rhetoric of the secular.

Sharf's essay, similar to McCutcheon's, exposes problems with assuming a hard constructivist, social-critical lens as normative for the study of religion. Under such a horizon, a liminality of democratic praxis becomes hindered. Within rhetoric of the secular, one either adopts the preferred ontological orientation, or one is relegated to the status of data and/or a locus of power machinations. The multivalent experience of religious others is collapsed, even colonized, by an objectifying and homogenizing gaze. The pulsating complexity of human beings is reduced to zero-sum games of political intrigue. Such reductive gazes may lead at times to important insights, but to make them normative for a secular academy is detrimental to democracy. Democratic praxis needs a diversity of ontological orientations that can flow into public realms of contested meaning—nurturing vibrant, empathetic dialogues amidst such diversity. The ability to place a diversity of ontological orientations into respectfully contested, scholarly, critically reflective public realms of meaning and contestation is what I am arguing for. Decolonial labor, in my mind, demands this type of openness, fluidity, and self-reflexivity. As such, it will be helpful to take a deeper look at some of the ways in which a secularist gaze inhibits decolonial praxis, through two essays from Arvind Mandair.

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[48] Ibid., 111-112.

The "Return of the Imperial as the Empirical"

Mandair, a South Asian scholar with an emphasis on Sikhism, offers a broad decolonial critique along these lines, arguing for the ability to take non-Western modes of thought as normative for academic labor. In doing so, Mandair urges us (the West) to overcome our fear of "the unbearable proximity of the orient." Mandair articulates what he calls "the repetition of the colonial event" as one that leads to an inevitable objectification of the *other,* of their experiences, cultures, and religions, relegating them to the status of objects—or concretized relics that can now be utilized as "data." A repetition of the colonial event is accomplished through an inevitable reduction of "experience." In relegating experience "to subject/object, self/other relations, indeed the automatic process of othering," a "return of the imperial as the empirical" is enacted.[49] Mandair's critique resonates with my own arguments, questioning a normative stance in academia of objectifying others as data, reducing the rich texture of experience to "subject/object" relations. Mandair also points toward more liminal academic spaces, where modes of thought from outside Western trajectories might serve as normative bases for scholarly reflection.

To offer my own example, one way in which a repetition of the colonial event might be accomplished is by consigning everything to "discourse about," thereby ostensibly objectifying alternate ways of being and knowing. As we saw in the introduction, the power of Gloria Anzaldúa's work, writing from an indigenous-inflected perspective, is in the fact that she writes *from* "subaltern ontologies," and not just *about* them. It is precisely this shift, as AnaLouise Keating put it, "that makes her work so innovatively decolonizing."[50] To consider Anzaldúa's writing as simply "discourse about" is to domesticate it, and arguably to denigrate and delegitimize it. It enacts a repetition of the 'colonial event' as a 'return of the imperial as the empirical.' A secularist gaze may inscribe objectifying and ontologically reductive moves into theory, functioning as to prevent Indigenous thought from becoming a normative source for scholarly praxis. Thus, uncritically adopting a hard constructivism may result in furthering colonial and racialized thought patterns. Such issues arise out of attempts to encounter the ‘other’ *without* a corresponding transformative effect reverberating back.

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[49] Mandair, "The Unbearable Proximity of the Orient," 647, 649.

[50] Keating, "Editor's Introduction," xxix.

I want to suggest, along with Mandair (and before him Charles Long, an African American co-founder of Africana and History of Religions disciplines), that perhaps the most fundamental of colonial moves is one of *objectification* (or what Long called *signification*).[51] In this sense, it might be argued that the turns away from mutual encounter in phenomenological discourses—i.e., turns towards language and then towards analyses of power—lost resources for mutually transformative encounters, which are crucial in my mind for decolonial praxis.[52] In some cases, these turns away from mutual encounter may inscribe an even more insidious, because hidden, colonial imposition, as Mandair argues below.

Mandair notes that pre-colonial India did not have a word for ‘religion,’ and that “most Indians participated in multiple religious and linguistic identities.” Paraphrasing Jacques Derrida, Mandair asks, “what if *religio* remained untranslated?” For Mandair, this evokes more than just the problem of deconstructing the category ‘religion.’ The problem extends to a lack of mutuality in the so-called “dialogue” between cultures, to the differences present prior to colonization and the demand for representation: “Who are you? What is your true religion?—and the re-sponsio by the colonized—‘I am Hindu/Sikh/Muslim’ etc.”[53]

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[51] See Long, *Significations.*

[52] For an analysis of academia’s “turns” from experience, to language, to power, and in particular their consequences for religious studies, see Stephen Bush, *Visions of Religion.* Bush’s narrative also helps to show how and why experience has become “doubly-removed” as a scholarly category, which is related to my description above of a double-encoding of objectification.

[53] Mandair, “Unbearable,” 650-651.

Mandair extends this problem in a unique way by showing how the colonizing move—that of othering first and only subsequently asking for a response, and thus setting the terms of the "dialogue" to ensue—later gets embedded in the normative stances of hard constructivism, social science, and critical theories of power.[54] The assumed superiority of the secular over-and-against religion funnels attempts to move beyond colonial mindsets. Decolonial praxis is forced to pass through a "secular anti-imperialist critique, one that would guard against the 'return of religion' or any form of repressed religiosity." The idea is that the mark of critical thinking is based upon a "historicist overcoming of religion or the religious"—an idea we saw expressly reenacted by both McCutcheon and Sharf above. This "dogma" remains remarkably resistant to exposure, according to Mandair, because it has become so widespread across academic disciplines.[55]

What interests me in particular is Mandair's extension of this critique to forms of critical theory, and the ways in which a policing of a religion/secular binary perpetuates colonial mindsets. Mandair's work highlights how making normative a hard constructivism induces a "repetition of the colonial event." This occurs by inscribing and naturalizing a fundamental ontological reductionism upon reality. Thus, the terms of "dialogue" have already been set, and a response is demanded in the already concretized terms of a religion/secular binary. A sublimated superiority-complex, once held by Christendom, can then reemerge once 'religion' or 'experience' has been deconstructed, thru the secularist gaze of social sciences or analyses of power.

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[54] For Mandair, this leads to an "unspoken political and intellectual alliance between liberal-conservative and radical left-views of the ideological limits of multidisciplinarity in the humanities and social sciences and multiculturalism in mainstream politics" (Ibid., 651).

[55] Mandair traces the underlying philosophical logic behind these colonial mindsets to Hegel. He sees Hegel as reacting to Schelling, who had brought the Orient "unbearably close" to Euro-Christian thought, and thus needed to reinscribe a distinctness and superiority in Euro-Christianity's onto-theological-historical unfolding. In Hegel's later *Lectures on Philosophy of Religion,* Mandair sees a deeper (re)inscription of this supremacist trope than in the more oft analyzed *Philosophy of History.* In *Philosophy of Religion* the ontotheological-historicity of Hegel's thought maps cultures according to their religious imagination, which is graded in hierarchical fashion according to their ability to think rightly the nature of God, "thus the spatial boundaries of a nation/culture corresponds to its spirituality-cum-historicity." In this way, 'religions' outside of European Protestantism, to whom alone the dynamic unfolding of history now belongs, become "static, frozen objects, i.e. phenomena to be known and studied by conceptually more advanced cultures. They become raw material, empirical data that can be fully understood and retrieved by those who possess the proper conceptual tools" (Ibid., 655).

What would it mean for *religio* to remain untranslated? Then the secular (always co-constructed with religion) would need remain so as well. To allow the secular to remain untranslated, or to (re)translate it as a pluralizing space of democratic praxis as opposed to ontological reductionism, is to open up diverse, decolonial spaces of encounter. As Mandair accurately states it, such spaces may enable "the opening of modes of perception, epistemologies, possibilities for thinking and especially different modes of forming and transforming subjectivity that have been repressed." Such "alternative modes of retrieving tradition … contest Western hegemony over the task of thinking about the futures of [humanity] and democracy."[56]

What Mandair is after, as well as myself, is a "release of differential subjectivities." He goes on to point out that it is through a "weakening of the ego as the ground of social relations," or a "primordial interconnectedness of the self—its essential vacuity," that is "the very starting point for 'Eastern' thought and ethics."[57] When scholars see only (neoliberal) selves everywhere vying for power, or when they insist that the only *real* thing in human relationality (or at the least the only thing of real value for the scholar) is social constructions, ‘discourse about,’ or power relations, they insist on a repetition of the colonial event. This does not mean there is not great value in the work being done in critical discourse, but rather that such discourse should be seen as partial, reductive, and inconclusive. Such discourse can be enhanced through the development of a healthy self-awareness of its own strengths *and* weaknesses, just like any other discourse, and thus should not attempt to function (or be implied to function) as hegemonic for academic thought (nor as an ethically superior dispensation). All discourses are but partial aspects of larger assemblages, assemblages that are themselves always in process and (re)configuring amidst creative potentialities among radically different subjectivities, contexts, and ontological orientations—and should be acknowledged as such.

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[56] Ibid., 659-660.

[57] Ibid.

Mandair’s analysis also raises problems for academic disciplinary formations. In a different essay Mandair questions the “division of intellectual labor” between disciplines such as philosophy of religion, history of religion, and area studies. Such division allows for each to inoculate itself against contamination from the object of study. Area studies, for instance, which developed through a need to protect South Asian cultures from colonialist impulses, nevertheless “manages to avoid the truly *self-reflexive* moment crucial to theory and thereby repeats a key procedure of Orientalism” (emphasis mine). In setting up a “safety zone” where “secularity protects its object from the hegemonic influence of Western religions,” the ability to utilize alternate modes of thought as normative sources for theory is lost. In other words, the ability to use, for example, Buddhist, Indigenous, Sikh, Confucian, Daoist, Hindu, or other ontological orientations as appropriate and normative sources for (decolonial) scholarly praxis becomes marred by a need to adhere to secularist gazes. The way in which secularity has been applied to protect such traditions, "in fact repeats the design of a past imperialism." Such a stance prevents, for instance, "Indic phenomena from being used as resources for conceptual thinking rather than being regarded as relics."[58]

If I am understanding Mandir correctly, what he seems to be implying is that without a self-reflexive moment that has the potential to enact onto-epistemological transformation in cultural encounter, we (the West) will continue to re-enact the colonial. The more we try to build up barriers to protect us from such encounters—whether we call it "mythmaking vs. theorization," or the "deconstruction of experience," or even under the guise of (rightly) wanting to protect others from colonial machinations (e.g., thru secularized academic disciplinary formations)—we will inevitably continue 'repetitions of the colonial event.' It is almost as if we have to risk our "selves," which includes all that we are—and hence also includes remnants of the colonial gaze—in such encounters, rather than build barriers around them for supposedly "safe" encounters. Methodological bunkers are no substitute for transformational existential encounters. Indeed, I would argue the latter are in some sense definitional of a Whitman-ian democracy whose multifarious potentialities I aim to uphold.

One might imagine such transformative existential encounters as something to be accomplished in the future, potentialities that can and should be enacted and will eventually be helpful. While this may be true, an equally important realization lingers:

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[58] Mandair, "The Repetition of Past Imperialisms" 279-281.

they have already happened. In the epigraph Mandair asks if "South Asian religions, normally regarded as a particular, [can] be regarded as something that actively shares in the universal? Can we consider South Asian religious phenomena shareable with the rest of humanity?" And then goes on to point out the obvious, namely that such questions are moot.[59] That is, we *have* been contaminated by "the Orient," among many other cultures, religious traditions, races, ethnicities, genders, and all the syncretistic hybridity that follows, just as 'they' have been contaminated by 'us.'

Such contamination surely effects how we think our "universals." The universal thought of today is not the same as the universal thought of yesteryear, and universality cannot be equated with onto-theology (e.g., *pratitya samutpada,* or "dependent origination," is a radically different universality from the "logic of the One").[60] Universal concepts need be hegemonic only in the guise of superiority, but not under a radical diminution of the ego as a self-possessing subject, nor under the guise of fallible hypotheses, nor within a humble stance of 'thinking with.' The need for self-reflexive moments may speak more to the necessity of developing an awareness of what has already *happened,* what is already the case "amongst us"—indeed what is already "us"—as an epigraph to chapter one expressed. In letting go of a need to project past categorical impositions, categories that perhaps functioned well in a previous *saeculum,* but which no longer serve us in the same way today, nor accurately describe our present cultural entanglements—i.e. a religion/secular binary—we might also let go of a need to disavow memories of contaminating encounters.[61]

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[59] Ibid., 299.

[60] "logic of the one," see Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism.*

As it just so happens, such contaminating encounters are at the heart of the following chapter.

Concluding Thoughts

Mandair's work exposes a need for decolonial praxis to embrace scholarly labor that allows for diverse views on the nature of reality. To impose secularized Western categories on Eastern, Indigenous, or other non-Western ways of thinking is to delegitimize them as valid ways of knowing, and thus of participatory being in "the labor of imagining the human."[62] They become static objects, relics, without agency or affective power. And relics, we might add, have a difficult time participating in robust democratic praxis. To avoid the self-reflexive moment of encounter, or to abject it after it *happens*, marks a repetition of the colonial event.

It appears unlikely that a hard constructivism provides a capacious and fruitful milieu for democratic, decolonial praxis—notwithstanding how helpful as it can be at times in upholding difference and critiquing socio-political structures of oppression. Such critiques may create rifts in the smooth functioning of oppressive cultural norms, but if we replace these rifts with the same categorical constructions that lie at the basis of cultural norms in the first place, we remain encompassed within the bounds of that same cultural conditioning—not by necessity, but by *choice*.

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[61] As Mandair puts it, interrupting the "compulsion to repeat this disavowal [of contaminating influences]," is to simultaneously allow for "new ways of theorizing the comparative enterprises that go beyond the ontotheological schema" (Mandair, "Repetition," 299).

[62] Thatamanil, "Comparing Professors Smith and Tillich," 1178.

What I'm hoping to accent is that secularist modes of critique can often valorize instability, yet when they subtly reinscribe a hard constructivism as the only acceptable mode of academic labor they work against their own radical potentiality to enact change. I mean to suggest that there is something like a split-personality at times in critical discourses, which can ricochet wildly between creative potency and liminality, while also remaining stubbornly enthralled with an ontological reductionism (and often heavily policing such a boundary, "haunted," as it were, by an "onto-theological" boogeyman). One might ask what actually provides a more fecund ground for the instability necessary for creative emergence and change? An unrelenting devotion to a secularized, ontologically reductionistic, critical theorist gaze? Or a polyphonic space of radically different ways of being and moving within a multi-dimensional reality that far exceeds, for many at least, the boundaries of such reductionisms? It is, of course, the latter I am attempting to situate as an important, indeed necessary space for a vibrant, religiously diverse democracy. A space where atheism, agnosticism, subversive religious and spiritual hybridity(s), and traditional religious stances can all exist side-by side as pluralistic ontological orientations to 'think with.'

In the first chapter I argued that terms such as academic, scholarly, rational, the secular, and the secular academy, should not function as metonyms either for each other or for particular ontological reductionisms, such as a hard constructivism. I did so in the context of our system of higher education within a religiously pluralistic democracy, arguing that responsibility for the inculcation of democratic practices largely falls to these institutions for various reasons having to do with democracy itself and the dynamics of our contemporary *saeculum*. In the current chapter, I analyzed a number of examples of how ‘rhetoric of the secular’ functions, particularly within the academic study of religion, and ways in which it inhibits decolonial praxis. In my critique of Russell McCutcheon’s essay, we saw an example of how rhetoric of the secular is utilized to make certain ontological reductionisms the only acceptable normative stance for the study of religion (and perhaps for the secular academy more broadly).

The critique of Robert Sharf’s essay on experience allowed me to highlight the broadly popular methodology of analyses of power, while also rehabilitating the category of experience. There I explored how analyses of power arguably play a role in upholding a secularist gaze as foundational in academia. In addition, I argued that analyses of power, though important and even essential, nevertheless remain partial, reductive, and doubly objectifying. This is not so much of a problem in and of itself, as all analysis remains partial and reductive. Yet in the attempt to become hegemonic—i.e., to make analyses of power the only *normative* stance for the study of religion, or perhaps the most important one, or even the most ethical one—it becomes oppressive, even colonial.

These colonial concerns revolved around the way in which an objectifying “othering” takes place as the primary step in both sociological and critical-power analyses. This is what Mandair referred to as “the return of the imperial as the empirical,” emphasizing objectification as the crucial first move at the heart of the “colonial event.” Mandair’s work helped to underscore how colonial machinations can arise in secularist discourse, particularly in a demand that decolonial trajectories pass through a “secular anti-imperialist critique” that guards against any “return of religion.” This insight has significance for my arguments moving forward. Once again, it is not the reductive lenses of social-critical theory *per se* that create conditions of coloniality, but rather the need to make normative such methodology for others, perhaps even for all scholarly labor.

In the following chapter, I take a closer look at distinctions between theology and the study of religion, and in particular the continuing need to prescind oneself from “theology.” But what does this really mean? Much, if not all, of such a distinction is predicated on what is meant by theology, which of course hinges on what is meant by ‘religion.’ In our contemporary *saeculum,* where material conditions have morphed into environments of pluralistic difference, practices of both religion and theology have become radically altered as a result. In pondering a secular academy beyond a religion/secular binary, taking account of such practices becomes important. One must have some sense of where things stand now, and from whence they have arisen, in order to begin imagining possibilities that may yet arise…

CHAPTER THREE

RELIGIO AND THE ACADEMY

At the center of this vision is a dream of a land that does not yet exist and a vision of its creation placed in the hands of very ordinary men and women. What do our students—and their teachers—think of such a vision? In other words, to whom do we think America belongs, and who has the essential responsibility for its future? Are we prepared to abandon the cynically safe responses to these questions…? Do we know that such supposedly realistic responses eventually stunt and finally destroy all the dream ports of our spirit, break all the wings of our hearts? And that they warn our students against ever dreaming or ever believing that they can fly?

—Vincent Harding, *Is America Possible?*[1]

[T]heological and non-theological modes of studying religion might be complementary rather than oppositional. Moreover, [in] the labor of imagining the human—and that after all is what both secular theories of religion and religiously informed theories of religion seek to do—[both] enjoy equal epistemological status. Neither can reasonably claim to be neutral or to enjoy privileged standing. Neither can credibly claim to possess a critical self-consciousness lacking in the other.

—John Thatamanil, "Comparing Professors Smith and Tillich"[1]

(In-Between) Theology, Sui Generis Religion, and Critical Theory

In 1935 Princeton began to take its first steps in implementing what was to eventually become a religious studies department. On April 11 of that year, a "Report of the Special Committee of the Faculty on Religious Education" was presented, manifesting a curious tension between the study of religion and "theology." Following William Hart's account of the report, the authors were keen to convince their colleagues of a fundamental distinction between the study, and the practice, of religion.[2] The study of religion is described as “a liberal art,” envisioned as a historical endeavor whose focus is the many ways in which the religious has been instantiated in human culture. The practice of religion, on the other hand, belonged to the “chapel and its ministers.” In a nod to other departments, the authors of the report note that other arts and sciences (such as sociology or anthropology) also study formations of religion, thus there is a need to justify why the study of religion demands its own field. The need for “religious studies,” they argue, is found in the uniqueness of religious phenomena. As the report states, “The religious forces in history are distinct within their own essence, development, and effects. Consequently the study of them is a study in itself and not a by-product of the study of other phenomena.”[3] This is an example of the formation of religion as a *sui generis* construction, religion as a unique dimension of human life with a universal essence.

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[1] Harding, *Is American Possible*, 44.

[1] Thatamanil, "Comparing Professors Smith and Tillich," 1178.

[2] Hart, "From Theology to *theology*."

In one sense, the establishment of religious studies departments and the construction of *sui generis* religion represents its own type of crypto-theology under the guise of a scientific study. Religion has a “distinct essence” which is to be studied and articulated by scholars of religion, hence the theological undertones of answering what the “essence” of religion is. Even more curiously, such a study is constructed specifically over-and-against its ‘other,’ that of theology. This paradoxical tension between theology and the study of religion is heightened when one realizes the authors of the report actually go out of their way to emphasize the following: that the scientific study of religion is in no way meant to displace the assumed superiority of Christianity. Rather, the study of religion begins with such an assumption.

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[3] As quoted in Ibid., 96.

Hart notes that even in the case of Princeton, where the religious studies department did not grow directly out of a divinity school, the report still explicitly posits Christianity as "the best presentation of what Religion *is*." It then goes on to more or less "rank" other religious traditions in order of their importance to the study of the field. Judaism is important, given its relationship with Christianity. "Mohommedanism [*sic*] and the religions of India and the Far East" are included as significant (though not as vital as Christianity and Judaism), while "primitive religions" are relegated to an "Anthropological Approach." By the latter, it is meant that Indigenous traditions are not actually 'religions' but more akin to relics, helpful for discerning an evolutionary trajectory towards Christianity.[4] This brief example from Princeton is illustrative not only of a *sui generis* construction of religion, but also of the politics of the construction of the category of religion, including how "religious studies" was initially embedded with a Christian superiority complex, as well as the politics of discourse on "world religions."[5]

The example also begins to reveal further folds of the complex political dimensions of rhetoric of the secular. One can see in the origins of religious studies (and Princeton I understand is a fairly typical example) an inveterate need to prescind from theology, while simultaneously taking the superiority of a particular construction of religion for granted. These multiplicitous folds speak to a need to delineate between the generation of a *sui generis* concept of religion—and discussion of the place of *theology*

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[4] Ibid., 97; quoting from the report: once "genuine insight into the essence of religion in its more developed form has been attained, a knowledge of its primitive beginnings is illuminating, indeed essential" (Ibid.).

[5] For a genealogy of problematic constructions of "world religions" discourse, see Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions.* For *sui-generis* constructions, see McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion.*

(or something akin to it) in a religiously pluralistic academic setting. The *sui generis* concept of religion, as seen in the example above, is initially constructed as inherently 'not-theology.' Such a boundary goes on to be militantly policed by future theorists, including from phenomenologists such as Ninian Smart.[6] Later, critical theorists in the study of religion, such as Jonathan Z. Smith, Russell McCutcheon, and others, would accuse the phenomenologists themselves (rightly in my view) of being "crypto-theologians," shepherding theological concepts into the study of religion under the guise of "the sacred," for instance.[7] Some phenomenologists were accused of implanting Christian gazes and concomitant Western superiority complexes into theories of *sui generis* religion, constructs which were embedded in the origins of the field, as seen in the example above.

Note, however, the overlap between the founding of *sui generis* religion (and hence religious studies departments) and subsequent critiques by critical theorists—namely the need to inoculate oneself from 'theology.' We saw a similar need to avoid "infection" from theology in the introduction, from contemporary works in cross-cultural philosophy and philosophy of religion. Much of this concern obviously hinges on what is meant by a practice of theology. As I have been implicitly pointing towards, and now approach directly, it is not at all obvious what is meant by such a practice today.

As I sort through alternate definitions as to what constitutes theology below, as well as the changing nature of religious identity and practice in the U.S., I trust this will become clear. Older critiques of theology, as beholden to religious authority for example, simply do not apply to much of the practice in academia today. The same holds true for critiques that see theology as a nonpublic endeavor meant for bounded communities. Many "theologians" today, as seen in examples below, work in explicitly interdisciplinary ways, contributing to discourse across many disciplines throughout academia. They are beholden to no authority in particular, and often articulate thick descriptions of their own "ontological orientations" as significant aspects of their work. Far from being bounded within particular communities, they work across disciplines—as well as religious and secular traditions—and remain in dialogue across vibrant difference. In other words, many "theologians" today are very much involved in the type of imaginative, empathic, prophetic, spiritual, activist, life-forming democratic praxis that comes into view in the following chapter.

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[6] See Fasching, "Religious Studies and the Alienation of Theology," for a discussion of Ninian Smart's views towards theology.

[7] McCutcheon, *Manufacturing;* Smith, *Map is Not Territory*.

As I endeavored to argue in the previous chapter, even the work of social-critical theorists such as Russell McCutcheon and Robert Sharf can be seen to be "theological," once certain reductionistic orientations are no longer taken as normative for academic labor. What I am pointing towards is the way in which hard constructivist orientations are also "ontological orientations." In this sense, they are also *religious orientations,* or ways of imagining, constructing, and orienting around a view of the nature of reality. There is a way in which critical theorists themselves remain beholden to their own *sui generis* constructions of religion, even as they critique such constructions. In a reliance on particularized ontological reductionisms—so that a hard constructivism appears as rational, common-sense, objective, and appropriate (indeed, the only "appropriate" method) for a public-oriented secular academy—they remain bound to a corresponding co-construction of the secular as ‘not-religion.’ In other words, there is something of a *sui generis secularity* operating under the surface of their rhetoric.

Critical religion scholar Tomoko Masuzawa hints in this direction when she critiques McCutcheon’s work, pointing out that to argue against *sui generis* religious constructions, while also positing explanations of religious phenomenon as McCutcheon does, is to carry on two “ultimately contradictory and incompatible” tasks. Masuzawa’s suggestion for the field of religious studies (similar to Timothy Fitzgerald’s in this regard) is to do away completely with any “imaginative production of ‘religion,’” in favor of a relentless interrogation into how the category was, and continues to be, constructed.[8] In other words, Masuzawa and Fitzgerald recommend a hegemony of analyses of power relations as constitutive of the field of religious studies.

As seen in the last chapter, however, secularist ethics become problematic when angling for hegemony. Masuzawa’s recommendation for the field remains circumscribed within a religion/secular binary, bound to the ontological reductionisms of a hard constructivism. It is in this sense that Masuzawa’s suggestion remains beholden to an unacknowledged *sui generis* construction of the secular. In my approach here, I acknowledge similar issues with constructions of the category of religion that Masuzawa, Fitzgerald, McCutcheon, and others speak to, yet I am arguing for an alternate approach. This alternative approach leans not into a secularist gaze, but rather into the opening up of pluralistic, decolonial, and democratic spaces of theorization, where multiplicities of ontological orientations can serve as normative bases for the scholarly imagination.

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[8] Fitzgerald, *Discourse,* 312. See also fn 44 in chapter 1.

It is worth noting that in the same essay, Masuzawa offers another example of rhetoric of the secular. She agrees with McCutcheon and "fellow secularists of like mind" that the American Academy of Religion can be characterized as "more ecumenically theological than *analytic* and *scholarly*, indeed, more cleric than *academic*, despite its name" (emphasis mine).[9] Ergo, Masuzawa explicitly demarcates the "analytic and scholarly" from the "ecumenically theological," the "cleric" from the "academic," and equates academic appropriateness with particularized ontological orientations, namely that of a hard constructivism and concomitant analyses of power.

In the first chapter, I argued that an understanding of secular as particularized ontological reductionisms was inappropriate, perhaps even colonial, and recontextualized the secular as indicative of the pluralization of democratic societies—culturally, religiously, racially. I went on to ally the secular academy with democratic praxis amidst such diversity, including practices which acknowledge multiplicities of reason-giving trajectories. From such a horizon, my critique of a secularist gaze parallels the secularist critique of *sui generis* religion, in that they rely upon particularized constructions of 'religion' and 'theology,' over-and-against which they define their own preferred ontological orientations as "scholarly," "analytic," and "academic." Subsequently, they naturalize their own constructed categories as 'not-theology,' while replicating a hidden superiority complex towards their own constructions. The superiority complex manifests in a need to label alternative perspectives and orientations for theory as 'non-academic,' 'theological,' 'clerical,' 'confessional,' and hence as heretical for a 'secular' academy.

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[9] Masuzawa, "The production of 'religion' and the task of the scholar," 124, emphasis mine.

My own critique departs at this key juncture from both a hard constructivism, as well as the founding of a *sui generis* religion molded on Christianity. Namely, I depart from the incessant need to prescind oneself from 'theology'—as if the very word imbues a contaminating influence intrinsically at odds with critical thinking, rationality, and the goals of a public secular academy. Thus, I find myself in the more liminal spaces 'in-between' theology, sui generis religion, and critical methodologies.

Conceptions of theology as necessarily beholden to institutionalized religious authority, or as relevant only for closed, nonpublic, bounded communities of believers (akin to Habermas' "confessional" and "membership" arguments seen in chapter one), are anachronistic. While such critiques made sense in the past, in terms of the historical trajectory of university life, theology no longer holds the same semantic weight it once did. Many contemporary theologians do not adhere to anything like the same set of practices that previously, and rightly, were critiqued as inappropriate for a public university. Of course, there are some who still practice theology as beholden to religious authority and meant for particular, bounded, non-porous religious communities, or even to evangelize others into such a community. I have no major issues with such practices of theology, yet acknowledge that in these cases the proper place for such practices (what William Hart will call below big "T" Theology) is in institutions dedicated to the maintenance of particular traditions—not public universities. However, it is simply not the case that these same critiques equally apply to all practices of theology today, as examples below reveal.

Adding to the current complexity of studies of religion—*and* practices of theology—is the changing nature of religious practice itself in the West (the United

States in particular). Religio-spiritual identities and practices have transformed drastically since the first instantiations of religious studies departments in the first half of the twentieth century. Much of the discussion around pluralization and decolonial work from the previous two chapters is pertinent to such complexity, and below I will flesh out some of the changing nature of religious practice with examples, demographic surveys, case studies, and other scholarly work on the subject. One of the pertinent discoveries will be how emergent religio-spiritual identities—from "scholar-practitioners," to "spiritual but not religious," to "multiple religious belonging" and "interspiritual" orientations—actively subvert a religion/secular binary. As a consequence, these emergent forms may be critiqued harshly from both sides of a religion/secular binary, by traditional religionists as well as secularists. This binary is at the center of many of the fundamental structures of modernity.

From a religion perspective, such experimentation is castigated as nontraditional, impure, selfish, noncommittal, noncommunal, syncretistic, and ultimately as unhealthy individualism. From a secular horizon, such inclinations might be dismissed as spiritual capitalism, or as representative of consumeristic "neoliberal practices." In both cases, emergent forms of religio-spiritual identity and practice are denied the seriousness of authentic religious impulse. I will address some of these critiques below with the work of Boaz Huss, who suggests that many of them stem from the way in which the contemporary folk category of "spirituality" undermines a religion/secular divide. I will also introduce the term "interspiritual"—denoting a matrix of encounter, happenings, orientations, and even religious identities—as a fecund, contemplative space of resonate encounter amongst difference.

After gaining a better understanding of these shifting currents, I reassess the nature of religious studies today, turning to contemporary practices of comparative theology as ethical resources for theorizing amidst ontological difference, and thus as democratic praxis. In the concluding section, I turn to Linell Cady's (re)imagining of religious studies in a pedagogical key, based upon changing dynamics of religious practice, and the spiritual yearnings often seen in students who enter into religious studies classrooms. The need to care for such students, and their yearnings, will be seen as an essential aspect of democratic praxis, as hinted at in the epigraph above from Vincent Harding.

The current chapter brings my arguments further into the fields of religious studies and comparative theology. In doing so, it explores different conceptions of the practice of theology and its relationship with religious studies. I also imagine religious studies in public university settings, with emphases on democratic praxis, which serve the existential needs of students. Three overarching concerns guide my exploration: 1) a founding and continuing need to separate religious studies from seminary-like studies; 2) the precarious political constructions of the category of religion and its co-constructed category of the secular; and 3) the changing nature of religio-spiritual practice in pluralistic democracies today.

Theology, theology, and Religious Studies

William Hart, following theologian Edward Farley, describes the scholarly practice of theology as enmeshed in ambiguous connotations all the way back to the medieval period. The ambiguity stemmed from notions of *theologia* as a type of intimate knowledge of God (*sapientia*, or wisdom), or *theologia* as a "self-conscious scholarly discipline," in the sense of an Aristotelian science. As I see it, the former notion of theology is ultimately tied to the workings of grace and is the goal, for instance, of monastic life in particular. Thus, when Maximus the Confessor, an 8th century Christian monk, spoke of "mystical theology," he referred not to a logically demonstrable set of principles but rather to knowledge of God that was the fruit of monastic ascesis.[10] According to Hart, *theologia* as *scientia* was championed most prominently by Thomas Aquinas and the scholastics.[11] Today, we still experience similar ambiguities in religious studies. Is it a social science? Critical theory? History of Religions? Anthropology? Philosophy? Cultural studies? Analyses of power relations? Some combination of the above?

Or is it a discipline enmeshed in philosophical-theological reflection amidst the diversity of humanity's experiments in religio-spiritual practice and orientation? A discipline where an orientation towards life itself might be worked out in critical dialogue with all of the above? This is the direction of scholarly praxis into which much comparative work flows, not to mention the very purpose of many forms of philosophy as well as theology. It is in this way that Mircea Eliade, for instance, understood phenomenology and history of religions:

> As I have pointed out…a considerable enrichment of consciousness results from the hermeneutical effort of deciphering the meaning of myths, symbols, and other traditional religious structures; in a certain sense, one can even speak of the inner transformation of the researcher and, hopefully, of the sympathetic reader. What is called the phenomenology and history of religions can be considered among the

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[10] See Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor*, 66-100.

[11] See Hart, "From," 94-95. Hart follows Edward Farley, *Theologia*, here.

> very few humanistic disciplines that are at the same time propaedeutic and spiritual techniques.[12]

It is this latter sense that attracts Linell Cady to a modified practice of "theology" in religious studies today, in order to serve the existential needs of students, as seen below. There is a similar resonance with "philosophy as a way of life," a scholarly orientation spurred by Pierre Hadot's work on ancient philosophy as spiritual praxis. Such an orientation overlaps with the 'ways' of scholar-practitioners, who are becoming more ubiquitous, transparent, and outspoken in academia today. I take a closer look at these resonances in chapter six.

For Hart, the question of the inclusion of theology within religious studies is more an epistemological one. Hart distinguishes between Theology and *theology*, where Theology denotes "a devotional, confessional, and dogmatic enterprise, a professional, church-based enterprise," and *theology* as a philosophically based, liberal, academic form of scholarly praxis that embraces "an open, revisable, hypothetical form of inquiry that rejects the either/or of absolutism and skepticism."[13]

I utilize Hart's distinction here throughout the remainder of this project—between Theology (big "T"), and *theology* (little "t"). I write them as *theology* and Theology when I mean to denote such meanings. Hart suggests that much of the suspicion against theology in academia today stems from a failure to distinguish between these two forms of theory.

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[12] Eliade, *The Quest,* Preface. It seems as good a time as any to note that problems with *sui generis* religion, as well as the implanting of Christian gazes as normative for the study of religion, emerge not from adopting a spiritually transformative attitude towards the study of religion—an attitude that might be expected to differ from person to person—but rather from adopting a *scientific* attitude towards the study of religion. In other words, one that looks to discover "the" truth and make such a discovery normative for all.

[13] Hart, "From," 94-95.

Given my first overarching concern above, as to the separation of the study of religion from seminary or divinity school training of ministers, it will be helpful to make some kind of delineation at this point. For example, not many scholars, if any, would argue that the training of Christian ministers is a proper use of a public, secular academy. This would be Theology (big "T") in Hart's sense. A seminary or divinity school would be the proper place for such training (though even those have undergone radical shifts in our *saeculum*). A more controversial factor arises, however, in the policing of "theological mindsets," which are seen by some to contaminate the study of religion. McCutcheon and Sharf, as seen in the last chapter, and Masuzawa, as seen above, might be considered theorists of this variety. I have been using the term "secularists" broadly to denote such theorists, and will continue to do so. These theorists hold not only to a critique of Theology, but also of *theology.* The problem is not one of training ministers, or devotion to a particular church, but an epistemological one. To do *theology*—which, in light of my previous arguments, might be defined as adopting alternative ontological orientations to the preferred ones of secularists—is to lack the critical thinking necessary for scholarly praxis. Yet, as argued previously, to consider the secular as a space of rational neutrality is a mistake. Secularists such as McCutcheon, Masuzawa, Sharf and others are *adopting* particular beliefs, or ontological orientations, just as others do.

William Hart rightly points out that everybody adopts some beliefs "without evidence or agreement on what counts as evidence," as the very basis for "knowing anything at all. Thus the significant differences between *theologians* and nontheologians do not lie on the level of evidence and facts but on the hypothetical or metanarrative level," or in what I have described as ontological orientations.[14] Hart refers to secularist policing as a fetishizing of purity, and exposes a (political theology-esque) hypocrisy in such stances. The need to expel anything that smells like *theology* induces its own type of Theologizing. In this vein Hart (rightly again) refers to secularist theorists as also "religious," employing their own "inverted image of Theology." Secularists in the scientific materialism mold play the same game and utilize the same logic as big "T" Theology, simply replacing God with "Science," yet, like "Nietzsche's madman who hasn't heard that God is dead, they do not realize that science is no longer Science."[15]

It is interesting to highlight this kind of role-reversal in secular academia since its separation from "Theology," itself part of the centuries-long saga in the Western world between the contested boundaries of science and religious authority. This separation was eminently helpful, not only for science and the academy, but I would argue for Theology as well. The religious authority with which Theology operated ("the queen of the sciences") had dominated discourse since antiquity, and impinged upon the exercise of free thinking, scientific endeavor, and critical thought. In addition, such a separation was necessary in order to prevent the evangelization of certain modes of theological thought within the classroom. Yet today, the ontological reductionisms of secularism can play much the same role as Theology once did. A hard constructivism for instance, as outlined in previous chapters, can dominate discourse in subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways, impinging upon free thinking and critical self-reflection, particularly when terms such as secular, rational, academic, and scholarly are unconsciously brought together as metonyms while simultaneously being framed as ‘not-religion.’

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[14] Ibid., 105; Hart relates the metanarrative level to "Wittgenstein's 'primitive behavior'…Quine's web of beliefs, and Indra's Net" (Ibid.).

[15] Ibid., 104.

The Theology of the secularist gaze relates to my second overarching concern. The construction of the category of religion, in its Christian guise, once served the superiority complexes of Christianity and the Western colonial world (as seen in the example of Princeton above). Today, that very same construction serves the superiority complexes of secularists, now in its role of the secular as ‘not-religion.’ The secularist gaze works to prevent decolonial possibilities by relegating all religious diversity into the singular category of ‘religion’ or ‘theology,’ while defining secular, academic, scholarly work as rational, natural, and simultaneously as ‘not-religion’ and ‘not-theology.’ In doing so, secularists perform their own evangelizing role within academia.

A secularist orientation too often aims to stamp out dissent, encoding anything that challenges its position in derogatory or threatening ways—as non-academic, unscholarly, uncritical, etc. Subversive theorists, or even entire conglomerations of scholars (as seen above in Masuzawa’s accusation against the American Academy of Religion), may be caricatured as “non-academic” and unworthy of scholarly rigor. Yet, as I will continue to argue, bringing a diversity of ontological perspectives into dialogue is not only a proper practice for a secular academy—where ‘secular’ is understood as denotive of pluralistic democracy—but also supportive of decolonial praxis.

What makes Hart’s critique of the secularist position particularly poignant is his own confession that he himself has been guilty of holding to such a view. He admits to unfairly arguing against departmental directions and hiring practices without distinguishing between Theology and *theology.* Hart had hoped to conclude, when he began writing of these matters, that theology as an academic pursuit should be akin to a "historical curiosity." He felt theology could not be considered a valid constructive project any more than "constructive alchemy" might be. However, in reflecting more deeply about the issues, he realized that to reject constructive *theology* as a secular academic endeavor is to simultaneously render it "intellectually illegitimate." This is an argument Hart finds cannot be made in a "nondogmatic" way (and hence, I might add, to argue thus is to make a "confessional" argument). Consequently, he concludes that there is "no methodological difference between *theology* and the methodologies employed in the arts and sciences." While upholding a strict boundary between Theology as the professional training of ministers and the secular academic study of religion, Hart settles for a reasonable inclusion of *theology,* as an open, hypothetical, philosophical endeavor into the "nature of things." This type of *theology* is a legitimate activity within the secular academy, having a proper place within the "methodological plurality of religious studies," as a "guess at the riddle" and "one among many hypotheses on an open road of inquiry."[16]

Comparative theologian John Thatamanil, similar to how he views boundaries between religious traditions, also sees little reason to insist on "an artificial and nonporous wall of separation between theology and religious studies." Thatamanil's stance clarifies decolonial considerations, arguing for the need to take seriously the thought of Eastern, Indigenous, and other non-Western traditions. In his response to an essay by Jonathan Z. Smith, from which the second epigraph in this chapter appears, Thatamanil argues that "radical asymmetries of power inevitably come into play when theoreticians seek to constrain theological discourse, especially its analogues in other traditions."[17] Smith's essay dovetails with the secularist critique of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) seen above from Masuzawa, arguing against Tillichian theological influences within the AAR.[18] Thatamanil, however, points out colonial concerns with such a stance: "It is one thing for us to discipline the uses and misuses to which Tillich has been and continues to be put and quite another to leave Indian thinkers like Śankara, Rāmānuja, and Nāgārjuna forever and perpetually in the role of native informant."[19]

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[16] Ibid., 106-107.

According to Thatamanil, a "theologically invested reading" can take the thought of religious others more seriously than "instrumental" readings. Importantly, the greater seriousness accorded to the normative claims of others works to "destabilize positions of power and privilege that theoreticians grant themselves."[20] For Thatamanil, this is not simply a contestation between theological and social-critical studies of religion, but also applies to religious traditions themselves. Hence, his passionate arguments to view religious diversity "as a promise rather than a peril," and his development of theological orientations that take seriously the normative claims of multiplicities of religious traditions. For example, Thatamanil's monographs utilize Eastern religious thinkers such as Śankara, Nāgārjuna, and others as normative sources for the *Christian* theological imagination, and his most recent book undertakes a sustained postcolonial critique of the category of religion.[21] His work reimagines religion in a decolonial key that theorizes within multiplicities of ontological orientations, both secular and religious. In doing so, I would argue, Thatamanil also participates in democratic praxis.[22]

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[17] Thatamanil, "Comparing," 1177.

[18] Smith argues specifically against the influence of the ideas of theologian Paul Tillich.

[19] Thatamanil, "Comparing," 1177.

[20] Ibid., 1171.

Thatamanil notes that the academic work of "imagining religion" has been dominated by Western perspectives, both theological and secular. In response to J.Z. Smith's notion of religion as an invention of scholars—through imaginative redescription of anthropological "data"—Thatamanil points out that constructions of religion have serious socio-political consequences. Often, these are of a colonial nature, and thus such work is hardly nonpolitical. The idea of religion as a delimited work of theorization among an elite group of Western intellectuals proves to be a fiction.[23] Other scholars have noted how the academic labor of imagining religion effects religious practices and orientations, sometimes even giving birth to new types of religiosities, such as neo-shamanism.[24] Once again, the study of religion is hardly a contained work of scholars imaginative "redescriptions." If culture tends to follow academia (as well as reactions against what academia is doing) in important ways, as I tend to believe, then the study of religion can obviously have large social consequences. The hegemony of a hard constructivism may be part of a “resonance machine” having serious social and political consequences, leaving a gaping hole without meaning-making or a depth-dimension at the center of democratic culture…a center which may not hold without it.[25] Arguably, cultures that emphasize incommensurable difference, or unending and oppressive power dynamics—while actively foreclosing notions of commonality, unity, spiritual depth, truth, or even reality—become hindered in their ability to manifest democratic solidarity amongst difference.

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[21] See Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine*; and Thatamanil, *Circling*, especially 213-248.

[22] On the point of democratic praxis, it is worth mentioning that Thatamanil devotes an entire chapter in his book to an "interreligious borrowing" amongst Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Thatamanil, *Circling*, 193-212).

[23] See Thatamanil, *Circling*, 108-151; Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*.

[24] See Josephson-Storm, *Myth of Disenchantment*, 12-13, 321 fn 59.

The diversity of culture in the West, and the increasing tensions and demands that such pluralization places on society as a whole, demand a reevaluation of past stances. These stances developed without the pressing need we experience today to address such difference. Decolonial considerations heighten the need to create spaces for vibrant encounters with difference, as well as constructive theorization from a variety of ontological orientations. To open up such spaces implies moreover an attempt to think beyond a religion/secular binary, particularly in the scholarly labor of imagining the human. To do so is also to begin to “politicize spirituality in ways that help us practice emergence, generativity, and liberatory models of belonging,” as Robyn Henderson-Espinoza puts it in chapter six, in order to accelerate “our collective becoming.”[26] It is to recognize that spirituality is also a political act of resilience, and a democratic praxis for many.

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[25] I discuss the concept of a “resonance machine,” from political theorist William Connolly, in the following chapter. See Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity.*

[26] Henderson-Espinoza, “Our Collective Becoming: Politicizing Spirituality.”

Subverting the Religion/Secular Binary: Spirituality

One arena that has been subverting a religion/secular binary for some time now is perhaps a surprising one, that of *spirituality.* Jewish studies scholar Boaz Huss, in a concise but informative review of *The Sacred is the Profane* (a series of essays edited by Russel McCutcheon and William E. Arnal), examines how academic critiques of the categories of religion and the secular emerged and became dominant trends in the study of religion. In doing so, Huss challenges the resiliency of the religion/not religion distinction maintained by McCutcheon and Arnal. For Huss, critiques of religion today emerge not only from academia, as might first be assumed, but are also given ballast by an unacknowledged partner—spirituality. Huss brings attention to the use of religion as a folk concept, and suggests that the academic critique of religion parallels major shifts in its use as a folk category. He refers to the "diminishing social and political power" of a "dichotomy between the religious and the secular," which undergirds the success of the critique of religion as an analytic category.[27]

This diminishing social cachet of a modern religion/secular binary is revealed in the increasing number of people who refuse to be categorized as either religious or secular, often self-identifying as "spiritual," or as "religiously unaffiliated." As Huss puts it:

> The decline of religion and the secular as key cultural concepts comes to the fore in the growing number of people who refuse to define themselves as either religious or secular, in the growing popularity of the folk concept of 'spirituality' that transgresses this binary opposition, and in the formation of new social

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[27] Huss, "The Sacred is the Profane, Spirituality is Not Religion," 99.

> institutions and practices…that indeed challenge and defy the distinction between the religious and the secular.[28]

Huss refers to the religion/secular binary as the "fundamental discursive category of modernity," and is keen to point out how it is being undermined in the lived practices and folk concepts of Western culture, not just in academic discourse. He sees the contemporary use of "spirituality" as a "new cultural category." Spirituality, as it is used today, does not imply a "disjunction between the religious and the secular." In addition, it has fostered emergent "social institutions, cultural practices and personal identities," ones that do not necessarily adhere to a religion/secular binary.[29] As such, spirituality is part of a "new discourse, in which the idea of the division of the social and cultural spheres into the religious and the secular is not taken any longer as universal and self-evident.[30]

Huss believes that many of the critiques of new practices of spirituality result from the way in which they subvert a religion/secular binary. This is why spirituality is often criticized from the vantage points of both secularists as well as religious traditionalists. To each in its own way, contemporary spiritual inclinations are both contaminating and undermining of the strategic delineation between religion and the secular, which works to maintain the integrity of both categories. As I see it, this subversiveness of spiritual orientations is part of their potential for democratic praxis—

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[28] Ibid., 100-101.

[29] For one such social institution, see "Embodied Philosophy."

[30] Huss, "Sacred", 101.

when such orientations can skillfully navigate complexities of appropriation, respectful dialogue, and relational pluralism.[31]

In another essay, “Spirituality: The Emergence of a New Cultural Category and its Challenge to the Religious and the Secular,” Huss traces the changing nature of the category of spirituality, and argues why its emergence today represents such a subversive challenge to modernity. In addition to articulating spirituality as a new discursive construct, Huss’ essay examines this construct in relation to existing scholarly work on emergent spiritual practice, including perspectives from postmodernity, neoliberal economic practices, and secularization, offering a concise yet capacious review of the literature. (Rather than recount such literature here, I direct readers to Huss’ essay for an overview.) I intend to engage directly with Huss’ broader points and to extend his critique, which challenges many of the negative scholarly appraisals of emergent religio-spiritual practice. In order to better situate such critiques, I first follow Huss’ brief genealogy of spirituality.

According to Huss, in the second half of the twentieth century the concept of spirituality experienced a radical semantic shift. The term stems originally from the Latin *spiritus,* which had been used to translate the Greek and Hebrew words *pneuma* and *ruach,* denoting “breath” and “wind” respectively, in addition to “spirit.” The latter had the connotation of the breath or wind of God. In the New Testament, *pneuma* is often juxtaposed with *sarx* or “flesh,” which implied desires opposed to the “Spirit of God.” Beginning in the twelfth century this dichotomy was extended to contrast spirituality directly with corporality or materiality. Thus, we see a certain movement from the embodied materiality of spirit in *ruach* or *pneuma*, to a notion of spirit as disembodied and actively opposed to materiality (a notion commonly critiqued among academics).

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[31] For skillfully navigating relational pluralism, see Faber and Keller, “Polyphilic Pluralism: Becoming Religious Multiplicities.”

Then, in the nineteenth century according to Huss, spirituality as a term metamorphosized once again. Here it came to denote "the essence of (Christian) religion." For instance, in the 1828 Merriam-Webster dictionary, spirituality is defined as "Essence distinct from matter, immateriality, intellectual nature" and as belonging to "the church, or to a person as an ecclesiastic, or to religion, as distinct from temporalis," and finally as "the essence of true religion." Now we find spirit being directly dichotomized with the secular ("temporalis"). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the term began to be associated with "oriental, especially Indian culture," and to take on a metaphysical meaning akin to a "core or quintessence of universal religiosity. … Spirituality was connected to the religious, metaphysical, moral, subjective, private, and experiential realms of life and juxtaposed to the physical, material, public, social, economic, and political arenas."[32] We see spirituality here as the opposite of the secular, as well as the core of a sui generis religious construction. This concept of spirituality has been utilized in Orientalist fashion to sometimes highlight the religiosities of the East as exotic, or to denigrate them as "mystical" and hence as ineffectual for secular life.[33]

However, in the second half of the twentieth century, under the rubric of "New Age," the discursive use of spirituality transformed once again, according to Huss. Now spirituality began to be juxtaposed with religion (as seen in the eventual “spiritual but not religious” designation). At the same time, spirituality began to transgress the categories of the secular. Body practices and issues of social and ecological justice are prominent among spiritual practitioners today, for instance. The opposition between the spiritual and the material has “become blurred” in Huss’ words, while a “new defining dichotomy has emerged,” the spiritual as over and against “the religious.”[34]

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[32] Huss, "Spirituality: The Emergence of a New Cultural Category and its Challenge to the Religious and the Secular," 48.

[33] As Richard King recounts so well in *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and the "Mystic East."*

I depart from Huss here, in seeing spirituality today as necessarily juxtaposed with the religious. Many who consider themselves spiritual, for instance, frequently participate in religious practices and rituals, such as meditation or centering prayer, yoga, *kirtan*, indigenous ceremonies, the study of religious texts and/or the words of saints and sages, retreats in monasteries, service to the poor, activism in religious social justice circles (such as the Catholic Worker Movement), pilgrimage, etc. I would prefer to reframe Huss’ argument to see the contemporary folk category of spirituality as subverting specifically the modern construction of ‘religion.’ Contemporary practices of spirituality destabilize notions of religion as bounded, non-porous, institutionally driven structures defined by adherence to doctrinal formulations, or by fidelity to authoritative interpretations of texts or revelatory events.

While spirituality as a contemporary folk category does not adhere to the modern construction of religion, neither can it be said to be representative of the other half of the binary, the secular. Thus, contemporary practices of spirituality destabilize one of the fundamental categorical structures of modernity. It is in this sense that Huss refers to spirituality today as expressing a "logic of postmodernism."[35] Huss, similar to Fitzgerald, Masuzawa, Asad, and others, prefers to maintain an unremitting social-critical approach to the study of religion, arguing for the "study of spirituality as an 'emic' notion whose genealogy, applications, and significance should be investigated and analyzed."[36] While supportive of Huss' self-reflexive approach within academia, I am more interested in what such social shifts imply for imagining academia beyond a religion/secular binary, rather than simply doubling down on such a binary for scholarly praxis.

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[34] Huss, “Spirituality,” 50.

Emergent Religio-Spiritual Practice

There has been a tendency amongst both traditional religionists and secular theorists to dismiss emergent religio-spiritual practices as New Age, self-seeking narcissism, or as products of neoliberal consumerist practices. For instance, Jeremy Carrette and Richard King see the increasing popularity of "spirituality" as an insidious development for society, marked by an attempted neoliberal takeover of the "cultural space inhabited by 'the religions.'" For Carrette and King, the result of this "capitalist spirituality" is "an erasure of the wider social and ethical concerns associated with religious traditions and communities and the subordination of 'the religious' and the ethical to the realm of economics."[37]

I contend that in order to understand emergent forms of religiosity with greater sophistication, one must turn to mature examples of its embodiment. To study naïve examples or groups of young seekers as representative of new religious trends is not only unfair, but perhaps unethical. It would not be difficult to find naïve practitioners and young seekers in every religious tradition, though to frame their understanding as representative of the religiosity of a tradition would be inherently unethical. When we study religious traditions, especially in philosophical or theological modes, we are responsible for seeking out mature embodiments of thought and practice as a matter of respect, dignity, and fairness. The same holds for emergent, syncretistic religio-spiritual embodiments. The distinguished theologian Paul Knitter, for instance, has written an entire book about his "double-belonging" to both Buddhism and Christianity.[38] In it, it is clear that his religiosity is not the result of consumeristic practices, nor could it be characterized as an aversion to religious commitment. The same holds true for Som Pourfarzaneh, a scholar of Islamic studies, who writes of his "multi-religiosity" within Buddhism and Sufi Islam as a "miracle of compassion."[39] We have already seen above how John Thatamanil has begun to theologize in an interreligious manner, utilizing Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu sources as normative for his religious thinking (and practice). Thatamanil's opening autobiographical account in *Circling the Elephant* reveals that such inclinations are neither consumeristic nor amateurish dalliance, but proceed from his complex historical embeddedness as an Indian-American.[40] Robert

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[35] Ibid., 55.

[36] Ibid., 52.

[37] Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, 4-5.

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[38] Cite Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not be a Christian*.

[39] Som Porrfarzaneh, "The Miracle of Compassion: An Essay on Multi-Religiosity by a Buddhist Muslim."

[40] Thatamanil, *Circling*, xi-xviii.

Neville’s work, particularly in philosophical theology, presents yet another case of emergent, syncretistic religiosity in mature embodiment.[41]

Two further case studies will be helpful here, as examples that swerve somewhat from those above in that they self-identify as “interspiritual” (while those mentioned above do not). In situating them as examples of mature religio-spiritual experimentation, I rely upon my own discernment, developed through personal relationships. Netanel Miles-Yépez and Beverly Lanzetta are respected teachers for communities of aspirants, and spend numerous hours daily in spiritual practice, having done so for decades. In addition, both are “scholar-practitioners.” Lanzetta had a long career in academia, including founding a religious studies program at Prescott College. Miles-Yépez currently teaches at Naropa University. The case studies allow me to rebut critiques of emergent religio-spiritual practice in greater detail, as well as to further contextualize the term “interspiritual,” noting both similarities and differences between Miles-Yépez and Lanzetta.

Pir Netanel (Mu‘in ad-Din) Miles-Yépez is the head of the Inayati-Maimuni Order, a hybrid Sufi-Hasidic lineage, fusing Sufi and Hasidic principles of spirituality and practice as espoused by Rabbi Avraham Maimuni in 13th-century Egypt along with the teachings of the Ba’al Shem Tov and Sufi teacher Hazrat Inayat Khan. The potential for such a lineage became possible when Miles-Yépez’s spiritual teacher, the late Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (founder of the Jewish Renewal movement and former “World Wisdom Chair” at Naropa), was initiated into the universalist Inayati Sufi lineage and made a sheikh by Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan.[42] An authority on Kabbalah and Hasidism, Reb Zalman, as he was generally known, was a student of Howard Thurman, worked with Abraham Joshua Heschel, and participated extensively in interreligious dialogues with spiritual luminaries such as the 14th Dalai Lama, Swami Satchidananda, and Thomas Merton. Though a pillar of liberal and mystical Judaism in the twentieth century, Reb Zalman remained committed to "a creatively Orthoprax Hasidic Judaism" throughout his life.[43] I introduce Miles-Yépez and his teacher Reb Zalman as sophisticated examples of syncretistic, fluid and liminal (re)configurations of religious identity and practice. Such experimentation has been percolating for many decades in the West, especially since the mass influx of Eastern religiosities beginning in the 1960s and '70s.

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[41] See Neville, *Ultimates;* Neville, *Religion;* Neville, *Existence.*

Reb Zalman initiated Miles-Yépez into both the Hasidic and Sufi lineages, thereby creating a new fused lineage, one that is now recognized by the Inayati Order. As might be expected, Pir Netanel does not identify exclusively with either the Hasidic or Sufi aspects of his "hyphenated lineage," but sees both as equal contributors of his "spiritual DNA." As a spiritual teacher, he teaches a Sufi path. At the same time, he identifies as Jewish, but not in a way that excludes the Christianity of his complicated ancestry. Though conversant in Islam, he does not identify as a Muslim Sufi, as the

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[42] Pir Vilayat was the son and successor of Hazrat Inayat Khan. For more on the Inayati Order, see https://inayatiorder.org/. For more on the Jewish Renewal Movement, see https://aleph.org.

[43] Much of the information about Reb Zalman stems from multiple personal interviews with Miles-Yépez in 2016 and 2017. Miles-Yépez was one of Reb Zalman's closest students. As one example of Reb Zalman's interfaith dialogue work, he was part of a roundtable discussion at the Chan Center in Vancouver, Canada on April 20, 2004, with the Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, and others. Miles-Yépez showed me the video of the roundtable. A dialogue between Zalman and Roman Catholic Trappist monk Thomas Keating can be found on YouTube as "The Kiss of God." For the relationship between Zalman and Heschel, see the introduction to Heschel, *Human: God's Ineffable Name*. For Zalman's relationship with Merton, see Kaplan and Magid, ""An Interview with Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi." Miles-Yépez is also currently working on a book detailing Merton and Zalman's extensive correspondence through letters.

Inayati lineage is universalist in orientation. For him, Hasidism and Sufism are "supranormative traditions," which might be accessed without normative religious commitments. His personal religious commitments tend toward Judaism and Christianity, though his teachings as a spiritual teacher are Sufi in form and content.[44]

Yet, in the end, Miles-Yépez feels his greater religio-spiritual identity is not contained by any of these normative or supranormative traditions. It is broadly "interspiritual," though strongly informed by the aforementioned traditions. These traditions are "flavors which add taste and dimension" to his interspirituality. Likewise, the Inayati-Maimuni Order is neither Hasidic nor Sufi, but an emergent form of religiosity that has grown out of traditional religio-contemplative lineages, yet claims authentic connection to those lineages. While having some sense of belonging to both Sufi and Hasidic lineages, Miles-Yépez describes himself as being involved in the formation of a transformative, syncretistic form of religiosity emerging through a fusion of the two (indeed, he would claim a third contribution from contemplative Christianity). This fusion is not reducible to an amalgam of traditions, for it cannot be explained as a sum of its parts. Rather, within this emergent religiosity exists a worldview which challenges our notions of clearly defined religious traditions within a modern religion/secular binary.[45]

Contrary to understandings that equate syncretistic forms of religio-spiritual practice as lacking religious depth, Miles-Yépez exhibits an encompassing, steadfast commitment to a transformative journey that requires a constant shaping and molding through theological reflection and spiritual practice. He involves himself in hours of daily religio-spiritual practice, embodies a deep commitment to his students, participates in and facilitates interspiritual dialogues with teachers in differing religious traditions, and produces award-winning written works of philosophical and theological reflections based upon Sufi and Hasidic teachings, among others. His journey has been imbued with guidance from respected spiritual adepts in traditional contemplative lineages, such as Reb Zalman and Thomas Keating, and his life revolves around his religio-spiritual identity. Far from being a free-wheeling, consumeristic, self-centered, anything goes hodge-podge of religious ideas and practices, Miles-Yépez's journey is focused, dedicated, communal, and self-reflective. As such, it offers an alternate narrative and existential example of a non-traditional religious 'way' that cannot be pigeonholed as consumerism or as embodying a lack of religious commitment. Miles-Yépez expresses the possibility of living a profoundly religious life outside of embeddedness in a particular, bounded religion as traditionally understood in the modern West.

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[44] Personal interviews with Miles-Yépez in 2016 and 2017.

[45] Ibid.

Beverley Lanzetta offers another example of an interspiritual practitioner. Lanzetta spent her career as a religious studies professor, developing many of her ideas through scholarly reflection. It was through academic study that Lanzetta discovered contemplative teachings within the world's religious traditions, which resonated with mystical experience she had before entering academia.[46] Lanzetta continues to remain outside of any formal religious institutions, yet also operates as the head of a religio-spiritual community of “new monastics.” In a difference from Miles-Yépez, she does not claim belonging to any traditional religious or contemplative lineage.[47]

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[46] See Lanzetta, *Nine Jewels of Night*.

Lanzetta describes her journey as part of an emergent religio-spiritual impulse happening cross-culturally, writing that humanity is “in the birth pangs of a global spiritual experiment” that is “challenging us to forge new wisdom traditions.”[48] For her, the patriarchal excesses of our religious traditions, as well as traditional splits between spirit and matter, demand that new forms of religio-spiritual embodiment arise. Many contemporary pilgrims, according to Lanzetta, feel called to embody lives of committed religiosity outside of traditional structures. “Outside” does not mean independently of religious traditions, but in partnership with spiritually efficacious practices and orientations. Lanzetta articulates this experimentation not in consumeristic terms, but as interspiritual practitioners incorporating “the wisdom of diverse worldviews” as they look to “contemplative structures that give rise to religious consciousness,” participating in multi-faith, interspiritual experimentation.[49]

Lanzetta sees extensive overlap in emergent forms of religiosity, characterized “by openness to multi-faith and interspiritual conversations; by a concern for suffering and the ravages of human violence; by a desire to prevent further destruction to the earth and to heal its eco-systems.”[50] She emphasizes that the driving force is not religious doubt, rebelliousness towards institutions, or egotistical individualism, but rather a “faith experience of the utmost seriousness that compels each person to give up whatever is oppressive, superior, exclusive, hurtful, or violent in his or her own religious worldview."[51] For Lanzetta, many of the "religiously unaffiliated" are actually "heeding the call of a deeper faith."[52] She goes on to describe three "common ground" characteristics among interspiritual pilgrims: (1) they hold pluralistic viewpoints, or an adherence to "'the manyness of truth' and are uncomfortable with religious languages and liturgical forms that exclude, oppress, or patronize;" (2) they are committed to "an authentic spiritual path—often in the dark and without spiritual languages or community support—to what impassions them, to what calls them in the depth of their souls;" (3) in doing so they are "giving life to new lineages of religious truths, to the deep structure of religion itself."[53]

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[47] See Lanzetta, *Emerging Heart: Global Spirituality and the Sacred*.

[48] Lanzetta, *Emerging*, 4.

[49] Ibid., 7.

[50] Lanzetta, “New Monastic Life.”

Lanzetta has developed many of her claims philosophically and theologically. In *The Other Side of Nothingness,* she articulates what she calls a "desert hermeneutic," an interpretive framework that proceeds from experiences of a divine abyss.[54] On the "other side" of apophatic encounter with the divine, Lanzetta discovers an ontological orientation that is inherently pluralistic, non-absolute, and in its endless fecundity continues to birth new religio-contemplative traditions. In *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology,* Lanzetta develops a *"via feminina"* through a study on "the spiritual dimensions of violence against women," and "the implications of gender in the spiritual life."[55] The patriarchal excess of traditional religio-spiritual concepts, linguistic forms, and practices (almost exclusively constructed by men) subtly exclude women's experience of the world, enacting an incipient violence as women attempt to walk spiritual paths.[56] Lanzetta's theological concepts help to substantiate her claims of emergent religious consciousness that addresses structures of oppression, giving "life to new lineages of religious truths."

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[51] Lanzetta, *Emerging,* 53.

[52] Ibid., 61.

[53] Ibid., 56.

[54] Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness,* 5.

My interest here lies not in analyzing Lanzetta's theological or metaphysical concepts, but rather in offering an example of an emergent, syncretistic religio-spiritual orientation developed in a serious, committed, even scholarly way. Many of Lanzetta's interspiritual orientations resonate with broader contemplative traditions, particularly in seeing religiosity as ultimately about spiritual transformation. These transformations access human potentials for holding the worlds suffering in ever expanding degrees of love, wisdom, compassion, and fervor for justice. Lanzetta offers a prophetic voice in particular on the suffering of women and environmental desecration.

Interspiritual Orientations

Lanzetta and Miles-Yépez share a sense of religio-spiritual identification, even though their religious journeys have been quite different. Miles-Yépez has been involved heavily in traditional religious-contemplative lineages, while Lanzetta's path occurs for the most part outside of traditions. Yet both identify as "interspiritual." It is important to note that Lanzetta and Miles-Yépez are also supportive of each other's identification as interspiritual, despite such differences. The point being that many who identify as interspiritual actually *expect* such differences, and have no intention of attempting to define the term in such a way as to exclude pluralistic difference, or the uniqueness of everyone's spiritual path. At the same time, among many who identify as interspiritual, there is generally broad agreement on notions of maturity, practice, study, and commitment as essential to one's path. Within a broad sharing of values, individualized differences of a religio-spiritual 'way' are affirmed and supported. This includes differences in practices as well as philosophical-theological frameworks.

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[55] Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 2.

[56] Lanzetta, *Radical*, 16.

The interspiritual, in this sense, is not then a new 'religion,' but more an emergent religio-spiritual *orientation*. It is an orientation that embraces the porosity of religio-spiritual traditions, and subverts the very structures through which we think the category religion. As Lanzetta describes it, "if it is a religion, it is unlike any we have known, for it is free of the universalist or exclusivist claim and without need of a determinate form or final name. Its underlying structure is dynamic and self-emptying, radically democratic and absent of one all-inspiring prophet."[57]

It is important to note that an interspiritual orientation does not necessarily mean one is unembedded in a religious tradition either. After all, the word was coined by the Roman Catholic monk Wayne Teasdale, and served as a descriptive term for the "Snowmass Interspiritual Dialogue Fellowship," a long-running interreligious dialogue (over thirty years) among spiritual teachers and serious practitioners embedded in various religious traditions.[58] As a broad and capacious moniker, I use *interspiritual* to represent a contemplative orientation towards religio-spiritual identities; an openness to transformative encounters across difference; respect for contemplative lineages, practices, and practitioners *within* religious traditions; an inherently pluralistic view of religio-spiritual paths with emphases on commitment, practice, and long-term spiritual transformation; and a positive view towards emergent, syncretistic religiosities of an efficacious nature.

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[57] Lanzetta, *Emerging*, 61.

Interspiritual orientations, as I define them, do not lead to a single syncretistic framework, but rather to multiplicities of emergent schemes and religio-spiritual practices. Lanzetta and Miles-Yépez would not necessarily assent to a singular philosophical-theological framework, nor do they share the same religio-spiritual practices. Yet they both identify as interspiritual and support one another's self-identification. The same is true for a large variety of people who hold interspiritual orientations. To identify broadly as interspiritual does not mean to hold to a set of doctrinal propositions, nor does it constitute a specific ontological orientation. Nevertheless, interspiritual practitioners within or outside of religious traditions tend towards shared values, as well as a spirit of openness to emergent religio-spiritual possibilities when carefully discerned.[59] An interspiritual orientation, because it is interested in the efficaciousness of transformations of the human condition, is also dedicated to maintaining deep partnerships with traditional religious and contemplative lineages. This includes ongoing and intimate dialogue on the nature and practice of discernment itself. The development of a religious framework becomes a process-oriented approach for an interspiritual practitioner, where philosophical or theological understanding is forged in the dynamism of one's life experience. One's ontological orientation emerges in the praxis of one's own transformative journey, often (but not always) in partnership with traditional wisdom lineages held within creative, syncretistic tensions. In this sense, interspiritual practice shares resonances with, and can learn from, the academic practice of comparative theology, to which I turn below. Differences in orientations are supported, as religious understanding is forged through unique relational experience in varying cultural, social, linguistic, ethnic, and racial milieus.

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[58] For the coining of the term "interspiritual," see Teasdale, *Mystic Heart*. The "Snowmass Interspiritual Dialogue Fellowship" was a successor to the "Snowmass Interreligious Conference." For an overview of its first two decades see Miles-Yépez, *The Common Heart*. For more on "interspiritual," see McEntee and Bucko, *New Monasticism*.

[59] For some of these shared values see Lanzetta, *Emerging Heart*; Ursula King, *The Search for Spirituality: Our Global Quest for a Spiritual Life*; Teasdale, *Mystic Heart.*

Often syncretistic spiritual seeking is labeled as "self-centered" or "purely personal." The idea seems to be that interspiritual orientations cannot represent something like a tradition because interspiritual practitioners do not adhere to a common set of doctrines, rituals, or practices. Thus, it is purely self-oriented rather than communally oriented. What underlies such a critique is, of course, our modern notion of 'religion' (as a bounded entity predicated upon adherence to dogmatically formulated beliefs, shared practices, and extrinsic religious authority). Yet, as seen above, there is a definite sense of shared values and a broad sense of emerging community amongst those interspiritually oriented. This community includes practitioners both within and outside of traditional religions. While not a religion in the modern, constructed sense, interspiritual orientations find delight in the differences of religio-spiritual paths, and cultivate a deep desire for intimacy and dialogue within such difference. Hence, one hears democratic reverberations in interspiritual orientations. Intimate dialogue represents its own “spiritual practice” for interspiritual orientations—a desire to be in intimate, transformative dialogue with difference—such is also a key aspect of democratic praxis.

Once the modern category of religion is deconstructed, syncretism need no longer represent a corruption of revealed truth, or a selfish rejection of religious authority. Rather, *syncretism* connotes religious innovation that recognizes the always already changing nature of religious traditions, and works with religious truth in more or less mature, nuanced, and fruitful ways. In fact, syncretism is how religion has been practiced throughout human history. There are no pure traditions, and all traditions are syncretistic. In the United States, where increasing religious diversity entangles with an individuating ethos, a fecund milieu exists within which syncretistic religious phenomena continue to percolate, and these trends only appear to be accelerating.

Demographic, social, and political movements in the U.S. point towards a future of even greater religious diversity. In a 2017 Pew study, the percentages of those identifying as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) in the U.S. increased significantly from just 2012, when they first exploded on the demographic scene as comprising a much higher portion of the population than previously imagined. Among those 18-29 years of age, the percentage jumped from 20% in 2012, to 29% in 2017, a nearly fifty percent increase in only five years. Among those ages 30-49 the increase was even more significant, jumping from 20% to 30%. Overall, more than 1 in 4 people (27%!) now identify as “spiritual but not religious.” That’s over 85 million people in the U.S. alone, and the demographic trends cut across racial, ethnic, and political categories, including

Caucasian, Hispanic, African American, Democrat, Republican, age, education, and economic differences.[60]

In a significantly larger parallel study (of over 100,000 Americans in all 50 states), the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) finds a precipitous decline in white Christian America, while at the same time showing growth in the religiously unaffiliated. The "religiously unaffiliated" have gone from 8% of the population to 27% in a single generation, growth that once again cuts across religious, racial, educational, and socio-economic factors.[61] "Religiously unaffiliated" is now the largest category of identification, including a full 38% of those between ages 18-29.[62] Importantly, only about a quarter of the religiously unaffiliated identify as agnostic or atheist, which suggests widespread spiritual inclinations among the religiously unaffiliated even as they identify as "secular" (in yet another transgression of a religion/secular binary). The PRRI study also found that the youngest religious groups (by age of practitioners) in the U.S. are all non-Christian.[63] In an essay examining the political implications of these studies, Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux finds that the base of the Democratic party is becoming "increasingly religiously varied," and a major challenge for the future of the party will be to "craft a message that speaks to pretty much every faith tradition—as well as people who have no religion at all."[64] This leads me to speculate that interspiritual orientations, as spiritually literate orientations formed in dialogue with diverse religious traditions—as well as those outside traditions—may have growing political capital in the years and decades ahead.

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[60] Lipka and Gecewicz, "More Americans now say they're spiritual but not religious."

[61] See Cox and Jones, "America's Changing Religious Identity."

[62] Over a quarter of the country overall identifies as "religiously unaffiliated," the next largest group is white evangelical Protestants at 17%. The "religiously unaffiliated" and "spiritual but not religious" are distinct groups, but with significant overlap. For example, around 50% of the spiritual but not religious still identify as Christian, while around 40% remain unaffiliated (Lipka and Gecewicz, "More Americans").

[63] Cox and Jones, "America's Changing."

All of the above speaks to radical changes in the religious make-up of the United States, and to a need for incipient spaces within academia for multifarious theorization. These phenomena are not just for sociologists to investigate, but demand new forms of religious thinking and reflection. They demand new forms of philosophy, theology, and religious studies. They challenge traditional notions of religion as well as the secular, and speak to a dynamism where boundaries between religio-spiritual traditions become porous. Such endeavors need not replace, nor subsume, traditional religious orientations. On the contrary, interspiritual orientations tend to emerge in deep and substantive *partnership* with traditions. In the religious wisdom and spiritual practices humanity has developed over millennia, knowledge, guidance, and spiritual energies are found that support the maturation of emerging forms of religio-spiritual practice. Conversely, these emergent forms challenge traditional religious structures to let go of oppressive assemblages revolving around patriarchal, racial, and environmentally catastrophic positions, and to open themselves up to transformative encounters with difference.

Further, the interspiritual movement itself may grow in surprising directions. As I briefly alluded to above, there may be growing political ramifications in the U.S. for the elaboration of political and cultural narratives that speak with spiritual maturity across religious traditions, as well as to those from no tradition. Such a message would also embody important secular concerns. There is something in interspiritual orientations of the affective resonance seen in political philosopher William Connolly's notion of "affinities of spirituality" (discussed in the following chapter). Affinities of spirituality can be seen in the pluralistic sensibilities of the interspiritual, in the way in which those who identify as interspiritual do not demand, nor expect, creedal homogeneity or common disciplinary practices. Yet interspiritual orientations broadly "resonate" with shared values, goals, practices, and a capacious sense of spiritual transformation. As Connolly's work will show, resonances on affective, visceral registers of being are crucial to the coalescing of political assemblages across religious, social, economic, ethnic, and creedal differences. As a religio-spiritual-ecological movement embracing a heightened awareness of issues of justice and oppression, evolving explicitly in dialogue, experimentation, and partnership with diverse religious traditions, emergent religio-spiritual practice, and secular-scientific perspectives—interspiritual orientations appear well positioned to play a leading role in the future development of political assemblages in the U.S.

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[64] Thomson-DeVeaux, "America's Shifting Religious Makeup Could Spell Trouble For Both Parties."

Along scholarly lines, one of the concerns of an interspiritual perspective is how to create space for others while still upholding democratic practices and the critical, self-reflexive thinking that is at the core of academic labor. An interspiritual perspective tends to spaces of encounter amidst difference, and holds lightly, even apophatically, a desire to narrow methodological lenses in order to 'grasp' and concretize objects. An interspiritual perspective embraces capacious and liminal modes of knowing, and is relentlessly relational rather than ostensibly objectifying. Placing a wager on the potencies and possibilities of *radical difference in right relationship*, an interspiritual perspective aims for communities of diversity and a diversity of communities, rather than a homogeneity of scholarly production. In its focus on plurality, an interspiritual perspective is secular, but not secularist. It is *theological,* but not Theological.

Brief Response to Cultural Despisers of Religio-Spiritual Experimentation

Problems arise for purely secularist lenses in understanding these cultural shifts capaciously. Consider critiques of emergent religio-spiritual orientations as neoliberal practices paralleling norms of late-stage capitalism. In my experience, many interspiritual practitioners are adamantly concerned about issues of social and ecological justice, tend to be opposed to neoliberal capitalism, desire to live more in harmony with nature, express a great yearning for community life, and strongly reject selfish, individualistic modes of consumerist culture. While not an academic ethnographic study, such reflections do have the backing of over two decades of anecdotal experience in working and dialoging with hundreds of people practicing emergent religio-spiritual forms. Of course, given the dominant trends of culture itself, practitioners may be—like all of us—at times also caught up in consumeristic culture.

Another critique leveled against emergent forms of religio-spiritual practice is that they are purely "personal" as opposed to communal, and thus tend to glorify the self, adopting selfish tendencies. Catherine Cornille takes this line of critique, juxtaposing religious authority with syncretistic spiritual seeking: "Eschewing the heteronomy implied in submitting to an external authority, the individual self becomes the final norm. Accordingly, religious truth is measured only by the degree to which a particular teaching or practice comes to enhance one's personal sense of well-being or wholeness."[65] Yet, to be involved in spiritually transformative processes as opposed to adhering to established doctrinal formulations is not necessarily to be individualistic and selfish as opposed to communal and altruistic. The reason many strive for a transformation of the self is to serve *others*, not just themselves, and to serve society in more fruitful and holistic ways. Imagining unique, individualized processes of spiritually efficacious transformation does not correlate with a lack of communal values, as if the only types of community possible are ones revolving around shared doctrinal beliefs, ritual practices, and/or acquiescence to outside authority structures. Lanzetta is just one person among many to articulate a set of shared values widely found in emerging religio-spiritual communities, values which often work precisely against a fetishized "selfish" orientation.[66] In my experience, if issues of social and environmental justice are not addressed, most younger people simply aren't interested in the spirituality being peddled.[67]

I agree with Huss above that much of the critique of emergent forms of religio-spiritual practice stem from their undermining of a religion/secular binary—and the threat this poses to secularist worldviews as well as traditional understandings of religion.

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[65] Cornille, *The Im-possiblity of Interreligious Dialogue*, 63.

[66] See fn 59 in this chapter for more.

[67] Furthering many of the points made in this section and above is Duane Bidwell's *When One Religion Isn't Enough: The Lives of Spiritually Fluid People.* Bidwell's book was discovered by me only after writing this chapter, and he offers many examples of "spiritually fluid people" in it. Recognizing that "religious multiplicity" is increasing in the U.S. and Europe, while in "other parts of the world [it] has long been the norm," Bidwell sees spiritual fluidity for many to be a vocation rather than a choice, similar to Lanzetta. He also confronts many of the same arguments against religio-spiritual experimentation seen here. In Bidwell's extensive experience and research, "most spiritually fluid people resist spiritual materialism; they are thoughtful, passionate, and integrated. Their lives challenge the 'logic of the One' that shapes most approaches to religion and philosophy in Europe and North America" (Ibid., 8).

However, in opposition to Huss I also simultaneously contest that such critiques are indicative of the essence of new forms of spirituality. When Huss offers his critique of theorists who dismiss emergent spiritualities as "being part of capitalistic consumer culture and for enhancing neo-liberal ideology," he also implicitly agrees with the underlying (and faulty) analysis. Huss sees these critiques as stemming from a "moral verdict on an idea of 'authentic' religion and spirituality, from which the New Age deviates," and argues that a moral critique should not substitute for, nor be confused with, historical analysis.[68] What Huss fails to recognize (at least in his short essay), is the ways in which such analysis is also biased by a hard constructivist ideology.

What I mean to relay is that I might agree with these critiques that many popular forms of "New Age" spirituality or other emergent religio-spiritual practices *do* embody problematic assumptions, selfish tendencies, and consumeristic practices. However, I strongly contest the way such critiques actively foreclose analysis of more mature forms of embodiment, hence caricaturing these movements. Similar analysis could easily be done on almost any other collective in society. Consider religious traditions. It would not be hard to find large numbers of participants in almost any religious tradition in the West (and perhaps even a majority of participants) heavily involved in consumeristic, neoliberal cultural practices. Would we then conclude that such is the "essence" of that tradition? Perhaps a doctrinaire Marxist would, but that should not be the normative stance for all scholarly analysis. How about scholars? Are many not engaged in consumeristic, individualized, "neoliberal" practices? The issue is not so much analysis of problematic economic practices, as the ruse to utilize such analysis in order to caricature a particular group as uniquely beholden to them.[69]

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[68] Huss, "Spirituality," 58.

There is another aspect of emergent religio-spiritual practice that these critiques miss—the affect and agency of Eastern and Indigenous religio-spiritual practice. Many of these trends have roots in the counter-culture movements of the sixties, as Huss states, or even further back in the spiritualist and Theosophical movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Both of these were heavily influenced by Eastern religiosities. Thus, the emergence of such forms cannot be reduced to "postmodern logic." The influx of Eastern 'ways' of being religious, and the ongoing experiment in global culture that is America (at its best), are strong heterogeneous influences. Today, with an increasing return of Indigenous spirituality into public life, America is saturated with religious difference and syncretistic experimentation. In other words, vibrant encounters across difference and their reverberating affects may be what is most responsible for such a "release of differential subjectivities," and not necessarily postmodern logic or late-stage capitalism.[70]

Recall Mandair's recognition from the previous chapter that in pre-colonial India most people participated in multiple religious identities, or Campany's scholarship in the introduction on the concepts into which religion had to be translated in China, as 'ways' or 'paths' (*daos*), or 'teachings' (*jiaos*). Emergent forms of *religio-spirituality* can be seen not purely as products of Western culture, nor as a return to a projected, mystical, Oriental past, but rather as creative cultural experimentation brought on by fecund and complex encounters with difference. Like any other historical movement, including the formation of religious traditions themselves, discernment over what constitutes healthy, life-giving forms of experimentation, and what not, will be heavily contested and a constant, ongoing process. I assert that such discernment is best done in offering an open hand towards emergent practitioners, and not, for instance, in excluding them from interreligious dialogue spaces.[71] Discerning from afar is always ripe with problematic issues. Theorizing that polices from the outside often inspires caricature rather than understanding, categorization rather than dialogue, and feeds a desire to seek out immature forms as representative rather than dealing with the complexity and challenges of more sophisticated embodiments.

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[69] An argument could be made that these new practices have only come into being during late-stage capitalism and thus uniquely embody such practices, as opposed to religious traditions which were founded thousands of years prior. However, this is also problematic. As discussed below, many of these trends have roots that begin well before postmodernity and late-stage capitalism.

[70] Mandair, "Unbearable," 659 (as quoted in chapter two).

Thatamanil has noted that human communities have always differentiated themselves, yet there is a novel and "peculiar character" to the way the modern construction of religion distinguishes communities, even if differentiation itself is not unprecedented. Part of this peculiarity lies in how, "in South and East Asia, categories of 'religious' differentiation permit multiple religious belonging. … One needn't be exclusively Buddhist, Taoist, or Confucian in East Asia." Another aspect of peculiarity lies along the axis of a religion/secular binary, where the idea that dimensions of cultural life exist that can be separated into secular and religious spheres "is largely without precedent."[72] Given that it is precisely these "peculiar" aspects of 'religion'—singular religious belonging and a religion/secular binary—that many emergent forms of religio-spirituality subvert, it is highly convincing that the influx of Eastern and Indigenous 'ways' of being religious have strongly influenced these developments.[73] While being careful not to fetishize such hybridity—either as an influx of the mystical Orient,[74] or as a re-enchantment of a science-based materialistic West[75]—recognizing a shared mutuality and diverse cultural agency in the presence of creative religious experimentation seems eminently reasonable.

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[71] As Cornille would do, e.g., "A second condition for a meaningful and constructive dialogue between religions is *commitment* to a particular religious tradition. … [I]nterreligious dialogue, if it is truly interreligious, nonetheless requires that its interlocutors remain rooted in the particular religious community from which and for which they speak. It is this investment in the truth of a particular tradition that distinguishes dialogue from New Age syncretism" (Cornille, *Im-possibility*, 4).

Absence at the Center: An Orientation for Democracy and Religious Studies

Much of my current narrative up to this point has told a story of the invention of religion as it proceeded from Protestant Christianity. Tied to this story was the instantiation of religious studies departments. As seen above, the founding of religious studies seemed to be based upon a convoluted endeavor to separate itself from theology and hence Christianity, while simultaneously implanting Christianity as the normative ideal of sui generis religion, thus orienting research a priori towards claims of Christian superiority. Subsequently, while still positing religious studies as a "human science," the concept of sui generis religion is thrown out, while claims of superiority continue on in new, objectifying, hard constructivist lenses. Along this trajectory, ‘theology’ remains the black sheep throughout—the abjected ‘other,’ whose most important trait lies in its delimiting—i.e., in the ability to define oneself as over-and-against it, as doing ‘not-theology.’ There is a problem with this story, however. It leaves out an alternate trajectory of religious studies, one more mystical, indeed more (inter)spiritual, than trajectories of the tale told thus far.

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[72] Thatamanil, *Circling*, 140-141.

[73] See Campbell, *Easternization of the West*; Kripal, *Secret Body*.

[74] King, *Orientalism and Religion*.

[75] Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*.

In *The Myth of Disenchantment,* Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm shows that Max Müller held substantial spiritual inclinations as a focus of his academic endeavor. Müller, to whom many sociological-critical theorists in the study of religion trace their genre to (including McCutcheon), didn’t just hold minor perennialist inclinations behind the scenes either.[76] Rather, Josephson-Storm shows how his scholarly work actually overlapped with spiritualism and Theosophy, sharing “habits of thought” with esotericists such as Éliphas Lévi and Helena Blavatsky. In fact, Müller gave a late series of lectures on *Theosophy, or, Psychological Religion* (Josephson-Storm notes that we might translate “psychological” in the title today as “spiritual”), which explicitly argued for a Neoplatonic Christian mysticism at the heart of his academic work. Müller’s goal for the scholarly discipline of comparative religion was one and the same with the goal of a theosophical, mystical Christianity, namely to achieve “the divine union toward which all religion is directed.”[77]

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[76] See also Vial, *Modern Religion, Modern Race.*

[77] Josephson-Storm, *Myth*, 114.

Josephson-Storm's book is fascinating in showing just how prevalent mystical and "magical" inclinations were thoroughly distributed throughout the modern West, including in many disciplines we consider to be the opposite of such inclinations (e.g., Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton, Müller and sociological religious studies, Critical Theory, and even Vienna Circle positivism). Contrary to the "myth of disenchantment," Josephson-Storm argues that instrumental reason has never been a dominant trend in society, and neither is it today. It is only a "myth" that we live in such an era, and thus he argues that the "cultural setting" within which religious studies was formed has been misread: "It was neither antireligious skepticism nor mainstream Protestantism, neither secular disenchantment nor liberal theology." Rather, the discipline was formed within an active and pervasive milieu of spiritualism, occultism and theosophy, with much overlap and ongoing dialogue between academics and esotericists: "it appears as though occultists, spiritualists, and many scholars of religion were fellow travelers, or at least, inhabitants of the same conceptual universe."[78]

As a result, there remains what Josephson-Storm calls a "shadow over the discipline of religious studies." Originally inculcated with the Christian "God" at the center of the discipline (indeed, at the heart of the category of religion itself), the field now operates "around a hole or fissure. In other words, we find ourselves in a discipline organized around a core that no longer exists and we cannot in good conscience reconstruct." Other terms have attempted to substitute for the Christian God, such as "transcendence" or "the sacred," though for good reason they have been found wanting.

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[78] Ibid., 122.

While attempting to make the discipline more “cosmopolitan or universal,” these terms remain overly Christianized and still do not work for most other cultures, nor do they “accurately describe assumed commonalities.”[79] In addition, they continue to produce a “remainder” of things, often under the nomenclature of “superstition,” which “do not count as religion and are therefore outside our realm of inquiry.”[80]

There remains a “divine shadow” in the field that points towards an absent center, where the “specter” of “comparative mysticism” continues to percolate and “refuses to be banished.” Thus, one finds an inherent tension in religious studies between its more mystical-spiritual inclinations and its presentation as a secular, human science. On the one side, “the very terms that have defined the field, that have structured the profession,” pull in the direction of a comparative mysticism or spirituality. On the other side, the “contrary reaction has often been to close down dialogue by arguing that those things marked as ‘religions’ have no common essence, and thus to risk balkanizing the field.”[81]

A question at this point arises for me: What if religious studies were to embrace this *liminal* space? A non-reification—an absence—at the heart of its endeavor? And secondly, given arguments I have made up to this point, what might this have to do with *democracy?*

Fred Dallmayr, an intercultural political scientist, has articulated politics as “relational praxis” and describes an “apophatic” form of democracy. In a democracy, power and legitimization reside in the hands of “the people,” yet Dallmayr asserts that the people "can never be fully or concretely instantiated."[82] Thus, there remains always an apophatic center to democracy, where "the people" exist as a presence/absence that never fully takes form. They are present "as an ever beckoning source of empowerment and legitimation," yet forever absent as a "fixed entity or determinate substance." Utilizing the thought of the Baron de Montesquieu and Claude Lefort, Dallmayr finds the "absence of a stable and empirically present center or foundation" a distinctive feature of modern democracies, part of an "ontological mutation" occasioned by the transformation from monarchy to democracy.[83] In some sense, this transformation parallels that of religious studies today. The monarchy of Christianity is gone, yet various new movements arise to concretize the center of the field with something else. The sacred, for instance, or a secularist gaze.

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[79] Ibid., 120-121.

[80] Ibid., 124.

[81] Ibid., 122.

One of the great threats to democracy, according to Dallmayr, lies in attempts to concretize this absence, to substantiate "the people" (e.g., by claiming the "will of the people" resides in one's particular policy prescriptions or political attitudes). Populism, and at the extreme end totalitarianism, are attempts to "replace the disembodiment of sovereign power with 'a *materialization* of the people.'"[84] In dialogue with Tzvetan Todorov, Jacques Derrida, Enrique Dussel, and others, Dallmayr discusses two other loci of power and their corresponding threats. Political rulers and agents (*potestas*) within democratic systems may become despotic and tyrannical or glorify a "lust" for power and wealth that degenerates into forms of plutocracy and neoliberalism, as many would argue is happening today. A third locus revolves around the pursuit of a common good and/or the "good life," which can degenerate into an oppressive "messianism."[85] Yet all these loci of power are also necessary for democratic life.

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[82] Dallmayr, *Democracy to Come*, 13.

[83] Ibid., 5-7.

[84] Ibid., 8. "*materialization* of the people" is quoting Claude Lefort.

As such, democracy need not be free of the exercise of religion in the public sphere, but must remain vigilant against a "'politicization' of faith" that attempts to occupy the necessary absence at the center of democracy. Again, resonances can be heard within the field of religious studies. What constitutes religion? And what constitutes a scholarly study of the religious, especially once a religion/secular binary recedes? Perhaps we need not concretize nor define these too clearly. Dallmayr argues, once again quoting Lefort, for a "permanence of the theologico-political" at the center of democratic life, which participates within this "empty space" as a "potentiality or a longing for goodness or the 'good life.'"[86] While the "good life" serves "as the ethical yardstick of democratic politics," it cannot "simply be presupposed or imposed, but must be searched for in dialogical interactions."[87]

The good life, for Dallmayr, is found in a constant reshaping of, and striving for, the potentials hidden in democratic values. These potentials emerge through dialogical interactions among those with differing, even antagonistic, perspectives. Raimon Panikkar and Mahatma Gandhi, among others, become important sources for Dallmayr here. He goes on to reject various understandings of the human as a "rational animal," "homo economicus," or "homo politicus," which respectively give rise to theories of deliberative democracy (the Habermas-Rawls line), Marxist theory, and politics as inherently antagonistic (a la Carl Schmitt or Nietzsche). Each of these is seen as concretizing what it means to be human. By giving a particular form to the mystery of being human, they miss the potential “decentering” or “absence” that stands at the center of an apophatic democracy, which is undergirded by a “subterranean rhythm of being.”[88] In the end, Dallmayr settles on a “difficult compatibility” between deliberative and apophatic democracy—arguing for a chastened deliberative democracy that is open “to new possibilities, new paradigms and horizons of thought,” while recognizing, in a manner similar to Jeffery Stout, hermeneutical histories that belie fixed universalisms, revealing “culturally sedimented … idioms and frameworks of understanding.”[89]

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[85] Ibid., 150.

[86] Ibid., 9.

[87] Ibid., 13.

What would it mean, I wonder, for religious studies to embrace such a democratically inflected, apophatic absence at the very center of the discipline itself?

The Gravity of an Absence: Comparative Theology and Religious Studies

An absence is not nothing, even if it may be “no-thing.” An absence can still represent a center of gravity, without being named, concretized, grasped, or even seen. An absence can be oriented around, as a no-thingness which nevertheless gives shape and form to that which it attracts. The Earth may revolve around the Sun, but the Sun, along with our entire solar system, itself revolves around an absence, a massive black hole at the center of this “milky way” galaxy in the boondocks of an expansive, and expanding, cosmos. An absence at the center does not mean having nowhere to place one's hat, as it were. We all have cosmic addresses. Yet, as attraction *happens*, assemblages of import caught within the gravitational field—or better said, within the warping of space and time, within the *time being*—may give way to new assemblages, emergent forms, and syncretistic hybrids which could be born, in just that way, along no other trajectory. An absence need not represent a reigning chaos, but rather chaotic, emergent orders of complexity. Such complexities consist of base ingredients, rearranged into new fashionable forms. Some ingredients, or combinations of ingredients, are apparently essential for certain types of life (water, oxygen), while others may have more mysterious roles to play.

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[88] Ibid., 35. This notion comes from Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being.*

[89] Ibid., 40.

There is something like this happening in comparative theology, for instance.

Comparative theology has much to offer on ways of navigating multiplicities of ontological orientations in respectful, dignified, and even democratic ways. As Francis Clooney describes the discipline, "Comparative theology is a manner of learning that takes seriously diversity and traditions, openness and truth, allowing neither to decide the meaning of our religious situation without recourse to the other."[90] Clooney articulates how the practice of comparative theology might spur the establishment of new communities, in a passage worth quoting in full:

> Comparative theology therefore implies and may call into existence a new conversation that, if taken seriously, has spiritual as well as intellectual implications. It may create a liminal religious community that seeks to understand faith that is complexified by comparative learning. This new community will have roots in multiple communities even if it usually remains its participants' second community. As the number of persons living this complicated intellectual and spiritual life grows larger, the fixed boundaries separating religions become all the

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[90] Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 8.

> less plausible, not due simply to demographics or social change, but now also because the theological insights arising in comparative study will push the boundaries.[91]

The *liminality* of the comparative theological approach is helpful in positioning a fecund, creative, apophatic epicenter for scholarly exploration. Comparative theologians have learned to treat the ideas—and people —of other religions as intimate partners in "the labor of imagining the human." This does not mean a facile submission to the views of others, or an abandonment of one's own orientations, but rather a vulnerability to the *presence* of others. As Thatamanil describes it, "persons from other traditions are not of interest solely because they offer us data for the construction of a given theory of religion, but because what they have to say about the nature of the real might be true or at least worthy of contestation as a genuine alternative to one's own position."[92] Such a stance allows for Eastern, Indigenous, and other non-European perspectives to become normative sources for theory, where they are not encountered merely as 'data.'

Comparative theology takes seriously the moral, ethical, and spiritual challenges of diversity. It allows for the arising of a liminal space that is always unfinished, incomplete, and to some degree marginalized from established norms and truths, while also maintaining space for traditional religious belonging.[93] (It is important to note, with

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[91] Ibid., 161-162.

[92] Thatamanil, "Comparing," 1178.

[93] Francis Clooney describes the comparative theologian as a "marginal person," whose work will always "fall short of full integration as a scholar and a person. She will be always both this and that, always finding that deference to two traditions means that she in a way belongs to both, without fully belonging to either" (Clooney, *Comparative,* 156-157).

Francis Clooney, that “being traditional too is a way of accentuating diversity.”)[94] The ethical underpinnings of comparative theologians are aligned and productive of democratic praxis in a pluralistic society, avoiding the objectifying-othering move at the heart of coloniality.

Thatamanil has described comparative theology as “the work of learning from the wisdom and practices of one’s religious neighbors so that a more encompassing knowledge of ultimate reality and the world’s relation to ultimate reality might be gained.”[95] When one recontextualizes secularist ontological orientations also as *religious* orientations, as I have done and will continue to do—then one can easily extend practices of a comparative *theology* to include secularist perspectives as part of the community of ‘religious neighbors.’[96] That is, secularists are also those from whom we might learn wisdom and thereby bring about more encompassing orientations towards the nature of reality. This places ontological orientations on something of an equal footing, without needing to imply that all secularists share the same ontological orientations, *mutatis mutandis* for religious folk.

As to the arguments against theology within secular academic settings—particularly as either beholden to religious authority or as meant only for closed, membership communities—comparative theologians are once again instructive. They expose the anachronism of such critiques, as well as the changing nature of religion and its theological imaginary. Comparative theologian Hyo-Dong Lee, for instance, puts democracy, postcolonial, and decolonial labor at the forefront of his "theology of spirit-qi." For Lee, as mentioned in the introduction, democracy is less a particular political formation as an underlying principle that "all creatures have the power to rule and to create themselves," resonating with Whitman's vistas of democracy. Lee brings together the Christian notion of Spirit with "the East Asian, Daoist, and Confucian notion of *qi* (which is better known in the West as *ch'i* and read as *gi* in Korean) in order to construct theological and philosophical underpinnings for the idea of democracy—that is, what may be called a *metaphysics of democracy*."[97] I return to Lee's work in the final chapter, bringing attention to how he works with the encumbered, historical situatedness of our pluralistic religious and political lives. Lee also serves as another example of self-aware, reflective, syncretistic religious experimentation that is neither consumeristic nor individualistically selfish (in fact, quite the opposite).

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[94] Ibid., 8.

[95] Thatamanil, *Circling*, 198.

[96] To briefly repeat the argument, a secularist position is religious in the sense that it consists of an orientation towards the nature of reality, and offers normative suggestions of how humans ‘ought’ to orient themselves towards such a reality in implicit and explicit ways, and how humans might study such a reality.

Postmodernist theologian and process thinker Catherine Keller, whose work we first encountered in the introduction, while not technically a comparative theologian, is another example of a theologian whose work is explicitly comparative, oriented towards other academics, eschews religious authority, and practices *theology* (little "t") in an overtly philosophical manner. The examples of Lee, Thatamanil, and Keller show the limited use of the caricature of theologians as beholden to particular doctrinal or other authoritative vestiges, writing for bounded groups of cohesive communities (unless we wish to posit academia itself as such a community, which perhaps it is), or as somehow displaying a lack of critical thinking. All three of these theologians make explicit use of various philosophical discourses of critical and postmodern theories, are in dialogue with constructions of the category of religion itself, are immersed in postcolonial and decolonial concerns, are passionately oriented towards democratic praxis, and navigate skillfully self-reflexive encounters with religious and secular ‘others.’ Their theologies arguably resemble much more a postmodern academy than they do classical Theology, and are likely to receive more stinging critiques from the latter than the former.

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[97] Lee, *Spirit, Qi, and the Multitude*, xii.

There are plenty of other examples to point to as well. Buddhist theorists Kristen Kiblinger and John Makransky challenge too easy portrayals from Buddhist thinkers that do not take into account either historical situatedness or other religious traditions seriously.[98] Hugh Nicholson takes a more explicitly political-critical stance in his work.[99] Robert Neville has sought to create encompassing cross-cultural and interreligious theories of ultimacy and human religiosity, not as hegemonic impositions of truth, but rather as fallible hypotheses that might be of help in some way to others and future generations.[100] Comparative theologian Stephanie Corigliano attempts to theorize from the standpoint of a contemporary, Western yoga community studying Patañjali’s yoga sutras. For Corigliano, comparative theology can itself be a “way of exploring and even forming faith identity,” thus one need not be ‘rooted’ in religio-spiritual commitments to begin with, as the practice itself “relates to philosophical questions and the personal search for meaning and life-understanding."[101] Her description of comparative theology resonates with Linell Cady's suggestions for religious studies seen below. Corigliano makes the important point that younger scholars (and I would add emergent religio-spiritual practitioners in general) are building upon labor previously undertaken by adventurous souls who came before.[102] More traditional academics such as Francis Clooney, Raimon Panikkar, Barbara Holmes, Paul Knitter, Howard Thurman, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Beverly Lanzetta, Robert Neville and others, as well as religious-scholar-practitioners whose work remained mostly outside of academia, including Bede Griffiths, Gloria Anzaldúa, Wayne Teasdale, Thomas Keating, the 14th Dalai Lama, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Thich Nhat Hahn, Swami Abishiktananda (Henri Le Saux), and others, have paved pathways which made normative, for many, religious experimentation and hybridity.

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[98] Kiblinger, “Relating Theology of Religions and Comparative Theology”; Makransky, “Historical Consciousness as an Offering to the Transhistorical Buddha.”

[99] Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*.

[100] Neville, *Ultimates*.

Emergent forms of religio-spirituality have not emerged out of nowhere then, but are built upon the deconstructive work and syncretistic experiments of those who came before. Many of these pioneers were embedded in particular religious traditions, and from there reached out to explore other traditions.[103] In addition, postmodern influences of feminism and relational thinking, queer theory, postcolonial and decolonial studies also contribute to such sensibilities. As Corigliano puts it, "the next generation is already faced with a world where clear-cut choices for exclusive faith commitments may not come naturally."[104]

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[101] Corigliano, "Theologizing for the Yoga Community?", 324.

[102] Ibid., 333.

[103] Some may expect those who come after them to follow in their footsteps, i.e., of embeddedness in a particular tradition and then reaching out to other traditions. However, insisting upon such a stance fails to take into account the new cultural conditions to which they have contributed. When partners from different religious traditions have children, they may grow up within an infusion of different religious traditions, rather than seeing a need to pick one. When spiritual teachers from multiple traditions, or even comparative theologians, give birth to "students," a similar orientation can occur quite organically, as it has in my own religio-spiritual journey.

Clooney—who at times has leaned quite heavily on the need to identify with an established religious community—also extends hospitality to those who are not established in a traditional religion. For instance, Clooney notes that he "expects important contributions to comparative theology" from those who are outside religious traditions. "They too need to be able to think differently about themselves and the diverse communities to which they belong, with a sense of accountability to truths and realities not of their own making. In the process, if they speak up, they will also become able to unsettle the conversations about religious diversity that most often have arisen in traditional faith communities."[105]

Today, emphasizing spaces of religious multiplicity in a secular academy as well as seminary spaces is an eminently important democratic praxis. Something like an interspiritual space within divinity schools, for instance, could help provide avenues for new communities of practitioners to think more deeply about their religio-spiritual orientations. It might also provide something of a "common space" for religious traditions themselves to interact with one another on novel ground, one with strong connective tissue and a radical openness to transformative encounters across difference. While we have reached a point where the training of religious professionals can proceed side-by-side, in dialogue with one another as well as with religious studies, we may be slowly approaching a time when something like an “interspiritual theology” might likewise be included alongside traditional religious orientations. Who can say where such inquiry/experimentation/practice might lead?

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[104] Corigliano, "Theologizing," 333. Corigliano goes on to say, "This reality requires new and creative ways for engaging with the 'spiritual but not religious.' Our understanding of this phenomena cannot be limited to a reproach of the superficial, relativistic, or New Age movement" (Ibid.).

[105] Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 165.

For comparative theologians, difference impels not inoculation but transformation. Difference presents opportunity—not as fetishized objects to once again possess and utilize for our purposes (in this case, transformation)—but as encounters of differential and fluid subjectivities, as well as places to bump up against the solidity and integrity of another, allowing such encounters to sublimate our own categorical gazes and thus reappear in surprising—and nonlinear—ways. We might even develop something of a desire for such encounters, minus the fetishization.[106]

Given the above, I am left to ponder, “Are (some) *theologians* now running ahead of the game when it comes to democratic values of openness, respect, and dignity in the midst of living amongst difference? Or in upholding scholarly values of critical, self-reflexive thought, sensitivity towards navigating difference, self-contextualization, interdisciplinary work, and importantly decolonial labor? Or even in the relinquishing of hegemonic attitudes and homogenous theorization in the spirit of broad-mindedness and mutual transformation?” Now *that* would be ironic.

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[106] See Faber and Keller, “Polyphilic”; Thatamanil, *Circling,* 70-107.

Democratic Caretakers and the Search for Meaning

I now return to the public, secular study of religion. Having fleshed out some of the changing religious demographics of the U.S., I offered a few examples of emergent religio-spirituality, addressed criticisms of religio-spiritual experimentation, and reviewed resources from comparative theology. These resources gravitated around respectfully navigating difference with an openness to dialogue and transformation. In this section, I wish to further explore what a democratically inflected religious studies might look like, integrating religious studies scholar Linell Cady's pedagogically influenced arguments for the field.

Given the transitions happening today, culturally, religiously, and economically, there is a need to (re)imagine democracy, and the socio-political-economic and educational structures needed to support it. A potential for religious studies to play a role in democratic praxis is found in caring for the existential concerns of student. This resonates with Cady's vision for the field. Cady sees current normative models for religious studies as not allowing for emergent, constructive, and heterogenous reflection on the religious itself.[107] She worries about an "impoverishment of religious studies" if the drive to push out all "theological" reflection was ever successful, mainly in making it "unresponsive to the clearly existential motivations and concerns that drive most of its students."[108] This is an important point to make. Many students who find themselves drawn to religious studies do so because they are interested in questions of religious and spiritual importance in their lives. They are often attracted to exploring and developing their own ontological orientations in dialogue with, perhaps even guidance from, humanity's vast experiments in what constitutes a life of meaning, depth, and justice. This includes for many a religio-spiritual path or a quest for "the good life." To do so, students need the freedom to roam across religio-spiritual and socio-political traditions, while practicing skills of critical reflection and respectful dialogue. Many students would benefit from an openness to developing their own religio-spiritual-political paths after finding their 'way' into religious studies classrooms.

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[107] Cady, "Territorial Disputes," 121.

[108] Ibid., 111.

Cady also points out that traditional religious institutions no longer have the legitimacy, for many, to address these existential concerns of students. The ability to explore and develop one's own religious, secular, or spiritual orientation in dialogue with many of humanity's attempts to do so, as well as with an interested group of peers involved in similar projects, seems an eminently reasonable—and democratically important—function of the secular (think "pluralized") academy. In the context of democratic praxis, to begin to construct one's own orientation towards life also means to address questions of what one's orientation might mean for others. Hence, I am encouraging theorization that goes beyond a facile separation of the secular and the religious, within an overall spirit of democratic praxis.

The need to be "caretakers"—not for any specific religious attitude or particularized ontological orientation (including a social scientific or hard constructivist one)—*but for our democracy*, means caring for students who enter into religious studies departments with a longing to explore for themselves, *and for society*, a greater depth and meaning to life. Such explorations are never purely "personal," as all persons are always already simultaneously relational. What does it mean to call something a purely "personal" path or orientation, when many theorists today, especially feminists, have reframed the idea of the personal in terms of relationality? No longer do many of us speak of bounded, impermeable subjects, but rather of fluid, relational subjectivities that are always in flux, impinging and being impinged upon by one's environment. To move towards the multifariousness democratic becoming championed by Whitman, among others, is to nurture the impulses of those in our society who wish to think deeply, responsibly, and ethically about such matters, *especially* in dialogue with one another.

Cady sees theology as offering a model "wherein the public and the personal can be brought together in the same frame for critical exploration." In light of the breakdown of collective socialization into a common national culture, what I called above a *theological* model (little "t") might allow for students to develop and "integrate a personal narrative that is both intellectually and morally responsible." For Cady, "Religious studies ought to be one of the academic sites that facilitate this integration." I couldn't agree more. The "pedagogical challenge," as Cady puts it, "is to bring together the public realm of facts and the personal world of experiences, values, and emotions."[109] I would add that when such a pedagogical challenge is further framed as to include normative reflection on current socio-political structures and historical trajectories, while skillfully encouraging dialogue amongst the different stances developed, it becomes democratic praxis (within a religiously pluralistic society). This democratic praxis is further enhanced when such reflections are extended into the realm of theory for the professional scholar. Here one begins to enter an atmosphere of the scholar-practitioner, a focus of chapter six.

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[109] Ibid., 120-121.

For Cady, the “inclusion or exclusion of theology” is the wrong way to frame the debate on the relationship between theology and religious studies in the modern academy. While rightly applauding critical theorists such as McCutcheon and Fitzgerald for calling attention to the constructed nature of the category of religion (as well as its dialectical relationship with a co-construction of the secular), Cady also disagrees with their conclusions, similar to my own take. As she puts it, to acknowledge the importance of this literature is in no way to suggest “that only naturalistic redescriptions are appropriate… [or that] the only responsible stance of the scholar toward religious discourse is its deconstruction.” She sees scholars who suggest such stances as paying insufficient attention to the fullness of the person.[110]

Ignoring the “horizon of the individual” fosters its own “acontextual bias.”[111] As scholars become attuned to how “the personal, the political, and the popular shape the formation of knowledge, including its scholarly production,” the implications for the field of religious studies become “extensive.” The idea that scholars can “transcend personal interests and motivations—whether religious or not—is belied by the evidence.” Objectivity then becomes less of a treasured goal, replaced by critical reflection and self-contextualization. All of this further complexifies the difference between certain forms of theology and other academic labor, which can be seen to be equally constructive in its own way.[112]

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[110] Ibid., 118.

[111] Ibid., 118-119.

Further complicating the issues is, once again, the changing nature of religious practice. Cady notes, following the work of Wade Clark Roof, that religious practice today often means piecing together a bricolage of multi-religious (as well as secular) “images, symbols, moral codes, and doctrines,” in order to define and shape “what is considered to be religiously meaningful.”[113] A significant amount of responsibility and agency for religio-spiritual orientation has been transferred from institutions to individuals, “trends that efface the authoritarian and supernatural marks that have defined religion in the modern West in sharp opposition to the secular.”[114] As a result, one might say a religion/secular binary is in need of a thorough reconsideration within academia.

Concluding Thoughts

While the responsibility for inculcating democratic norms is not a new one for academia, the changing circumstances of what is meant by “democratic norms,” and recognition of the monumental failures of past configurations of such norms, brings new conditions to this responsibility. One of the great changes we see today is in the need to *co-create* the future of democratic norms together, to co-create a *dêmos* that is reflective of the diversity that has always been present in our country—yet historically disregarded, actively repressed, and brutally oppressed (African Americans and Native Americans are foremost on my mind here)—as well as the growing diversity due to demographic changes. In anticipating future changes, one might stipulate a need for democratic norms to embody an openness to continual transformations, in deepening directions hinted at in the following chapter.

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[112] Ibid., 114; Cady discusses in this regard to a study on the scholarly formation of Tibetan Buddhism, see Donald Lopez, *The Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West.*

[113] Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 75. As quoted in Cady, “Territorial,” 119.

[114] Cady, “Territorial,” 119.

Decolonial praxis makes an especially important case for the need to listen and respect others' experience, as well as our own. How else are we to uncover cultural biases we take as normative without listening to those who *experience*, oppressively, such underlying biases? How are we to discover systemic racisms in our socio-political systems without listening to the experiences of people of color? How are we to understand the Christian biases so embedded in our culture without listening to the experiences of non-Christians? How do we understand the biases engendered by the reactions against Christian authority, i.e. the 'secular,' also so embedded in our culture, without listening to the experience of those from the East, or from Indigenous traditions? How do we discover patriarchy without listening to women? Heteronormativity without listening to LGBTQIA+ folk? Secular biases without listening to religious folk? And religious biases without listening to secular folk? We need more of that jazzy fluency preached by Cornel West all around. What better way to practice democratic musicality than by encouraging normative reflection from multiplicities of reason-giving trajectories, ontological orientations, and socio-political stances, in dialogue and community with one another?

Since this must be an act of co-creation, it is different from the past where one might have assumed a particular set of values and practices (such as a normative

Christianity, or even a normative white supremacy) as constitutive of democracy. Democratic norms are more open-ended and contested in our times. We are in the midst of a decline of normative religious institutions, awash in postmodern sensibilities that contextualize and relativize perspectives, and enmeshed in the fluidity of a culture (in the U.S.) engaged in a transformative reckoning with past racist underpinnings as well as a reimagining of what its future culture might yet be. Cultivating academic spaces in which we might, as *dêmos*, have an opportunity to do some of the deep, reflective, and critical work informed by history, science, the humanities, current socio-political-historical formations, *and* religious and spiritual orientations, is not just a need but also a responsibility.

Together, we need to constructively imagine new forms of democracy, democratic praxis, and democratic becoming, participating in what Gloria Anzaldúa calls an "el sueño of the sixth world," a dream of democratic possibility. As Vincent Harding's opening epigraph to this chapter attests, democracy in America is a "dream of a land that does not yet exist…placed in the hands of very ordinary men and women." When supposedly "realistic" and "cynical" responses stunt the "dream ports of our spirit," the "wings of our hearts" are in danger. How many today feel that their wings have been broken, and that they will never "fly," as it were?[115]

In emphasizing the future of democracy lay in the hands of "very ordinary men and women," Harding was attending to a need for students to engage in heart-filled dreams in the name of democratic praxis. For myself, such a dream is a deeply religious, deeply (inter)spiritual one. While a Princetonian founding of religious studies implanted a normative Christianity at its center, this does not mean that religious studies must shun religiosity. Not all spirituality is Christian superiority, after all. And not all students are secularists. The cultural conditioning that is created in our scholarly praxis should be continually questioned, paying attention to the student cultures enacted in the fertile soil our theories provide. Are these cultures life-giving? Or are they toxic? Do they allow us to dream? Or do they stunt our "dream ports?" Do they help us actualize the profound potential we carry within? Or do they categorize (*kategoria* in Greek, "to accuse") us into narrow, encompassing limitations?

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[115] Harding, *Is American Possible*, 44.

In the spirit of opening "dream ports" into our scholarly praxis, I explored above William Hart's differentiation between *theology* and Theology. The former connoted more liminal scholarly explorations in fallibilistic modes of inquiry. Importantly, such a mode of inquiry does not fall easily on one side or another of a religion/secular binary, but lives instead along the slash. The importance of religious thought for "the labor of imagining the human" was discussed, with the help of John Thatamanil, and further colonial consequences of a religion/secular binary were indicated, namely in reducing voices from other cultures to the status of data as opposed to interlocutors. The changing nature of religio-spiritual practice in the U.S. was explored, and "spirituality," as a new cultural category, was seen to undergird academic critiques of 'religion,' while actively subverting a religion/secular binary. Interspiritual orientations were explored further, and critiques of religio-spiritual experimentation were found wanting (often falling on one side or the other of a religion/secular binary). Contemporary religio-spiritual experimentation also profoundly complicates delineations between religious studies, theology, and even philosophy. Combined with concerns of coloniality, arguments for such disciplinary boundaries begin to falter, and more liminal spaces begin to arise in the ‘in-between’ among disciplines.

An alternate trajectory of religious studies was also explored, one more mystical than the story at Princeton with which I opened. In this latter narrative, religious studies is seen today to have an absence at its center—a kind of apophatic field gravitating around spiritual affinities—more a liminal atmosphere than a social science. Democracy itself was seen to subsist within a liminal field, one that shares an apophatic absence (“the people”) at its center. Comparative theology, a scholarly field that lives within a liminal atmosphere by design, then offered resources for academic exploration amongst radical difference. Contaminating encounters, with the potential to enact self-reflexive transformations, are embraced in comparative theology—indeed, such encounters are intrinsic to the field itself.

Finally, an argument was made for academia to serve the existential needs of students, specifically in helping students to reflect upon a meaningful life. The field of religious studies was seen as a natural place for such praxis, where many students already enter classes with existential concerns. This was framed, once again, as an aspect of democratic praxis. Democratic praxis, while a constant theme thus far, has yet to be explored directly. In the following chapter, it becomes the focus. As a doorway to the second half of this project, the next chapter begins to embody a more liminal, constructive, oneiric narrative, yet one ineluctably wedded to struggles for democracy and justice, where the opening of dream ports remains a crucial component.

CHAPTER FOUR

ATMOSPHERICS OF DEMOCRATIC PRAXIS (IN ‘THESE STATES’)

May we allow the interweaving of all the minds and hearts and life forces to create the collective dream of the world and teach us how to live out ese sueño. … May we do the work that matters. Vale la pena, it’s worth the pain.

—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Escuro*[1]

[M]y conviction is based on rugged, often blood-stained hope, hope fiercely breaking out of the dark-womb beauty…of struggles for the creative transformation of ‘ordinary’ women, men, and children.

—Vincent Harding, *Is America Possible?*[2]

Atmospherics

What is at the root of “democracy”? How does it, how can it, hold together? How do we bind together (or not) as *dêmos,* a people, a society, a nation, a *polis*? Is solidarity amongst a pluralistic *dêmos* even possible? What undergirds a *polis* amidst such radical difference, as we find for instance in today’s United States? What role do metaphysical beliefs (“ontological orientations”), religious or otherwise, play in such pluralistic public space? These are the flash points of this chapter’s explorations: religion, politics, pluralism, and democracy. Their juxtapositions guide my reflections, bringing forth potencies of possibility, perils of past failure, and questions of impossibility, all saturated with existential condensation.

In short, the focus of this chapter is the atmospherics of democratic praxis.

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[1] Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 22.

[2] Harding, *Is American Possible*, viii.

I have always been fond of a searching line from Howard Thurman: “Ultimately, all the dualisms of [one’s] experience as a creature must exhaust themselves in a unity fundamental to life and not merely dependent upon that which transcends life by whatever name [one] seeks to patronize it.”[3] It is one of my favorite Thurman quotes. As I find myself on the scent of democratic solidarities “fundamental to life,” in the sense of being intimately entwined in life’s becoming, Thurman’s quote appears *apropos*. Such solidarity is to be found not necessarily apart from “that which transcends life,” yet at the same time cannot remain “merely dependent” upon such transcendence. How democracy becomes *incarnate* might be another way to phrase it, and the fragrance of this question haunts and inspires (*in-spirares,* “breathes in”) me here.

Within my own ‘local history’ of the U.S., there is no way to talk about democratic praxis without also talking about race. The founding ideals of our country, as Nikole Hannah-Jones puts it, “were false when they were written.” Yet, while the founding fathers “may not have actually believed in the ideals they espoused…black people did,” and “have fought to make them true” ever since. Black Americans have believed “in this country with a faith it did not deserve,” seeing “the worst of America, yet, somehow…still [believing] in its best.”[4] Ever since reading Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in high school, I have turned most often to the voices of Black Americans when reaching for depths of democratic understanding.[5] I have continually found more incarnate expressions of democratic praxis and the ideals of my country embodied there. Along with Hannah-Jones, I tend to see Black Americans, by virtue of their struggle, as “the most American of all.” I too wonder, what would it mean “if America understood, finally…that [black Americans] have never been the problem but the solution.”[6]

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[3] Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground*, xvi.

[4] Hannah-Jones, “Our democracy's founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true," 1, 16.

[5] King’s letter had a profound effect on me, and I’ve carried a printed copy with me since first reading it.

Voices emerging from the struggles of Black America hence play the most prominent role in articulating atmospherics of democratic praxis for me below, though not the only voices heard. In fighting for democratic ideals, the praxis of Black Americans has often partaken of two key components, critique and liminality.[7] The critique of white power structures and moral orders, combined with a liminal embrace of the idea(l) of democracy itself gives rise to what Vincent Harding calls in the epigraph a “dark-womb beauty,”—out of which a democracy that has never existed might yet emerge. Atmospherics of democratic praxis are here marked not only by a critique of power, but also by *imagination*, *empathy*, *hope*, *failure* and *funk*. The liminality of democratic praxis thus avoids some of the objectifying and caricaturing tendencies sometimes seen in analyses of power. These atmospherics also bring attention to qualities such as particularity, equality, multifariousness, decolonial praxis, and even undergirdings of a religio-spiritual nature. In other words, they are atmospherics emerging from the “rugged, often blood-stained hope, hope fiercely breaking out of the dark-womb beauty…of struggles for the creative transformation of 'ordinary' women, men, and children."[1]

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[6] Hannah-Jones, “Our democracy’s,” 18. That is, Black Americans do not represent the problem of American democracy, but rather their struggles for democracy represent its solution.

[7] I do not mean to suggest any type of univocal voice from Black Americans. My selections here certainly reflect my own contemplative leanings and inclinations.

In offering an incipient fragrance of these atmospherics, Cornel West, Eddie Glaude Jr., and Vincent Harding, along with Gloria Anzaldúa, will first help to articulate liminal, imaginal, and empathetic dimensions of democratic praxis. This includes a section elaborating on the title of this project.[8] There I put forward a liminality of democracy that moves beyond a religion/secular binary, and encourages a democratic praxis of living with the liminal. Following upon that, a practice of "apophatic assemblage" from Catherine Keller is discussed, as well as William Connolly's notion of "affinities of spirituality." I then come to a more performative dimension of the chapter, articulating incarnations of democracy through the work of James Baldwin, as well as an essay from Nikole Hannah-Jones. Hannah-Jones' essay, from which the above quotes are taken, opens the New York Times' "1619 Project." I then turn to two "prophets of democracy," in Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., followed by two "sages of democracy," with Walt Whitman and Howard Thurman. Two of the voices above, that of Thurman and Anzaldúa, become the focus of the following chapter, as I dig deeper into each's democratic/decolonial praxis, which proceeds in contemplative keys. Throughout this chapter and the next, I continue to point out connections to one of the running arguments of this project, namely a need for academia to provide spaces of theorization that thrive within intimate dialogical settings amongst radical difference—as an aspect of democratic praxis.

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[8] This section is titled, "Listening and Living with the Liminal."

The twisting, turning, and sometimes crashing reverberations of many voices is part of what creates the atmospherics of this chapter—and hence an argument more liminal than linear, as an atmosphere always is. An atmosphere is made up of many divergent vectors of air, fire, water, and earth—entangled, colliding, metamorphosing into one another. It is but the twisting, turning, and crashing of ice crystals, in an exchange of interiorities (here in the form of electrons and protons) that gives birth to lightning and thunder, after all—encompassed within those shrouded, liminal clouds no less. Atmospherics attune us to sensual, affective, embodied realities—ones we contribute to but do not control. Racism is more an atmosphere than a well-defined form. So is democracy.

Atmospherics also bring attention to "visceral registers of being," the heat and cold, anger and shame, resentment and hope, of democratic praxis.[9] At the same time, democratic praxis looks to invoke and affect these visceral registers within its own intricate performance, allowing the funk of democratic failures to permeate one's pores, and yet give rise to imaginal and empathic forms of emergent praxis. Jane Bennet speaks of "atmospheric flows" as "a field of forces tending to infuse themselves into porous bodies."[10] Bennett speaks here of Whitman's poetic democratic praxis, honing in on an "ethereal strata of influence and experience," yet seeking "to alter those currents, to compose them into specifically democratic postures and moods." In articulating "subliminal gravitational pulls and electric flows," as well as "not-quite-lived potentials of futurity," Bennett sees Whitman enhancing "his audience's capacity to detect inchoate flows and signals, to sense them more strongly."[11] It is something similar I have in mind here, particularly thru atmospherics gravitating around that "luminous darkness" spoken of by Howard Thurman, affecting every corner of this haunted—yet beautiful—land that is not yet, and "yet must be."[12]

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[9] "visceral registers of being," see the section on William Connolly's work in this chapter below.

[10] Bennett, *influx*, 28-29. Bennett writes here specifically of Whitman's sense of "sympathy."

A Contextual, Contemplative Mode of Decolonial Praxis

In previous chapters I delved into some of the key issues facing pluralistic democracies. These centered around how to conceive of public political space amidst a vibrant diversity of secular and religious orientations. The secular academy, I argued, shares in the responsibility for the inculcation of democratic values and practices, as a locus of professional thinking and education within society. Accordingly, a further exploration of "democratic praxis" itself becomes vital.

I went on to investigate the secular as a constructed space of values and preferred ontological orientations. The secular as defined in opposition to 'religion' was seen as an antiquated understanding. Today, such an understanding contributes to unhealthy practices of an arguably colonial nature, as demonstrated throughout this project. Yet the secular can be recontextualized outside of a religion/secular binary, where it becomes denotive of our historical embeddedness in a pluralistic, religiously diverse democracy. I also argued that so-called secular perspectives are also *religious* stances, when seen as orientations towards the nature of reality. Decolonial praxis may encourage (and perhaps necessitate) multiplicities of orientations towards the nature of reality to serve as normative stances for scholarly labor, an insight that was also framed as an aspect of democratic praxis.

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[11] Bennett, *influx,* 61. A crucial insight for our times that Bennett also learns from Whitman, one that I will return to in chapter 6, is "that it is important not to relinquish this atmospheric realm to the capitalists" (Ibid.).

[12] See Thurman, *Luminous Darkness.* This is Thurman's study on segregation. "yet must be," see Hughes, "Let America Be America Again," quoted more fully below.

All of which brings me to an extended exploration on the current state of our democracy. I contextualize myself here as a citizen of the United States, speaking to, from, and for "our" democracy.[13] This contextualization of myself is a way of speaking into my own 'local history.' While some decolonial scholars adopt fundamental stances of opposition, critique, and the theorizing of constitutive difference, I take a different track here. I lean into more liminal and contemplative perspectives, which tend to emphasize our shared humanity, intimate dialogical praxis amongst difference, and democratic struggles that emerge within our local histories. At the same time, I wish to acknowledge the decolonial work of Global South theorists such as Walter Mignolo and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, as well as influential Caribbean thinkers such as Franz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, and Sylvia Winter, who employ a strong oppositional consciousness towards Western ideas and subjectivities.[14] These discourses often employ Marxist readings and/or postmodern critical analyses of power, and range from heavily analytical, secular-materialist theory to more poetic inclinations, such as found in Glissant. Rarely, though, do they articulate religious or spiritual perspectives (Global South scholar An Yountae's *The Decolonial Abyss: Mysticism and Cosmopolitics from the Ruins* is a notable exception to this trend).[15]

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[13] As I stated in the introduction, my contextualization is not meant to connote any sense of "American exceptionalism." See the introduction for more.

[14] See Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*; de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*; Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*; Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*; Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*; and Winter, *Sylvia Winter: On Being Human as Praxis*.

I share with these theorists a firm belief that decolonial praxis is itself multiplicitous and pluralistic. That is, it cannot be contained within particular trajectories or theoretical constructs, and by necessity will include under its banner sometimes fundamentally different approaches. Neither do I believe that decolonial praxis must of necessity begin with a fundamental rejection of ideas that have emerged from Euro-Western trajectories. As Charles Long, a preeminent scholar in history of religions and a founder of the study of Black Religion, pointed out, Black Americans have often critiqued the West "for not *being* the West, for not living up to its cultural ideals."[16] That is, the question of how one lives into one's professed ideals—the question of *praxis,* "philosophy as a way of life," and/or the *transformation of the human condition*—is, in my mind, radically pertinent to decolonial labor.[17]

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[15] Yountae, *The Decolonial Abyss*. Yountae combines readings of the mystical abyss within Western mystical and philosophical traditions with notions of a "colonial abyss," as found particularly in the Caribbean thinkers mentioned above (Fanon, Césaire, and especially Glissant). Yountae also utilizes readings from other decolonial Global South theorists, such as Mignolo, as well as employs a Whiteheadian, process-oriented approach as seen in the work of Catherine Keller.

[16] Charles H. Long, *Significations,* 9. Long was ahead of his time as a decolonial, Africana thinker working alongside other co-founders of the History of Religions discipline (of which he was one, along with Mircea Eliade and Joseph Kitagawa) at the University of Chicago. In his work, Long pays exquisite attention to the ways in which colonial powers enacted processes of "signification" upon conquered peoples, as well as the consequences of such signification. Long's approach finds that once "[t]he languages and experiences of signification can be seen for what they are and were…one might also be able to see a new and counter-creative signification and expressive development of new meanings expressed in styles and rhythms of dissimulation." For Long, "religious experience is the locus for this resource" (Ibid.).

[17] For "philosophy as a way of life," see Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson. trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995).

I also note a kind of functional collaborative synergy that can exist between differing democratic and decolonial approaches, similar to how some scholars have described the varying approaches of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., for instance.[18] I see resonances of my own approach to decolonial praxis in various scholarly work, some of which is seen below. My own contemplative leanings draw me away from placing oppositional discourse at the center of my thought, while still recognizing its necessity and importance.

Womanist AnaLouise Keating's "post-oppositional politics" is one place I find resonance with my own approach, offering an articulation of decolonial praxis in contemplative keys. Keating concentrates on transformative dimensions of a post-oppositional politics, which she contrasts with an "oppositional consciousness" that adopts binary formations of resistance, such as that between "oppressed and oppressor," "center and periphery," or a fundamental colonial difference. Keating defines oppositional consciousness as "a binary either/or epistemology and praxis that structures our perceptions, politics, and actions through a resistant energy—a reaction against that which we seek to transform."[19] A post-oppositional politics, on the other hand, embraces a "realistic politics of hope and the possibility of planetary citizenship."[20] Importantly, nonoppositional perspectives do not reject oppositional insights into "social disparities and systemic injustices," but rather include them within capacious, relational frameworks that emphasize liminality and transformational capacities.[21] This gives rise to “threshold theories [that] are premised on a shared commonality (not sameness)—a complex commonality so spacious that it embraces difference—even apparently mutually exclusive differences.”[22] Keating quotes Gloria Anzaldúa in describing this kind of liminal “connectionist thinking:” “This faculty, one of less-structured thoughts, less-rigid categorizations, and thinner boundaries, allows us to picture—via reverie, dreaming, and artistic creativity—similarities instead of solid divisions.”[23] In *Transformation Now!: Towards a Post-Oppositional Politics of Change,* Keating concentrates on women-of-color voices to develop “nonoppositional theories and relational methods that insist on a realistic politics of hope,” while enacting “a variety of multidirectional, multidisciplinary, multivoiced conversations, [and] provocative dialogues in which all parties are transformed.”[24] Such an approach to decolonial praxis resonates strongly with the notion of a beloved community of religious diversity, which I discuss in the final chapter.

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[18] See Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America*; and Joseph, *The Sword and the Shield*.

[19] Keating, *Transformation Now*, 2. Keating finds such modes of resistance to be "too limited to bring about the long-term transformation we need" (Ibid.).

[20] Ibid., 5.

A contemplative perspective engages in democratic and decolonial praxis more in a mode of ‘calling in’ than ‘calling out,’ paying attention to the wounding and trauma we have all suffered. In suggesting a ‘calling in’ as opposed to ‘calling out,’ I am citing in particular the work of Black feminist scholar Loretta J. Ross. It is important to recognize that such an orientation does not mean refusing to call out problematic behavior or systemic oppressions, but rather does so in modes of genuine openness, and even love. As Ross describes it:

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[21] Ibid., 20.

[22] Ibid., 11.

[23] Ibid., 17.

[24] Ibid., 5.

> Call-outs are justified to challenge provocateurs who deliberately hurt others, or for powerful people beyond our reach. Effectively criticizing such people is an important tactic for achieving justice. But most public shaming is horizontal and done by those who believe they have greater integrity or more sophisticated analyses. They become the self-appointed guardians of political purity.
>
> …
>
> Calling-in is simply a call-out done with love. Some corrections can be made privately. Others will necessarily be public, but done with respect. It is not tone policing, protecting white fragility or covering up abuse. It helps avoid the weaponization of suffering that prevents constructive healing.[25]

In the following chapter, I take a closer look at decolonial praxis from a contextual, contemplative perspective through the work of Howard Thurman and Gloria Anzaldúa. For the remainder of this chapter, I turn specifically to democratic praxis 'in these States.'

Imaginal, Empathic, Funky: Cornel West's Ensemble of Democratic Praxis

Given the great need for listening—and learning—across difference, Cornel West argues that *empathy* and *imagination* are linchpins of authentic democratic praxis. According to West, we must be able to harness imagination and empathy in order to expand our circles of understanding and relationality. West asks, "How broad, how deep is your empathy? How broad, how deep is one's imagination?"[26] Is one able to discover "a robust kind of poetic orientation, so that your empathy is so broad and your imagination is so open-ended that you're willing to be open to different discourses, arguments, pushing you against the wall."[27] Secular thinkers "must become more religiously musical," while religious thinkers must also be "secularly musical." Our "fragile experiments in democracy…depend on not just the character and virtue of the citizens but also the ability to be multicontextual in the various frameworks and reason-giving activities in public spaces."[28]

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[25] Ross, "I'm a Black Feminist. I Think Call-Out Culture is Toxic." See also Ross, "What if Instead of Calling People Out, We Called Them In?"

[26] Butler, Habermas, Taylor, and West, *The Power of Religion*, 98.

Even more important for West are the prophetic dimensions of empathy and imagination. When these become sufficiently developed, one is able to tune into the failures of democracy, and the plight of the oppressed. One acquires a "righteous indignation and holy anger at injustice," which in turn creates a "sense of urgency, a state of emergency that has been normalized, hidden, concealed." This leads one to become suspicious of discourses that "deodorize the funk that's there."[29] In order to constantly confront hegemonic powers that dehumanize portions of the population, one must become intimate with the "catastrophic." This includes intimacy with histories of failed democratic ideals, and with what West calls the "tragicomic." Democratic praxis necessitates "utopian interruptions" that stem from prophetic religiosities, which are "always tied to failure."[30] Such interruptions help us to face the reality of our inability to institute democratic ideals. They also prepare us to move beyond a "logic of equivalence" ("love thy neighbor"), to a "logic of superabundance" ("love thy enemy").[31] Such a logic requires "an individual and collective performative praxis of maladjustment to greed, fear, and bigotry. For prophetic religion the condition of truth is to allow suffering to speak."[32]

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[27] Ibid., 99.

[28] Ibid., 93.

[29] Ibid., 97.

[30] Ibid., 99.

[31] Ibid., 96.

In this sense, democratic practice stems first and foremost from recognizing, and *facing,* our failures, as James Baldwin calls us to do below. Upon listening to West's words on secularity and democratic practice, Jürgen Habermas himself is brought to bemoan the absurdity of academic discourse and to declare, "we hear not someone talking about prophetic speech, but performing it in some way—namely, in a kind of moving rhetoric to which the only possible response would be to stand up and to change one's life. So just to continue academic discourse is somehow ridiculous."[33]

Nevertheless, I persist…

West's well known prophetic critique brings to the fore an important question for religious studies as well, apart from the more general question of democratic praxis. When the "academic study of religion" makes normative a social scientific, historical, or critical power relations guise as a basis for the 'secular' study of religion, or for the humanities more generally, it siphons away the power and profundity of religious language to serve the maturation of democratic society, even if only implicitly. When such normativity is then utilized to either ostracize or denigrate religious voices (and corresponding ontological orientations) from academic thought in general, it discards essential perspectives necessary for democratic becoming. While a Habermasian

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[32] Ibid., 99.

[33] Ibid., 114.

"translation proviso" may be necessary for law-making, extending such a proviso into the locus of professional thinking and education within a pluralistic democracy might be considered self-sabotage.[34] It robs society of developing the very resources needed to incarnate a vibrant, multifarious, democratic culture. As seen below, many "theological" voices are powerful resources for democratic praxis. Empathy and imagination are keys to tapping such resources.

"A Third American Founding"— Eddie Glaude Jr.

Eddie Glaude Jr., a scholar of African-American religion and political theorist, writes that democracy "constitutes more than a body of formal procedures; it is a form of life that requires constant attention."[35] Formulating his political theory along a trajectory of the African American tradition in dialogue with American pragmatism (especially John Dewey), Glaude acknowledges the "centrality of African Americans to the actual meaning of democratic community and social justice in the United States."[36] Glaude's *In a Shade of Blue* utilizes this pragmatist lens along with black religious and political thought to explore complexities of black identity, theology, and political struggle in a hopeful search for democratic possibility. Rather than a rational basis for argumentation within a pluralistic democratic polity, Glaude's focus remains on the formation of *democratic character* that is flexible enough to transform and ground itself in the uniqueness of historical moments. According to Glaude, such formation today shades towards an increasing recognition of diversity, the pluralization of identity structures, and enhancement of collaborative, participatory politics among everyday folk. Glaude argues for an embodied, praxis oriented understanding of the political.

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[34] For the "translation proviso," see chapter 1.

[35] Glaude Jr., *In a Shade of Blue*, 6; Glaude Jr. goes on to say that the formation of "democratic character…involves, then, a caring disposition toward the plight of our fellows and a watchful concern for the well-being of our democratic life" (Ibid., 7).

[36] Ibid., 4.

Since the political materializes through specific historical trajectories, "the public" must continually emerge anew in response to socio-cultural transformations.[37] In this way identity formation takes place "in the messiness of our living and the problems we confront."[38] Part of what I am pointing towards is a need for spaces within academia to allow for such processes to proceed. That is, academic spaces where we can theorize amidst radical difference—and radically different ontological orientations—in order to form democratic character, and to allow for a continual (re)emergence of contemporary publics forged through dialogical encounters with difference. This difference, after all, is *among* us, present *as us.* New and fruitful democratic cultures can only emerge amongst such difference.[39]

In a more recent work, *Begin Again,* Glaude engages the African-American writer James Baldwin in order to mine resources for our democratic becoming. Baldwin, whose intimacy, sensitivity, and profundity set him apart as one of the greatest American writers of any *saeculum*, kept race and American democracy always front and center in his work. Glaude traces Baldwin's early idealism into the chastened realism of his later years, and yet argues that Baldwin never abandoned his dreams of a “New Jerusalem” in the realization of American democracy. Baldwin just grew to be much more realistic about them. Glaude writes that we are in need of “a third American founding,” one where “‘becoming white’ is no longer the price of the ticket.”[40] The original founding of our country clearly failed in this regard, as did the opportunity for a second founding following the Civil War, with the end of Reconstruction. We now find ourselves in a position where a third founding might be possible. We can either embrace the emergent racism see in Trumpism for instance, or “risk everything, finally, to become a truly multiracial democracy and the first of its kind in the West.”[41]

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[37] An idea Glaude utilizes from John Dewey in *The Public and Its Problems*. See especially the chapter, "The Eclipse of the Public," 110-142.

[38] Glaude Jr., *Shade,* 9.

[39] In the following chapters, I will explore some thoughts on what this might mean for fields such as religious studies and philosophy, reintroducing the "scholar-practitioner" back into the folds of academic life.

This third founding, if it is to be realized, demands “a new American story, different symbols, and robust policies to repair what we have done.”[42] The new story must embrace both “our contradictions *and* our aspirations,” while developing a “different symbolic landscape” that reflects our diversity, the fact that “we are a mosaic of people.”[43] It also demands political and material transformations, as our democratic failures are manifested in socio-political structures of oppression, as well as “the very spatial organization of towns, villages, and cities…ghettos, housing projects, and highways that cut off and isolate communities.”[44] We must guard against a desire to return to some sense of “normalcy,” to once again hide away the “daily reminders of suffering and injustice"—so often brought to the fore during the Trump years, yet existing long before he arrived.

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[40] Glaude Jr., *Begin Again*, 202.

[41] Ibid., 208.

[42] Ibid., 202.

[43] Ibid., 203, 204.

[44] Ibid., 204.

Crucial to this work of democratic becoming is an unremitting realism and, once again, imagination. The realism is necessary in order to face the reality of who we are. We must "put aside the fairy tale of America as 'the shining city on the hill,'" and face the reality of a society that privileges white people above all others. As Baldwin wrote, "Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced."[45] As we face the reality of our situation, imagination becomes one of the most "potent weapons" we have, allowing us to break free from the world as it is. Imagination becomes essential to the work of democracy, because we must imagine *"the world as it could be."* [46] According to Glaude, democratic praxis "requires an imaginative leap beyond the limits of our present lives," in order to instantiate a multiracial democracy that is truly predicated on "the value that every human being is sacred." Only then can we "build a New Jerusalem," one "where the value gap cannot breathe."[47]

In other words, to let go of the lies of who we are, to face reality as it is, and to accept responsibility for a labor of love—a labor of living into the imaginative reality of our ideals—*is the work of democracy.*

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[45] Baldwin, "As Much Truth As One Can Bear."

[46] Glaude Jr., *Begin,* 210, emphasis original. Glaude is referencing specifically the story of Exodus here in the context of the struggle of Black Americans.

[47] Ibid., 209. Note also the religious overtones at the heart of this vision of democracy, revolving as it does around the "sacredness" of all life, and the building of a "New Jerusalem." A sense of religiosity undergirding democracy is a recurrent theme amongst the voices of these atmospherics.

Listening and Living with the Liminal—Vincent Harding and Gloria Anzaldúa

The unique historical moment we find ourselves in—a moment where new democratic publics are struggling to take emergent forms—has great need of lively spaces within which multiplicities of religious, cultural, ethnic, and racial orientations can be in dialogue and community with one another. To do so is to incarnate spaces where one can practice a jazzy fluency of democratic musicality, as preached above by Cornel West. While questioning assumed norms that have perpetuated structures of systemic racism, patriarchal prejudices, and colonial thought patterns, we must also constructively imagine together new forms of democratic becoming, an inherently *liminal* proposition. Scholar and civil rights leader Vincent Harding speaks to a need for polyphonic voices in the creative work of democratic praxis:

> In a truly creative democratic encounter, we were able to hear each instrumental voice in its own integrity, in its mutually respectful and attentive listening to the others. And out of that seriously playful engagement, new creations constantly emerged, some quiet and thoughtful, others filled with powerful energy and unexpectedly soaring structures of life. For me, this was another model of new American possibilities at their creative best.[48]

These democratic sentiments are at the heart of this project.

Harding argues that imaginative, liminal, and constructive work is absolutely necessary for decolonial labor, given that African-Americans "have insisted that the most authentic American dream is of a nation that does not yet exist." The "dream of America," which Black Americans have carried and contributed to more surely than anyone, for Harding "cannot be fulfilled, cannot be deepened, until it enters into a creative, transformative engagement with the best dreams of humankind."[49] Imaginative dreams and visions become "powerful mechanisms in the creation of new realities," especially when they are embodied, taking on flesh and blood in the concrete circumstances of life—just as they did in the civil rights movement, and are currently doing in contemporary movements for racial justice.[50] This is why Harding's insistence on creative, imaginal work connected to the heart, as a key for democratic praxis, does not subsist upon an airy sense of transcendence, but rather stems from conviction based upon that "rugged, often blood-stained hope."[51]

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[48] Harding, *Is America Possible*, 26.

A kindred voice to Harding's can be found in the work of Chicana activist, lesbian, queer, race, and gender theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, who has written extensively along 'borderlands' of decolonial praxis, democratic becoming, imaginal liminality, and spiritual transformation. In *Light in the Dark/Luz En Lo Oscuro,* written during the final decade of her life and published posthumously, Anzaldúa offers a decolonial vision of democratic possibility predicated upon an ontologically expansive vision. AnaLouise Keating notes that *Light in the Dark* offers a decolonial ontology and epistemology, based upon an "aesthetics of transformation" and a "metaphysics of interconnectedness." She describes "Anzaldúa's approach to writing [as] dialogic, recursive, democratic, spirit-inflected, and only partially within her conscious control."[52]

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[49] Ibid., 8, 9.

[50] Ibid., 39.

[51] Ibid., viii.

[52] Keating, "Editor's Introduction," ix, xi. Keating's introduction offers an informative and substantial overview of Anzaldúa's work, especially the context for *Light in the Dark*.

With ancestral indigenous thought as foundational to her theorizing, Anzaldúa enfleshes imaginative ideals of democratic possibility in her concepts of *nepantla, nos/otras* (us/other), and *las nepantleras*. Nepantla, a Nahuatl word that connotes "in-between-ness," is described as a liminal space—a shamanistic bridge between worlds—often entered into through brokenness and vulnerability. It is "a mysterious type of dreaming or perception," one that can register many different states of consciousness. "Shaman-like nepantla moves from rational to visionary states, from logistics to poetics, from focused to unfocused perception, from inner world to outer. Nepantla is the twilight landscape between the self and the world, between imagination's imagery and reality's harsh light."[53] Nepantla is also a way of knowing, a way of being in the world as well as a way of bringing a world into being, a *dasein* and not only a place. Imagination has a soul dimension that "bridges body and nature to spirit and mind, making these connections in the in-between space of nepantla." Shamans live forever "betwixt and between … journeying beyond the natural order or status quo and into other worlds."[54]

Las nepantleras, then, dwell in liminalities, in 'in-between' states that cannot be circumscribed by singular cultural locations, whether racial, social, sexual, theoretical, religious, or even species-centric. Their ability to shift perception allows for "alternative forms of selfhood," reconfigurations of identity and knowing, where paradoxically the stability of one's perspective "relies on liminality and fluidity." Las nepantleras become "spiritual activists engaged in the struggle for social, economic, and political justice," nurturing “psychological, social, and spiritual metamorphosis.”[55] Imagination serves an incarnate function here, and *nepantla* becomes an efficacious liminal space where the idea(l) of democracy is *alive,* and enactive. For Anzaldúa, it is a place from which new communities and cultural conditions can be born:

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[53] Anzaldúa, *Light*, 108.

[54] Ibid., 29-31.

> It is precisely during these in-between times that we must create the dream (el sueño) of the sixth world. May we allow the interweaving of all the minds and hearts and life forces to create the collective dream of the world and teach us how to live out ese sueño. … May we do the work that matters. Vale la pena, it’s worth the pain.[56]

This is what I mean by the *liminality of democracy,* a place from which new cultural conditions and (beloved) community can be formed, whose success is ultimately predicated on an “interweaving” of “minds and hearts and life forces,” an entanglement giving birth to a “collective dream.” It is only in learning to subsist within a liminal space of democracy that such a collective dream can be born. Even after such a dream(ing) is birthed—a dream(ing) that is in some sense alive and enactive, forming and reforming, like the “publics” Glaude Jr. references above—one still must be taught how to live out el sueño. Such a teaching, *how to live democratic praxis,* takes place within liminality as well, within an “interweaving” of hearts and minds and life forces. To learn to live within the liminal, then, becomes a vital, indispensable, obligatory aspect of democratic praxis.

Anzaldúa’s orientation is one that would have difficulty, perhaps, finding a home within specialized academic disciplines today (certainly within the secular academy). As mentioned previously, according to AnaLouise Keating, the key to Anzaldúa’s decolonial praxis is that she "does not simply write *about* 'suppressed knowledges and marginalized subjectivities'; she writes from *within* them, and it's this shift from writing about to writing within that makes her work so innovatively decolonizing."[57] While such a methodology is often seen in writings that emerge from oppressed and racialized communities (e.g., in Anzaldúa's influential earlier work, *Borderlands / La Frontera*), Keating emphasizes that in *Light in the Dark* Anzaldúa radically expands her decolonial praxis through her explicit engagement of ontology and epistemology:

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[55] Ibid., 82, 83.

[56] Ibid., 22.

> Through empirical evidence, esoteric traditions, and indigenous philosophies, she valorizes realities suppressed, marginalized, or entirely erased by the narrow versions of ontological realism championed by Enlightenment-based thought … Anzaldúa does so by writing from—and not just about—these subaltern ontologies.[58]

Can academia today provide a fecund space for such theorizing? When answered in the negative, it is an indictment of academia's role as progenitors of democratic and decolonial praxis.

Anzaldúa believed fiercely in "indigenous thought as a foundational, vital source of decolonial wisdom for contemporary and future life on this planet and elsewhere," arguing that indigenous philosophies offer us "alternatives to Cartesian [and Kantian]-based knowledge systems."[59] Such philosophies, if they are to perform their decolonial praxis, should not then be cordoned off into "area studies," which, as seen in chapter two, arguably reduces them to "relics"—objects of study—as opposed to living philosophies from which to theorize from. This may bring up complex and uneasy questions of appropriation. However, the unease of such questions is also precisely what allows them to become points of liminality. As we will see in the following chapter, for Anzaldúa, "cracks" (*rajaduras*) between cultural identities serve as openings to the 'in-between'—the liminal, spiritual worlds of *nepantla*.[60] Utilizing accusations of "appropriation" in ways that mitigate the lure of such liminal spaces, is arguably a way to domesticate the decolonial potential of Anzaldúa' work.

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[57] Keating, "Editor's Introduction," xxix; the quote within the quotations is cited to Ernesto Martínez, *On Making Sense: Queer Race Narratives of Intelligibility*.

[58] Keating, "Editor's Introduction," xxix.

[59] Ibid., xxxiii.

Whether or not one wishes to engage in shamanic-inflected decolonial praxis, I submit there can be no academic "consensus"—other than that of a colonial guise—that can reasonably discount such experiences and possibilities. Hence, there is simply no ground to say that scholarly theorization, reflection, critical thought, research, etc., cannot or should not stem from such philosophical orientations. Rather, *it is incumbent upon academia to provide space for such theorization as part of its* own *decolonial praxis*.

I do not mean to suggest that any particular ontological orientation gets run of the mill, simply exchanging for instance a hard constructivism for the syncretistic, spiritualized, indigenous-inflected, contextual, linguistically aware, liberative, and embodied ontology of Anzaldúa. It does mean, however, that multiplicities of ontological orientations are allowed to exist as potentially acceptable scholarly points of departure, and that one can theorize from, be in dialogue with, and form communities of inquiry amongst multiplicities of them. It also means letting go of a colonial itch to domesticate such ontologies, or to make them pass a (colonial) "test for scholarship" that begins and ends with Enlightenment trajectories in Cartesian or Kantian forms.[61]

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[60] See Anzaldúa, *Light,* especially chapter four.

Anzaldúa's decolonial praxis is predicated upon opening up scholarly thought to experience and theorization from ontological orientations that exceed a Western Enlightenment trajectory. In support of such praxis, I have examined in previous chapters scholarly tropes and trends that work to domesticate, disregard, and even disqualify such orientations from the halls of academia. To do so is to work against the democratic and decolonial praxis outlined thus far. Anzaldúa's work returns in force in the following chapter, where I delve deeper into concepts introduced here, and give attention to the ways in which the racialized and marginalized identities she inhabits engender her theory and praxis. The following chapter will also allow me to continue to highlight the challenge her work presents directly to scholarly praxis in a religiously pluralistic democracy.

In summing up this short section—one that parallels the namesake of this project—it is within liminality, such as the "in-between" spaces of *nepantla* ("between imagination's imagery and reality's harsh light"), that one begins to access an oneiric acumen for incarnating democracy. The "influx and efflux" that occurs in these often unconscious, affective, liminal, and spiritual spaces, has perhaps a much greater effect on our lives—and on our shared lives together—than one might imagine.[62] One might discover an ameliorating, transformative experience that (re)orients one's whole approach to reality. Such an example is seen in the following chapter, where experiences of "the root of one's being" becomes the key for Howard Thurman's decolonial praxis. AnaLouise Keating's transformative "post-oppositional politics" seen above also takes place within liminality, as does Martin Luther King Jr.'s sense of *agape* below. Many of the greatest exemplars of democratic praxis lie more or less precisely along these lines—well, not exactly along these lines—but more like somewhere in this *atmosphere.* Atmospherics filled with lightning and thunder, storms and clouds, failure and funk—yet, at the same time, blowing in audacious, hope-filled, liminal realities, often of a spiritual nature, undergirding the promise (and peril) of democratic praxis.

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[61] For an example of a Kantian 'test for scholarship' see Hedges, "Why the Theology Without Walls Fails Both as Scholarship…" See also my response to Hedges' essay, McEntee, "Theology Without Walls's Potential as Decolonial and Democratic Praxis."

[62] "influx and efflux," see Bennett, *influx and efflux.*

Paralleling the interweaving of Anzaldúa's el sueño, Martin Luther King Jr.'s democratic praxis entails a realization that we are "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."[63] King's 'testament of hope' and dedication to a dream of beloved community remains a powerful and concentrated gift for democratic praxis. King lived in the in-between liminal spaces amidst communities of color, white power structures, and an overt white supremacist culture. His "dream" of beloved community emerged betwixt and between the spiritual depths of imaginal realities and the materialized, concretized social and political facts of his existence, and he lived ever on the borderline between life and death—a true *nepantlera*. King's later life and his increasing disillusionment—not so much of his dream but of the road to its embodiment—testifies to the close connection between struggle, brokenness, vulnerability, and democratic praxis. King speaks to the inner soul of America, to an experiment of global culture (the "world house"), and to the actualization of a potential for divine relationality. Ultimately, for King, democratic praxis is undergirded by a particular kind of love, *agape.*

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[63] King, *A Testament of Hope*, 290.

King used agape to speak about one's love of their enemies…that "logic of superabundance" that Cornel West spoke of above. Importantly, agape does not mean "like." It is not sentimental. King didn't *like* the people who burned down his house with his wife and young children at home, he didn't like the racist police officers who beat and maimed black Americans marching for equal rights, he didn't like those who lynched their brothers and sisters because of the color of their skin. But he could love them.[64] He could love them because they are *alive*, because they belong to Life, and ultimately, for King, to God. There is a power in this kind of love, a transformative power that works from both within and without—a transfiguring power that has no need to impinge, dominate, or change life, yet is caught up within it, is interior to life itself. It binds all of life in relationships of depth and meaning, for good or ill, and ever struggles to "make all things new." It is only this kind of love, for King, that can finally serve as a reliable basis for an authentic democracy.

Similar to *nepantla* above, or the multifarious religio-spiritual becoming seen in Whitman's vistas of democracy below, or Thurman's decolonial praxis in the following chapter—King's agape partakes of a liminality of democracy—or perhaps better said, a liminality of democracy partakes of it. The liminality of democracy recognizes a multiplicity of ways for democratic becoming, without having to relegate such ways to a religion/secular binary. A liminality of democracy, in various forms, is seen in nearly all the voices above, as well as those below.

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[64] King, "Loving Your Enemies," especially 47-49.

The liminality of democracy, then, embraces and participates in the *religious* undertones of democracy, ones that cannot be easily dismissed thru secular-ized reflections. A liminality of democracy works against domesticating transgressive theories, such as Anzaldúa's, in order to present more acceptable, pedestrian, secularized modes of analysis for scholarly praxis. Jeffrey Stout points out that religious arguments for democratic principles represent "high accomplishments in our public political culture," as examples such as King, Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, early Abolitionists, and many others show. He doubts that the religious nature of these democratic arguments can be dismissed as excess baggage within which is couched the real, secular arguments that are of importance.[65] A liminality of democracy recognizes the importance of religious arguments to our shared public life, and *desires* a diversity of such arguments, in respectful yet liminal dialogue with one another, in order to better incarnate a dream of democratic becoming. In short, a liminality of democracy highlights the need for a beloved community of religious diversity in our shared public life.

In the atmospherics of democratic praxis then, the religious may be held in high esteem, even as any particular 'religion' remains dethroned from such a place of prominence.

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[65] Stout, *Democracy and Tradition,* 70. Stout concludes, "It is hard to credit any theory that treats their arguments as placeholders for reasons to be named later" (Ibid.). Stout's work was first encountered in chapter one.

Catherine Keller's "Apophatic Assemblage"

One practice of democracy that drinks from a religiously-inflected liminality, while also concentrating on the formation of democratic communities amidst radical difference, is found in the work of theologian Catherine Keller. Keller's concept of "apophatic assemblage" offers a democratic praxis inflected in each moment with a liminal, apophatic sense of unknowing. A Whiteheadian process-based theologian, Keller enfolds postmodern thought in its many veins (particularly Derrida's deconstruction), feminism, race and gender theory, postcolonial and decolonial work, ecology, politics, Biblical hermeneutics, even quantum physics and mysticism, among other things, into her *Political Theology of the Earth*. For Keller, a "political theology of the earth takes part always already … in negative theology." By negative theology, Keller refers to a "mystical edge of contemplative religious practice [that] has quite long-standing experience in 'staying-with' the unnameable, even, or especially, as we struggle to name it. That sometimes means remaining with unspeakable loss."[66] These "negative" undertones of democratic praxis serve to remove any false belief in an unremitting, smoothly advancing narrative of liberal progress. At the same time, they bespeak a hopefulness at the unspeakable edges of a chaotic, liminal complexity pregnant with emergent possibility—a practice of living in the liminal. Here the political becomes directly imbued with the theological, as Keller replaces a sovereign, all-knowing and providential God with one who remains "unknown" and "unexceptional" in important ways. This Whiteheadian God requires our participation in a "divine becomingness" that exists for us *en potentia.* A divine relationality in the world (i.e., "beloved community") becomes actualized only to the extent to which we embody it, realize it, perform it.

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[66] Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*, 93.

Kairos, an "eventive," divinely inspired time that marks a qualitative difference from its linear, quantitative cousin *chronos*, signifies for Keller "a breakthrough [of divine relationality] into, not out of, concrete history."[67] This *political* actualization lies at the basis of Keller's "hope without optimism" for our own political and ecological futures—an actualization that even as it happens remains for her always already covered in clouds, draped in darkness, and wandering among the back alleys and forgotten spaces of the "undercommons." Such heartrending hope dis/closes itself amidst the struggles of the oppressed, is heard in the cry of the Earth, sprouts within the earthy (and now apocalyptic) lives of the "nonhuman," and percolates in the shadowy spaces of our unknowing—helping us to succeed thru "failing better."

For Keller, a sovereign God becomes emptied in *apophasis*, or "unsaying." She describes apophasis as "negative theology" that operates simultaneously in theoretic and spiritual keys, giving rise not to Carl Schmitt's unquestioned dictator who decides in the "exception," but rather to an "amorous agonism" that "*struggles with acute difference*" in order to mobilize and act.[68] The "sovereign exception" becomes instead a "collective inception." At the heart of Keller's work are questions of democratic possibility amidst intense difference, questions which she extends to our nonhuman brothers and sisters as well, with whom we are inextricably bound in crises of clima(c)tic proportions. Similar to

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[67] Ibid., 4.

[68] Ibid., 15, 22, emphasis original.

Anzaldúa, she expands the *aporia* of pluralistic democracy beyond the human, defining the political as "*collective assemblage across critical difference*."[69]

The apophatic performs, for Keller, a liminal and transformational role that is crucial to her envisioned, amorously inflected heterogeneous assemblages. So much so that, for Keller, "There may be nothing more important to the salvaging of a habitable earth future … than the art and practice of apophatic assemblage."[70] Keller describes apophasis more directly as "an ancient practice for liberating insight from certitude, for thinking at the edges of the unthinkable."[71] The apophatic might include sitting quietly with the mystery of our own self, or even sharing moments of "silent breathing together." In allowing us access to the "oneiric space" of "ambiguous affects, aesthetic ripples, and sudden outpourings, of something between a collective and political unconscious," the apophatic carries liminal possibilities of building collaborative constituencies across radical difference. Keller asks of the apophatic, might it, "in its affective agonism then *mysteriously* intensify the aspiration, the con-spiration, of ecosocial assemblage? And, in that spirit of a deeper, darker solidarity, might such an intersectional pluralism intensify its own difficult sociality?"[72]

In its "speechless breathing," the apophatic connects us to "our own earthbound bodies," opening up relational space with speechless others who populate both human and nonhuman worlds. While non-human worlds surely communicate, "it is an apophatic sort of talk," at least in the sense of being radically different from human language, and thus the apophatic helps us to develop "new skills of interspecies translation," so that we might "listen with a new and silent care to the communications of [a boundless cosmos'] manifold members."[73]

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[69] Ibid., 33, emphasis original.

[70] Ibid., 166.

[71] Ibid., 15.

[72] Ibid., 164.

The apophatic also moves us to action. In heightening our affective sensitivity and stimulating an enhanced relationality across critical difference, the apophatic "lures" us into action in service of a "becoming public." Actions that touch down "earthily," dwell "nationally," and reach "virtually around a perilously entangled planet,"[74] hinting at "our own political possibilities" to "become the new earth, the new public, we imagine."[75]

Perhaps the key to Keller's apophatic assemblage is the cultivation of a "hospitality to shared uncertainty." It opens us in vulnerable unknowing to radical difference, across racial, religious, cultural, and socio-economic lines of power. An apophatic aesthetic eventually deepens, for Keller, into an "amorous agonism." Its "systemic mistrust of certainties," including our own, helps us move beyond respect and tolerance to mysterious intensifications of solidarity and possibility—potentially to an "ecosocial inception" that assembles "at the edge of chaos."[76] In tilling the (spiritual) soil for such a collective inception, Keller's practice bespeaks a liminality of democracy. Similar to Keating's post-oppositional approach, apophatic assemblage utilizes atmospherics in liminal and spiritual keys to catalyze collaborative constituencies across critical difference—without losing a sense of the failure and funk of democratic praxis. Such a practice reverberates with Anzaldúa's nepantla, Glaude Jr.'s third revolution, and West's prophetic ensemble.

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[73] Ibid., 167, 168.

[74] Ibid., 170-171.

[75] Ibid., 160.

[76] Ibid.

William Connolly's "Affinities of Spirituality"

Another liminal concept of democratic becoming comes from political philosopher William Connolly. Connolly has no such connections to theology, nevertheless he recognizes the importance of religious and spiritual affects for the political. For Connolly, when we exclude a "visceral register of being" from public life (for example, by bracketing religious belief from the public sphere), we may only encourage more malicious manifestations of its affective energy. In ignoring "the vexed relations between bodily disciplines and selective modes of affective contagion," we diminish our grasp of problematic political movements and operative dimensions of a "multifaceted democracy."[77] Recent political developments in the U.S., mainly the presidency and continuing phenomenon of Donald J. Trump, speak volumes for Connolly's thesis. In *Aspirational Fascism: The Struggle for Multifaceted Democracy under Trumpism*, Connolly deftly analyzes the affective embodiments that drive Trump's support. Against this politics of grievance, Connolly sees the need for an "injection of multifaceted pluralism into democracy," yet one that remains aware of the visceral register of being. Such injections must be combined with "strong jolts of egalitarianism," as well as a deeper understanding of the grievances that drive Trump's popularity.

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[77] Connolly, *Aspirational Fascism*, xxii.

Without these, one might only amplify said grievances, greasing backlashes to pluralism and/or further concretizing notions of white identity.[78]

There is something of Connolly's visceral register of being that aligns with what I have called ontological orientations. It is often orientations towards the nature of reality which drive emotions and actions. Such a phenomena is seen below in Connolly's analysis of what he calls a "resonance machine."[79] A resonance machine emerges among an assemblage of political factions, often becoming entangled through visceral registers of being which are not always immediately apparent. These entanglements are both unpredictable before they occur and exceed the sum of their parts, as they feed off the energies of one another to amplify resonance, evolving into an emergent identity. Resonance machines stich together various groups and identities into overarching assemblages that aim to control the levers of state power, attempting to institutionalize its ethos through disciplinary and coercive means. (Something like a resonance machine operates in academia today, perpetuated by rhetoric of the secular, though it is perhaps propelled more by inertia than by emergent coalitions).

As a concrete example, Connolly analyzes the emergence of a right wing politics that knits together the highest echelon of the social strata to evangelical Christian constituencies and small government militia-esque mentalities. Connolly's analysis remains attentive to the affective dimensions of such a coalition, in which powerful economic interests, fundamentalist theological tropes, and a belligerent militaristic attitude are wedded together. Connolly shows how the knitting together of such a coalition spans cognitive and visceral registers. Examples include the overlapping of an evangelical orientation towards an omnipotent God with a neoliberal faith in an always beneficial self-correcting free market; the visceral experience of patriarchal family life with cowboy capitalism and an aggressive military stance; and the widespread use of certain disciplinary practices across each group, such as demonizing the feminine and subsequently working to feminize one's perceived enemies—a deeply offensive practice still widely seen today. The overlap between creeds and affective dispositions "resonate" with one another, thereby reinforcing the power of the assemblage as a whole. Due to such resonance, the power of the assemblage exceeds the sum of the socio-political movements of which it is made. Such is the nature of a resonance machine.[80]

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[78] Ibid., xix.

[79] Connolly devotes an entire book to the development of a "neoliberal resonance machine" in *Capitalism and Christianity.*

Connolly's political theory situates us within a vast array of conflicting worldviews and constantly shifting force-fields (both human and non-human), where there are numerous constituencies with whom we resonate (both positively and negatively) to differing degrees, or what he calls "a world of becoming."[81] This is the landscape one must negotiate in building collaborative political endeavors. Connolly's "respectful agonism" (which has its own resonance with Keller's more theologically inflected "amorous agonism"), takes place within an "ethos of pluralization," where all of us become political minorities to one degree or another, through a kind of Deleuzian "minoritization." His world of becoming reveals a contemporary social milieu that churns with a quickened pace of change in technological, economic, and cultural spheres. The quickened pace of change is part of the “fragility of things,” where swarms of seen and unforeseen possibilities coexist.[82] Every social, political, economic, and cultural order is in some fundamental way a tenuous assemblage of contingent circumstances.

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[80] Ibid. See also Connolly, *Aspirational.*

[81] Connolly, *A World of Becoming.* Connolly, similar to Keller, utilizes Whitehead's process philosophy.

Connolly’s political theory plays up this instability to provide hope for the future as well as prescriptions for agonistic struggle. In order to successfully negotiate this landscape, we must learn to collaborate across zones of difference, honing in on common resonances and sensitivities, and be willing to build political movements that may not accomplish all we wish for (i.e., compromise). Creative experimentation in economic, political, educational, and cultural spheres becomes especially important in order to seed new possibilities, a liminal sentiment seen in nearly all the voices in these atmospherics. One never knows when such an exploration might become a tipping point for a new socio-economic political order…

Which brings me to one of the more fruitful ideas in Connolly’s work for my own purposes, that of *affinities of spirituality.* Connolly holds that spiritual sensitivities are as important for political life as the political, economic, or religious creeds one holds.[83] These spiritual sensitivities resonate with one another underneath the surface of professed creeds, functioning as to hold together political assemblages. Connolly describes spiritual affinities of resentment, racism, and unhealthy forms of masculinity that have fueled Trumpism across “creedal differences.” Such affinities “often jump across different professions of creed, doctrine, and philosophy."[84] The ability of spiritual affinities to bridge ideological differences makes it a crucial factor in building collaborative political constituencies. For Connolly, the most important political endeavor of our time is to build an alternative left-leaning political assemblage, "composed of multiple constituencies whose diverse experiences resonate together."[85] The cultivation of spiritual affinities that commune across religions, across religious and secular differences, across racial, cultural, ethnic, and class divides, appears to me as essential to such an endeavor. As seen in the previous chapter, the cultivation of such spiritual affinities may even be crucial to the future survival of the Democratic party in the U.S., which is quickly becoming a radically diverse assemblage, composed of increasing ethnic, racial, and religious diversity. Something of a generalized notion of Connolly's affinity of spiritualities will return to the fore in the final two chapters.

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[82] Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*.

[83] Connolly, *Capitalism,* 8.

Incarnating Democracy: James Baldwin and Nikole Hannah-Jones

Given the importance of visceral registers of being and affinities of spirituality for democratic praxis, the rest of this chapter is now dedicated more to a kind of performative praxis than a critical analysis. More a song or fragrance—or funk—than an argument. These are, after all, atmospherics (and who wants to argue with lightning?). It is a performance anticipated above in the jazzy, funky, apophatic atmospherics of democratic praxis.

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[84] Connolly, *Aspirational*, 40.

[85] Ibid., 15.

Transgressing the lines of a religion/secular binary, what if one begins to conceive of democracy itself as a kind of burgeoning religious/contemplative tradition (it is, after all, only a few hundred years old)? Embodying its own modes of spiritual practice and transfiguring fragrances of divine becoming? That is, what if democracy itself is "undergirded by ultimacy," and therefore *spiritually* efficacious and transformative? What transfigurative potentials are spurred to development through democratic praxis? And what would it mean for democracy to embrace its role as a transformative vehicle of human potentiality? What religiously pluralistic eschatology might it sing?

Essential for any spiritually potent tradition is an awareness of where one finds embodiment of transfigured potentialities, what one might call "saints, sages, and prophets" of democratic praxis.[86] For Whitman, until democracy can "inaugurate its own perennial sources, welling from the centre," in ethics, art, theology, philosophy, and literature, it will remain "defective, its growth doubtful, and its main charm wanting."[87]

One of my assertions is that such "perennial sources" are to be found in the voices of those who have fought most surely—body, mind, soul, and spirit—*for* the incarnation of democracy. In the voices of those Americans who have been engaged in the struggle, often through necessity and survival, to incarnate something that is "yet to be." In particular, I refer to voices from Black America, who have been engaged in this country, from its beginning, as both despised outsider and, as Hannah-Jones phrased it above, "the most American of all." In our connection to this land, to its power and majesty and beauty, the wisdom of Native American traditions becomes essential, as well as profoundly complicated by a colonial and genocidal past. Yet, it is perhaps only with a deep, abiding, conscious integration of indigenous wisdom into our culture that we might begin to incarnate a healthy symbiosis with the land on which we subsist. Indeed, such a transformative integration may be our greatest hope for confronting the ecological disaster in which we are already deeply embroiled.

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[86] I am indebted to Hyo-Dong Lee's class on "Saints, Sages, and Democratic Subjects," for sparking my thought on the connections between saints and sages and democratic praxis.

[87] Whitman, *Whitman,* 935.

Saints and sages of democracy are to be found not only in the famous, but like democracy itself, in the exceedingly ordinary. In the inaugural essay of "The 1619 Project," a recent *New York Times* series examining the legacy of slavery in America, Nikole Hannah-Jones opens by telling a story about her dad. She tells us that she always gave her dad grief for his commitment to the American project. Born "into a family of sharecroppers on a white plantation," her dad's family worked picking cotton from morning to night, "just as their enslaved ancestors had done not long before." The Mississippi county they lived in lynched more black people than any other county in the state, and Mississippi led the country in lynching. Even when the family finally moved north to escape the horrific conditions of their life, their dreams were shattered in the realization that "Jim Crow did not end at the Mason-Dixon line."[88]

Growing up, Hannah-Jones didn't understand how despite all of this her dad could fly an American flag outside their home. It made her "deeply embarrassed." Didn't their story begin with enslavement? Wasn't their cultural pride to be found *not* in the country that had treated them as chattel property, but if at all in a "vague connection to

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[88] Hannah-Jones, "Our democracy's," 1-2.

Africa?" Wasn't taking honor in being "American" really just a marker of "degradation?" An "acceptance of our subordination?" Hannah-Jones then stunningly concludes that it was her who was wrong all along, and that her "father knew exactly what he was doing when he raised that flag."[89]

What is going on here? And what does this have to do with democracy?

James Baldwin, in *Notes of a Native Son*, describes (as he does in nearly all his work) the poignancy of being both trapped and formed by one's society. Of *belonging* to the land that one is born into, "blood of my blood," even when betrayed by that very land: "We take our shape, it is true, within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth; and yet it is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed."[90] This tension runs throughout Baldwin's work, a constant stream flowing from an unseen mountaintop. The "oppressed and the oppressor are bound together…they both alike depend on the same reality."[91]

Such a tension also lies at the heart of the paradox implied in the behavior of Hannah-Jones' father. Only by living into a new reality can we begin to become fully human, no matter white, black or any other color. For according to Baldwin, we are all, in this country, a little bit white and a little bit colored. Our inability to face our own history, to be honest about who we are, about what we have done to our native and colored brothers and sisters, and to ourselves, is the crucial and necessary first step in becoming a democracy. “What one begs the American people to do, for all our sakes, is simply to accept our history.”[92]

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[89] Ibid., 3.

[90] Baldwin, *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, 16.

[91] Ibid., 17.

In “The American Dream and the American Negro,” Baldwin makes the shocking statement that “what has happened to the white Southerner is in some ways much worse than what has happened to Negroes there,” for the white racist is a human being just as anyone of color is, yet has become one whose “moral lives have been destroyed by the plague called color.”[93] Baldwin suggests that democracy is less a political structure than the possibility of a new identity. In *The Price of the Ticket,* written towards the end of Baldwin’s life, he reflects upon “another depth, another incoherence,” brought about by listening to a group of colored soldiers, including his half-brother, on furlough for their father’s funeral. What they were fighting for didn’t seem to exist, a thought that made Baldwin tremble, for his brother “had never seen the America his uniform was meant to represent. Had anyone? Did he know, had he met, anyone who had? Did anyone *live* there? ... *Was it worth his life?”* Even though his brother didn’t represent a country that *existed*, he “certainly…represented something much larger than himself and something in him knew it.”[94]

This “something much larger” can only be seen as a commitment to an imaginal idea of democracy, to the idea(l) of “America” itself:

> *“The land that has never been yet—*
> *And yet must be… ”*[95]

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[92] Ibid., 716-717.

[93] Ibid., 716.

[94] Ibid., 837, italics original.

[95] Hughes, “Let America Be America Again.”

Hannah-Jones tells us that what her father understood all those years ago, and "what it would take me years to understand," was that "black Americans, as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation's capital, are this nation's true 'founding fathers.' And that no people has a greater claim to that flag… It is we who have been the perfecters of this democracy."[96]

When one begins to face the question that Baldwin asks of us, to really look at our history, one finds more than just brutality. And thus, without in any way negating the need to *face* such brutality—and to simmer in it so that we might *know* from whence we came—one also begins to discern true exemplars of democracy forged in this country, the places where democracy has been incarnated most clearly. One sees Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman risking life and limb to escape slavery, and then returning again and again, in inexplicable acts of courage, to do the same for others. One hears Malcolm X's unparalleled race critique and his prophetic call to human dignity for those whose country has failed them. One sees Ella Baker striving tirelessly in the struggle for human rights, giving birth to a new mode of politics, one now taken for granted and championed by all sides in our country, that of "participatory democracy."[97] One listens not just to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "dream," as powerful as it was, but even more intently to the nightmare he endured in the later years of a tragically short-lived and violently ended life, as he recognized the extent of entrenched white intransigence on questions of race, and the need to extend his struggle to the poor of all colors and to stand against the Vietnam War. One marvels at the audacity, eloquence, and prophetic anger of Fredrick Douglass, in 1852, addressing (by invitation) a mostly white audience gathered to celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence, chastising them in the most explicit terms:

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[96] Hannah-Jones, "Our democracy's," 3, 4.

[97] See Mueller, "Ella Baker and the Origin of 'Participatory Democracy.'"

> Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak to-day? … What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to [them], more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which [they are] the constant victim. To [them], your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; … your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgiving, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to [them], mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. … The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretense, and your Christianity as a lie.[98]

Yet even Douglass ends on a note of hope, "drawing encouragement from the Declaration of Independence" and "the genius of American institutions." To what could he be referring? Certainly, it is not the same "republicanism" of the country he just denounced. Douglass' hope resides, as does Hannah-Jones' father and Baldwin's brother above, in what seems like an impossible possibility, an America that does not yet exist, yet one that Douglass' own speech serves to incarnate. Baldwin reminds us, in his famous denouement to *The Fire Next Time,* that "the impossible is the least that one can demand," and that, in any case, we are "emboldened by the spectacle of human history in general, and American Negro history in particular, for it testifies to nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible."[99] It is precisely in such an achievement, of such an impossible possibility, that one discovers an incarnate foundation for democracy.

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[98] Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July."

Prophets of Democracy: Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X[100]

In his classic work *The Prophets,* Abraham Joshua Heschel endeavors to give a taste of the existential "prophetic" experience of the Judaic prophets of old. For Heschel, prophecy is a "voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world."[101] The prophet resides in a liminal space, "a crossing point of God and man." To be a prophet is to live within such liminal spaces, always considering the plight and concrete circumstances of human life. It is in this sense that I refer to "prophets of democracy" here.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X are two of the most iconic and well-known American prophets. Yet the memory of both stems too often from an unrealistic and uninformed visage of their lives, and hence their importance for democratic praxis can be domesticated. The mirage is multi-faceted. King is often either glorified or dismissed as "beyond black and white," a dreamer preaching a race-less society. The power of King's life for democratic praxis becomes tamed, and the radicality of King becomes lost. The searing example of King's life, and his exquisite insight into the internal dynamics at work in our country, go unheeded. King embodied the soul of America in a unique way, and his vision for our country articulated at the end of his life will be the focus of my reflections here.

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[99] Baldwin, *James,* 346.

[100] I am indebted to James Cone for many of the ideas in this chapter, in particular my thoughts on King, Malcolm X, and Baldwin. Dr. Cone was an influential teacher, and much of the following section was first written in his class on "Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X," one of the last he taught. For more on the relationship between King and Malcolm X, see Cone, *Martin;* and Joseph, *The Sword and the Shield.*

[101] Heschel, *The Prophets,* 5.

Malcolm X has been equally misunderstood. On one side, he is dismissed as a demagogue, a hate-mongerer of reverse racism. This is almost exclusively by the white majority, which in itself is revealing. By being unable to deal with Malcolm X in a mature way, reflecting on his message for our country, we indict ourselves. Until we are able to face the truth in Malcolm's message, our country continues to fail itself, and our soul remains scarred, unhealed, and in need of *metanoia*.

On the other side, Malcolm's unrelenting championing of human dignity and unparalleled race critique can become covered over when he is glorified unreflectively. By embracing problematic features of Malcolm's rhetoric, one can do damage to his more powerful truths, making it difficult if not impossible for them to take root in us, both individually and as a country.

For King, I concentrate on a set of sermons given in 1967, less than half a year before his death, published as *The Trumpet of Conscience*. These sermons reflect King's mindset after he came out against the Vietnam War earlier in the year, and contain a prophetic analysis of the psychological and cultural dynamics of our country. King's analysis remains in many ways just as true today as when he wrote it, though the names of various social groups might differ. King was being condemned at this time by both white and black leaders as anti-American for his stance against the war, and many of his closest "friends" had deserted him.[102] During this time, King was forced to lay claim to his own inner truth in a more radical and unapologetic way than he had ever done before. His life became increasingly liminal, unsure of which friends might leave him next, feeling death approaching and his movement defeated in various ways, battered on his own side of the color line as well by the rise of Black Power. King lived into such a radical liminality, refusing to shrink from its demands. No longer concerned to play the role of "politician," he became increasingly uncompromising in the values he held most dear. The radicalness displayed at the end of King's life carries atmospherics of militant nonviolence, solidarity across critical difference (especially among the poor), and a profound understanding of differing perspectives. His capacity for reflective thought, empathic resonance, and long suffering perhaps sets him apart among those who have struggled for human blessedness. These atmospherics are far more important to King's democratic praxis, in my opinion, than his gift for oratory, and such qualities are on full display in *The Trumpet of Conscience.*

To those who would question his conflation of civil rights with his anti-war and anti-poverty campaigns, King could only respond, "the inquirers have never really known me, my commitment, or my calling."[103] He felt called "to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation, and for those it calls enemy."[104] King felt that seeing from the 'enemies' point of view was

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[102] See the brief introduction to "Trumpet of Conscience" by James Washington, in King, *Testament*, 634. See also Stewart Burns, "Cosmic Companionship."

[103] King, *Testament*, 634.

[104] Ibid. 636.

> the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence … to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. For from his view we may indeed see the basic weakness of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition.[105]

This is the logic of superabundance in action, the logic of agape as democratic praxis.

King's commitment to universal justice at the same time did not distract him from the particularity of his American embodiment—rather it only deepened it. Let us not forget that the motto of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was "To save the soul of America," and King's insight into the dynamics of our country is perhaps unsurpassed. While King did not have the cutting depth of Malcolm's race critique, he saw more clearly from varying vantage points. This may be one reason why King in his most radical form has been left behind too readily. His mature thought challenges all perspectives to see truth in the "opposition," offering his own version of a 'post-oppositional' politics. This is a position not so easily achieved, nor often amenable to popular sentiment.

King tells us that America must undergo "a radical revolution of values," one that in addition to the struggle against white supremacy must also "look uneasily on the glaring contrast between poverty and wealth." King saw that these struggles were intimately entwined. Without solving the problems of poverty within which so many Black Americans were trapped, there could be no true dignity for them. Their poverty was the result of racist social policies, and thus no true racial integration into a shared democratic life could occur. The violent preoccupations of the country—including the war in Vietnam and the continual building up of the military industrial complex—siphoned off resources needed to combat the problem of poverty. These three issues—of white supremacy, poverty, and violence—were inextricably entangled, and King saw this as clearly as anyone ever had.

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[105] Ibid. 638.

When it came to surveying the social milieu in America, King was equally brilliant, and his analysis speaks to similar divides seen today.[106] King saw three distinct groups emerging in his time: hippies, radicals, and those who struggled to adapt to the "prevailing values of society." The last and largest group, while accepting the current socio-economic systems, was generally unhappy with the status quo and in the midst of soul-searching on the state of the country, unsure of how to move forward (what today we might call "moderates"). The radicals were united in their belief that only "by *structural* change can current evils be eliminated," since "the roots are in the system rather than in men or in faulty operation." They revolted against old values, but had yet to formulate new ones. Some were pacifists, but others were "armchair revolutionaries," insisting on the "political and psychological need for violence."[107] King, rather than merely dismiss those who called for violence, saw the positive insights from their point of view. The radicals' great "creative collective insight" was the need for "direct self-transforming and structure-transforming action." Finally, King diagnosed the hippies as a group struggling to "disengage from society" as an "expression of their rejection of it."

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[106] I am indebted to Otis Smallwood for insight regarding the depth of King's social analysis.

[107] King, *Testament*, 642.

They sought “not change but flight,” and in this expressed “a profoundly discrediting judgment on the society they emerge from.” King also saw that the hippies would not last long as a mass group “because there is no solution in escape.”[108] The growing alienation of young people throughout the country was an “acid of despair” dissolving society.[109] Then, in what I find to be a passage of great importance in King’s thought, he turns to the movement began by Black youth as a resource in which we might light a way towards a better future. Here I believe King captures essential currents for these atmospherics.

King traces a historical trajectory for this alienation of youth, seeing its emergence in the post-World War II McCarthy era, where intimidation ruled and left a “legacy of social paralysis” in its wake. This “blanket of conformity and intimidation” conditioned society “to exalt mediocrity and convention.” It is with the emergence of Negro youth that this blanket of fear begins to lift, as they give birth to a “new spirit of resistance” in their struggle for civil rights and democracy. King tells us it is “difficult to exaggerate the creative contribution of young Negroes” as their “boldness and ingenuity … aroused the conscience of the nation.” King relates how these youth had to transform themselves. While previously they had “imitated whites in dress, conduct, and thought in a rigid, middle-class pattern,” they now began “initiating rather than imitating.” They broke from the surrounding white culture and societal norms and found their own voice, booming in depth and dignity, and became the leaders of whites who were inspired to emulate them. It was by throwing off “middle-class values,” putting

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[108] Ibid. 643.

[109] Ibid. 644.

"careers and wealth in a secondary role," that these Negro youth made a "historic social contribution" to the life of our nation.[110]

According to King, this democratic praxis stimulated a broader social movement that elevated the moral level of the country. When we oppose the "tyrannical forces" of white supremacy, wealth inequality, and violence in all its forms, we not only build a better society, but also add "stature and meaning" to our own lives.[111] In other words, *we find a life worth living.* We can look to the Black freedom movement not only as embodying the deepest ideals our country was supposedly founded on, not only as the moral conscience of the country itself, but also as a new vision of what the "American dream" should be—a prioritizing of democratic praxis over "careers and wealth." Such democratic praxis, as shown in these liminal atmospherics, can also be a deeply religious or spiritual praxis, always predicated on enabling lives of meaning, dignity, and equality for all. In such a 'dream,' material wealth means nothing apart from a basis of democratic becoming, giving rise to a life of meaning, and a life worth living.

For Malcolm X, the struggle of Black people was not primarily an *American* struggle, but a human struggle for basic dignity and rights. Rather than a fight for "civil rights," it was a fight for "human rights." Malcolm, one of the most passionate, fierce, and uncompromising spokesmen for democratic praxis in our country's—indeed the world's—history, owned his own self-worth in a way that was beholden to no one. He wasn't asking for anything when his democratic praxis *demanded* others recognize his

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[110] Ibid., 645.

[111] Ibid. 646.

God-given worth. In “The Black Revolution,” Malcolm articulates this stance as a different approach in struggling for one’s rights: “He doesn’t beg. He doesn’t thank you for what you give him, because you are only giving him what he should have had a hundred years ago. He doesn’t think you are doing him any favors.”[112]

Though Malcolm claimed that those “involved in the human-rights struggle don’t look upon themselves as Americans,” I believe he was also touching upon something rooted in the American soul. What Malcolm X articulates is the failure of America to embody its own soul, speaking from that place of prophetic conscience, that liminal voice God lends to “the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor.” One can feel powerful democratic resonances echoed in his words, ones that don’t ask but demand a basis of equality and justice in these atmospherics: “All of our people have the same goals, the same objective. That objective is freedom, justice, equality. All of us want recognition and respect as human beings. We don’t want to be integrationists. Nor do we want to be separationists. We want to be human beings.”[113] Though Malcolm may not have seen himself as “American,” he carried the soul of America within him, and articulated it as prophetically as anyone, paralleling the Hebrew prophets of old.

Malcolm’s rhetoric was a judgment upon America and a call for *metanoia,* a spiritual conversion predicated on a transformative change of heart. Far from being racist or inciting violence, Malcolm’s analysis sprung from a clear-eyed view of the facts on the ground, the reality and evil of a white supremacist American culture that infected all areas of American life. The depth of self-worth Malcolm found within himself allowed him to name the evil he saw in no uncertain terms. Malcolm was clear on many occasions that it was this evil he was preaching against. In "The Ballot or the Bullet," he explains, "Now, in speaking like this, it doesn't mean that we're anti-white, but it does mean were anti-exploitation, we're anti-degradation, we're anti-oppression. And if the white man doesn't want us to be anti-him, let him stop oppressing and exploiting and degrading us."[114]

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[112] Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 52.

[113] Ibid. 51.

Malcolm challenged America to see things as they were. In an interview just three days before he was assassinated, Malcolm explained, "Whenever you find the condition that black people are confronted by in this country, being permitted by the government to exist so long … any black man, who really feels about this situation … his feelings are extreme." He went on to say in reference to King's work in the South, that when you have brute policemen who are Klansmen and the federal government does nothing to stop it, "I will guarantee you that you are producing extremists by the thousands." Challenged pugnaciously by another white panelist, as to how things would be changed by turning people into extremists, Malcolm responds, "It's not going to be changed by making believe that it doesn't exist to the intense degree that it does."[115]

Malcolm went on when asked if he was suggesting a revolution:

> No, I'm saying this: that when you respect the intelligence of black people in this country as being equal to that of whites, then you will realize that the reaction of the black man to oppression will be the same as the reaction of the white man to oppression. The white man will not turn the other cheek when he's being oppressed. … So all I am saying is, I absolutely believe the situation can be

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[114] Ibid. 25.

[115] Ibid. 182, 183.

> changed. But I don't think it can be changed by white people taking a hypocritical approach, pretending it is not as bad as it is.[116]

Later in the interview, as Malcolm's interlocutor accuses him of inciting violence, Malcolm scolds, "Don't ever accuse a black man for voicing his resentment and dissatisfaction over the criminal condition of his people as being responsible for inciting the situation. You have to indict the society that allows for these things to exist."[117]

Like Jeremiah for the Jewish people, Malcolm is rightly acclaimed as an American prophet. Not a prophet for Black Americans, but for all Americans. He forces us to confront our self, to *face* the question of who we are by speaking from the depths of the soul of our country, from that which is embedded in the Declaration of Independence. Malcolm speaks for the soul of America far more than a white supremacist culture. White culture in America has often been too morally weak, too psychologically twisted, too greedy for material wealth—to embody divinely inspired principles in the liminal roots of democracy. The arising of voices like Malcolm and Martin, among others, from the depths of that soul, gives us hope that it may yet be incarnated, if we are but willing to humble ourselves, hear their voices…and undergo *metanoia.*

It is also important to give voice to differences between Martin and Malcolm around the question of nonviolence.[118] King understood nonviolence as profoundly transformative for both the individual and larger society, not only as a strategic tool, but more importantly *as a way of life*. While Malcolm did not incite violence, he did glorify it at times. This is a subtle but significant distinction. Malcolm spoke often of the need for violence in revolutions (though he did say towards the end of his life that America "is the first country on this earth that can actually have a bloodless revolution").[119] He idolized guerilla warfare, and never fully understood what King meant by nonviolence, unable to grasp the depth of commitment and transformative power in King's religious vision. For King, nonviolence was a divine power that transformed the individual, sanctifying them in some way and deepening their democratic praxis. Nonviolence was a symbiotic and synergistic liminal power, one that could integrate varying constituencies longing for a better and more just world.

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[116] Ibid.

[117] Ibid. 191.

[118] It is worth noting that there is no doubt that Malcolm was going thru significant changes in many of his ways of looking at the world, spurred by religious experience during his *hajj* to Mecca, in the brief, intense, chaotic period before he was murdered. Thus, there is no telling where Malcolm might have gone in future years. For a recounting of this period in Malcolm's life, see Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention.*

King perceived that the integrative power of what he called "militant nonviolent resistance" could help bridge divisions among the three disparate groups he analyzed above. Militant nonviolence could accept from the hippies, "the vision of peaceful means to a goal of peace, and also their sense of beauty, gentleness, and of the unique gifts of each man's spirit." From the radicals it could adopt "the burning sense of urgency, the recognition of the need for direct and collective action, and the need for strategy and organization." Further, it welcomed the insights of those who had not fallen into extremes of anarchy or despair, those "who have not rejected our present society in its totality." Thus, nonviolence presented a challenge to "the more extreme groups to integrate the new vision into history as it actually is, into society as it actually works … [keeping] open the possibility of honorable compromise."[120]

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[119] Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 56.

In King's vision, once again we see the coming together of collaborative communities amongst radical difference, here resonating around an affinity of spirituality, the religio-spiritual liminality of *nonviolence*, another essential ingredient to these atmospherics. King speaks here, if I may be so bold, to the inner soul of America, to an experiment of a global culture united in a liminality of democratic praxis. One might (more than arguably) ask, is the soul of America ultimately nonviolent? History (and the present) would seem to answer an emphatic, "No!" Nevertheless, I assert that America, in the deepest expression of her values, *is* an experiment in global culture and democratic praxis, and such praxis can only survive and flourish in nonviolence. Nonviolence has an integrative factor that violence can never achieve. It facilitates a divine imprint within human beings, while violence inevitably scars the soul. Even without a "divine imprint," as recent reflections from Judith Butler reveal, nonviolence has the potential to accomplish what violence cannot.[121] Violence may accomplish the overthrowing of oppression, but it leaves one without an integrated society, and carries long-term consequences for the culture that arises out of it. America itself is a prime example of the consequences of such violence, consequences which in the end might simply prove too much…even as these atmospherics remain hopeful. Self-defense may be necessary at times, but any form of violence should always be the last resort, and if necessary, engaged in with a heavy heart—never glorified.

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[120] King, *Testament*, 646-647.

[121] Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence.*

Malcolm may have been more open to this assessment than many would imagine. While he never preached nonviolence, Malcolm's rhetoric was a call for human dignity and self-worth more than anything. It was America's failure that brought about this struggle, and its redemption to which both Martin and Malcolm were calling us. The interview from which I quoted Malcolm above includes some of the last words he ever uttered in public, conducted in the days before his assassination. Malcolm concludes this interview by exhorting his uppity white combatant to support King's work, telling him, "Any time Dr. King goes along with people like you—you should put forth more effort to keep him out of jail. You should put forth more effort to protect him. And you should put forth more effort to protect the people who go along with him and display this love and this patience. If you would do more for those people … instead of trying to attack me, probably this country would be a much better place in which to live." (When the man dismisses Malcolm's plea by stating indignantly that he has lectured all over Alabama, Malcolm, never one to let a glib comment slide, asks him [and I can only imagine with a large toothy grin], "Did you have on a white sheet?"[122])

In the liminality of democracy, Martin and Malcolm both reverberate in the soul of America, and a recognition of both are needed to move further into its embodiment. James Cone ended his inspired book on Martin and Malcolm and America connecting the dreams of Martin and Malcolm with the concept of beloved community, "For Malcolm and Martin, for America and the world, and for all who have given their lives in the struggle for justice, let us direct our fight towards one goal—the beloved community of humankind."[123] In these atmospherics, based upon my own local history, part of democratic praxis is learning from those who have struggled most bravely in this fight. As Taylor Branch has said, we are invited "to join hands and sing a Negro spiritual, so that everyone … could share inspirations forged during slavery." Branch points out that to "silence race collapses American history into a fairy tale," and that King never promised, "African Americans would behave like white people."[124] Nor did Malcolm. Rather, they invited Americans of all colors deeper into their own atmospherics, into the soul of America itself. If we are willing to follow, we may find at least the beginnings of, and the potential for, nothing less than a "beloved community."

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[122] Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 192.

Sages of Democracy: Walt Whitman and Howard Thurman

A "sage" is one who is associated with "wisdom," variously a "a profoundly wise person," "one who becomes wise through reflection and experience," or a "mentor in spiritual and philosophical topics who is renowned for profound wisdom."[125] A sage breathes into the atmospherics of democratic praxis a needed current, as a guide into its liminal depths. Sages carry a breadth of experience that blossoms into *sophia*, a spiritual wisdom with feminine in-spirations.[126] In bringing these atmospherics to a close, I turn to two ‘sages’ of democracy, beginning with that “poet of democracy,” Walt Whitman, and concluding with Howard Thurman, who will offer his own vista of democracy while bridging this chapter with the next.

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[123] Cone, *Martin*, 318.

[124] Branch, "Remembering the March."

[125] The quotes come, respectively, from Oxford English Dictionary, Merriam-Webster Dictionary, and vocabularly.com (all accessed online, November 15, 2021).

[126] As seen in the introduction. See also Keller, "Emancipatory Wisdom."

Walt Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas*, first published in 1871, is a reverberating, poetical meandering of atmospherics on the meaning of democratic praxis in ‘these States.’ Philosopher Jacob Needleman once described *Vistas* as “the most powerful manifesto ever written about the inner meaning of American democracy,” and many of the points made in Whitman’s *Vistas* resonate with these liminal atmospherics.[127] Whitman opens *Vistas* in a particularly apt way, singing of how a “truly grand nationality” *reflects the weather*. Such grandness is made up of influences that imitate, “in their limitless field, that perennial health-action of the air we call the weather—an infinite number of currents and forces, and contributions, and temperatures, and cross purposes, whose ceaseless play of counterpart upon counterpart brings constant restoration and vitality.” Such a “large variety of character” must allow “full play for human nature to expand itself in numberless and even conflicting directions.”[128] These two principles—variety and freedom—are presented not only as the “greatest lessons of Nature,” but also as the greatest lessons of “New World politics and progress.” Whitman sees American democratic praxis as having the potential to surmount cultures and systems of inequality (that “gorgeous history of feudalism”), and to incarnate instead a chaotic yet harmonious becoming of variety and freedom—a liminality of democracy that, as we saw in the epigraph to the first chapter, is undergirded by religio-spiritual becomings amongst "all the religions, old and new."[129]

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[127] Needleman, *The American Soul*, 316-317.

[128] Whitman, *Whitman,* 929.

Catherine Keller has lifted up ways in which Whitman's poetic democratic praxis anticipates not only a queering (and celebration) of sexuality—one of the "infinite number of currents" for which Whitman himself is well-known—but also of ecological and gendered folds. Keller sees Whitman not only articulating "the relationality of 'an inescapable network of mutuality (King)'," but also "an ecological democracy, an egalitarian cosmopolitics."[130] She quotes Giles Deleuze in describing Whitman's vista: "Nature is not a form but a process of establishing relations. … [It] invents a polyphony: it is not a totality but an assembly, a 'conclave,' a 'plenary session.' Nature is inseparable from processes of companionship and conviviality."[131] Keller holds up Whitman's feminism (*"And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man*")—while also bringing awareness to his many calls for "manly" character—as well as his incipient "deconstruction of the gender/sex binary." In the latter, Keller sees Whitman anticipating the gender work of Judith Butler.[132] Whitman also "finds himself nonseperable from … the stragglers, the strugglers, the laborers, experimenters, Native Americans, slaves and ex-slaves, who run through the fibers of his kosmos-personality."[133] Keller even articulates a certain apophatic aesthetic in Whitman, the unspeakableness of same-sex love approximating “the apophatic indeterminacy of what now names itself ‘queer,’” denoting Whitman a “queer father of an ecological humanity.”[134]

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[129] Ibid., 930.

[130] Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible,* 199. "Whitman anticipates and enfolds the entangled issues—race, sex, gender, class, and ecology—of a future epoch" (Ibid., 208).

[131] Ibid., 199. Original quote cited as Giles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical,* trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998), 59.

[132] Keller, *Cloud,* 202, 203.

[133] Ibid., 199.

Jane Bennett, in a recent work on Whitman, also finds atmospheric, ‘apophatic’ resonances in Whitman’s effulgent democratic becoming, specifically in his “solar judgement.” As Whitman asks us to “*judge not as the judge judges but as the sun falling round a helpless thing,”* Bennett finds an admonition in Whitman to

> *postpone judgement,* that is to say, to hold off the sorting discrimination often assumed to be the very essence of ethical action. Whitman explores—indeed, pushes to the limit—the idea that one very valuable effort of the democratic dividual consists in the active *elision* of discriminating perception, in a ‘judgement’ as nonjudgmental and magnanimous as the dispensation of light offered by the sun.[135]

In such liminal, apophatic space, a “visceral” register of being once again comes to the fore, and one begins to *feel into* the world around them.[136] Whitman’s democratic praxis comes to the fore as liminal, affective “sympathies” emerge. For Bennett, Whitman’s “lyrical songs of more-than-human sympathies are attempts to induce, from out of an America polarized into two hostile camps, a public disposed toward a democracy that is multicolored and extraordinarily diverse (‘variegated’) and yet still a functioning whole.”[137] One might say that Whitman’s liminal sympathies look to become a *symphony*, emerging “within the very infrastructure of the cosmos” itself.

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[134] Ibid., 205, 214.

[135] Bennett, *influx,* xvi.

[136] Bennett connects this visceral register of being to Whitehead’s process-thought, in a manner similar to William Connolly’s and Keller’s use of Whitehead (Ibid., 46-62).

[137] Ibid., xv.

Of course, Whitman refers to himself as a "Kosmos," in his famous "Song of Myself," signaling a view of the cosmos that exceeds even material and affective dimensions. Whitman's kosmos is undergirded by a magisterial, multiplicitous divinity in love with its own variegated becoming—uniquely entangled as none other than Whitman himself (as well as all forms of life). On this point, Whitman resonates with one of his contemporaries, the Hindu saint Sri Ramakrishna, of whom we will hear more from in chapter six.[138] Of course, they never met one another, living on nearly opposite sides of the world…but perhaps…well, perhaps there was just something in the air…a current wafting whither and wit in those global atmospherics.

For Whitman, the actualization of a harmonious yet chaotic becoming, based upon a foundation of variety and freedom—principles seen most clearly in Nature herself—is democracy's true vocation. Such a vocation, for Whitman, can only be consummated by means of "a religious and moral character beneath the political," one that has yet to be accomplished, "neither [by] the schools nor the churches and their clergy."[139] In other words: *Democracy itself, in its very liminality, becomes a religio-spiritual calling—yet one that has yet to be accomplished by any religion.*

Towards the end of *Vistas,* Whitman writes that for "these States…theology and social standards" are "of greater importance than their political institutions." Yet these remain undeveloped, beholden to past articulations from "foreign lands… ignorant of its [own] genius." He questions whether America "has a corner in her own house."[140] What

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[138] See Maharaj, *Infinite Paths to Infinite Realities*.

[139] Whitman, *Whitman*, 932.

[140] Ibid., 978.

Whitman anticipates is the flowering of a religiosity steeped in democratic becoming. Such democratic blossoming not only supports the becoming of “an infinite number of currents,” but emerges out of an “adhesiveness of love, that fuses, ties and aggregates, making the races comrades, and fraternizing all. Both are to be vitalized by religion…breathing into the proud, material tissues, the breath of life. *For I say at the core of democracy, finally, is the religious element. All the religions, old and new are there.”*[141]

Such a religiosity must emerge, crucially for Whitman, out of the spirit of the land, out of our own “local history,” as an authentic expression of ‘these States:’ “The spirit and the form are one, and depend far more on association, identity and place than is supposed. … This something is rooted in the invisible roots, the profoundest meanings of that place, race, or nationality.”[142] American democracy must also learn that “Of all dangers to a nation…there can be no greater one than having certain portions of the people set off from the rest…they not privileged as others, but degraded, humiliated, made of no account.” As it faces its failures, democracy must, at the same time, learn the atmospheric art of *composting:*

> By virtue of its kosmical, antiseptic power, Nature’s stomach is fully strong enough not only to digest the morbific matter always presented, not to be turn’d aside, and perhaps, indeed, intuitively gravitating thither—but even to change such contributions into nutriment for highest use and life—so American democracy’s.[143]

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[141] Ibid., 949. Emphasis mine.

[142] Ibid., 977-978.

[143] Ibid., 949.

Whitman's liminal democratic praxis marks a suggestion of "intuitively gravitating thither," to "not to be turn'd aside" by the "morbific matter" uncovered—i.e., to not "deodorize the funk that's there"—and yet learn, by the example of Nature herself, to "change such contributions into nutriment for highest use and life." Only in this way can be born "a sublime and serious Religious Democracy…dissolving the old, sloughing off surfaces, and from its own interior and vital principles reconstructing, democratizing society."[144]

Whitman ends *Vistas* discussing how America will flounder until such a "native" religiosity, literature, and aesthetics arrives, without which her material wealth will "prove merely a passing gleam." For these to arrive America must become "a full-form'd world, and divine Mother not only of material but spiritual worlds, in ceaseless succession through time—the main thing being the average, the bodily, the concrete, the democratic, the popular."[145] And with that, Whitman's famous essay comes to a close, as do these reflections on Whitmanian currents in these atmospherics.

One whose democratic praxis never turned aside from the failures of democracy in America, yet who gave birth to spiritual worlds arising from interior roots, is Howard Thurman. Vincent Harding wrote that Thurman may have been "the wisest and most compassionate man I have ever known."[146] Thurman was a spiritual director for Harding, as well as for King and others in the Civil Rights movement, and wrote extensively on democracy in the United States. All of Thurman's reflections are consciously inflected by his experience as a black man in a racist American society (and I note that the most important person in his childhood, his grandmother, was born a slave). For Harding, the essential quality of Thurman's "life, work, and magnificent vision," lies in how the depth of his particularity gives rise to a universal relationality. It is in Thurman's own description of the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, that Harding finds perhaps the best description of this quality: "His tremendous spiritual insight created a mood unique among the voices of the world. He moved deep into the heart of his own spiritual idiom and came up inside all peoples, cultures, and all faiths."[147]

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[144] Ibid., 977.

[145] Ibid., 994.

[146] Vincent Harding, "Introduction," xiv.

In many ways such a sentiment undergirds this chapter. By going deeply into a particular idiom of democratic praxis, I aim to come up inside atmospherics that resonate beyond their particularity. In the following chapter, I will delve more deeply into Thurman's work, with an eye to its significance for decolonial praxis. Here I keep my eye on his democratic atmospherics.

"The responsibility of love is to love," Thurman tells us, and hence, similar in a sense to King's *agape*, "there can be no love apart from suffering."[148] Here, in place of sentimentality, or weakness or strength, or good or evil—is found a "robust vitality" that is the impetus for a reshaping of the self, a "self that redefines, reshapes, and makes all things new."[149] In *The Search for Common Ground*, a late work on community and individuality that Thurman calls his "lifelong working paper," he spends an entire chapter reflecting on Utopian thought.[150] Utopian thought, for Thurman, is “rooted in the very structure of man’s conscious life,” the result of a “spirit that hovers” over humanity, refusing to accept the contradictions of life or a perceived meaninglessness “as being either ultimate or final.” Life’s inherent drive to actualize potential undergirds Utopian thought, which must be honored in giving “form and place to such actualization as a concrete existence, at least in the imagination and in the dream.” It represents “the quality of hope…about the future,” which should never be dismissed as an “aberration of distorted minds.” On the contrary, Utopian thought is a “fundamental idea” that has been gathered throughout all times and ages from “the quality of life itself.”[151] Its weakness lies in a concretization of the ideal, but not in the hope it eminently provides, for such hope is grounded in the experience of life to actualize itself against all odds. Such a Utopian hope lies at the heart of the atmospherics found here, for that ‘land that has never been yet,’ that ‘impossible possibility.’

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[147] Howard Thurman, as quoted in Harding, "Introduction," ix.

[148] Thurman, Mysticism and the Experience of Love, 21.

[149] Ibid., 23.

Thurman tells us in the preface that *Search for Common Ground* is his way of dealing with the ambiguities of “the existential period in which his life must be lived.” He ends *Search* (first published in 1973) with a chapter exploring “the meaning of the search for identity,” a “mood and necessity” for Black Americans who are “for the first time in American society” beginning to see themselves as “an integral part of the society in [their] own right.”[152] This chapter, Thurman tells us, was not an easy one to write, for after finishing the rest of the book he found himself stuck, “for a long time,” wondering what it meant to consider the pursuit of community amongst “the present tensions between black and white.”[153]

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[150] Thurman, *Search*, xiii.

[151] Ibid., 44-45.

[152] Ibid., xv.

Thurman begins the chapter by describing the modern state as a new “symbol of belonging,” a “homeland” which takes on a “transcendent role.” A citizen who is loyal to the state has a sense of “participating in a collective or communal destiny, thus reaffirming…a sense of belonging to a transcendent entity in which the individual life is somehow transformed into something so much more than itself.”[154] Thurman’s democratic praxis keeps the “theologico-political” at the center of a liminal democratic life in the nation-state, developing his own kind of political theology. When those within a state are denied “freedom of access to the resources of community,” they are attacked at the “very foundation of their sense of belonging.” Such a betrayal can be devastating to their ability to actualize their potential. This creates a “condition of guilt” within the larger society that must be “absorbed in order to keep life tolerable,” tearing at the very “fabric of the total life of the state.” In this sense, Native Americans have suffered a betrayal “worse than death,” experiencing a “merciless and ruthless attack on [their] ground of community,” and destroying “a rare sense of belonging” to the land which served as an extension of their self-identity. By becoming “an outsider in [their] own territory,” they endure a “devastated and desecrated extension of self that the land signified.” As such, a “nameless” guilt descended “into the very fiber of American character and there is no catharsis to be found.”[155]

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[153] Ibid., xiii.

[154] Ibid., 85.

[155] Ibid., 87-88.

When it comes to the search for identity among African Americans, Thurman examines the signs of his times. It is clear that Thurman's admiration and heart lies with King's vision of beloved community, as "the profoundest sharing in the common life," carrying a sense of unity that cuts across all barriers—racial, social, economic. Yet, Thurman is forced to acknowledge a new sense for a much more forceful and aggressive "concept of community." A need had arisen for clear-cut boundaries from a racist white society, a self-determining separatism where natural lines of community would be cut between oppressors and oppressed ("The bankruptcy of trust stood fully revealed"). This new community would be built upon "the rejection *of* the white community rather than being rejected *by* the white community."[156]

Ultimately however, Thurman sees this new embodiment of community as a weigh-station, or "at most, a time of bivouac on a promontory overlooking the entire landscape of American society." Upon this vista of democracy, Thurman waits "to hear again the clear voice of prophet and seer calling for harmony among all the children of [humanity]." He speaks of those who are "haunted" by forgotten visions and moments of insight revealing "a way of life transcending all barriers alien to community"—and Thurman is surely one who is haunted thus. He longs for statesmen "through whose blood the liquid fires of Martin Luther King's dream" will sweep before us once again in a "grand surge of beatific glory." He knows that "the barriers of community can never be arbitrarily established," for eventually it must be realized "that community cannot feed for long on itself; it can only flourish where always the boundaries are giving way to the coming of others from beyond them—unknown and undiscovered brothers [and sisters]." In time we must make plans for a new city to be built, one that "has never before existed on land or sea."[157] Thurman's liminal democratic praxis, similar to King's sociological analysis above, remains eerily *apropos* in our time of extreme partisanship, concretized identity categories, and widespread fracturing on all sides of the political spectrum.

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[156] Ibid., 95-97.

Harding suspects that Thurman's greatest contributions are to be found here, in a future of black religious thinking that opens up avenues for authentic democratic praxis across racial, creedal, ethnic, and religious difference—a praxis of the liminality of democracy. What Thurman was attempting to communicate, according to Harding,

> was that it was possible to take all of the struggles and the sufferings of the black experience and recreate them in such a way that they can be used to open a whole new arena of human encounter and human relationships. I think it was the direction he felt we fundamentally had to go in. … For whatever we do out of our blackness, and whatever others do out of their Native Americanness or Chicanoness or Europeanness in creating, in a sense, rooms in the American house, there has somehow got to be a common foundation for all of us — Because his conviction was that we came out of a common center and it is towards that common center that we must be continually moving. And I feel that has tremendous political implications.[158]

Thurman's approach to democratic praxis lay more with building communities that crossed racial, religious, and cultural boundaries—and with spiritual transformation—than in leadership of social organizations or in instigating mass movements.[159] Thurman's vocation differed from King and Malcolm X in this regard, whose own vocations differed from that of Baldwin's, much more a writer that a leader of activist activities. And these vocations all differed, for instance, from that of Ella Baker, who did her most important work as an organizer of students and founder of participatory democracy—or from that of Hannah-Jones' father, or that of Berdis Baldwin, Alberta King, and Louise Little, the "three mothers" whose motherhood gave birth, both literally and figuratively, to many of the currents seen above.[160] Yet all are deeply involved in democratic praxis. This highlights an aspect of great significance. *Authentic democratic praxis is multiplicitous.* Such an understanding is too often hidden behind critiques that encourage a homogeneity of praxis. To engage in such critiques is ironically to move against democratic praxis itself.

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[157] Ibid., 103-104.

[158] As quoted in Alton B. Pollard, III, *Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman*, 126-127. The quote comes from a personal communication between Vincent Harding to Larry Murphy.

[159] See Pollard, *Mysticism*.

The differing vocations of Thurman, King, and others point towards authentic multiplicities of praxis within atmospherics of democratic becoming. Thurman's emphasis on spiritual transformation as essential to democratic praxis, explored more fully in the following chapter, further underscores this point—as coming into spiritual maturity connotes embodiment of one's own unique talents and gifts in service of others. The praxis of democracy is multifarious, and thus in need of an ensemble of practices and perspectives. At the same time, we must work to actively recognize solidarity amidst these democratic ensembles, as well as an underlying *harmony*—even amongst widely divergent approaches. Such "variegation" at the heart of the democracy resonates with the sagacity of democratic atmospherics performed here.

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[160] See Anna Malaika Tubbs, *The Three Mothers: How the Mothers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin Shaped a Nation*.

It is time now for the currents of these atmospherics to shift once again, and in the following chapter I take a more detailed look at the spiritual and decolonial dimensions of Thurman’s and Anzaldúa’s praxis. The atmospherics of this chapter stream into the next one, with streams of empathy, imagination, hope, failure and funk trailing in its clouds. In my own local history of the U.S., I found ideals of democracy incarnated in many voices, particularly emerging from the struggles of Black Americans, “this nation’s true ‘founding fathers’” and “perfecters of this democracy.”[161] Within such atmospherics, a liminality of democracy was discovered—one that embraces religio-spiritual undergirdings for democracy, and participates in democratic praxis beyond a religion/secular binary. The liminality of democracy was also marked by multiplicitous ways of praxis, and crucially paid attention to ways in which community amongst radical difference might be enacted. Thru empathy and imagination, thru heeding prophetic calls to face our failures—without deodorizing the ‘funk’ or turning aside from ‘morbific matter’—an atmosphere conducive to democratic community across critical difference swirls nonetheless. Combined with adhesives of agape, utopian interruptions, the power of nonviolence, affinities of spirituality, apophatic assemblages, and even composting—the liminality of democracy partook of an ability to in some sense universalize the particular. That is, a liminality of democracy engages struggles and insights from particular trajectories to open up “whole new arena[s] of human encounter and…relationships,” contributing to a ‘third American revolution.’ The following chapter allows me to flesh out in greater detail the particular examples that Thurman and

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[161] Hannah-Jones, “Our democracy’s,” 3, 4.

Anzaldúa provide. As we will see, a sense of going deeply down into the particular, only to discover liminal spaces and/or spiritual worlds in which all are entangled, is foundational to their democratic-decolonial praxis. The final two chapters will then reflect on what a liminality of democracy might mean for academic praxis, particularly in the 'in-between' spaces amongst fields of theology, religious studies, and philosophy.

CHAPTER FIVE

DECOLONIAL PRAXIS IN CONTEMPLATIVE KEYS

A person's fact includes more than [their] plight, predicament, or need at a particular moment in time. It is something total which must include awareness of the person's potential. This, too, is a part of the person's fact. This is why love always sees more than is in evidence at any moment of viewing.
—Howard Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*[1]

Decolonizing identity consists of unlearning identity labels; it means unlearning consensual "reality"; it means seeing through the roles and descriptions of reality and of identity by what Don Juan calls acts of "not-doing." Something breaks down, one falls to pieces (dismembered), and one has to pull oneself together and reconstruct oneself (remembered) on another level. I call this the Coyolxauhqui process. In an instant of insight/conocimiento, your life and its dismembered parts get reconstituted. You enact a healing.
—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark / Luz en lo Oscuro*[2]

In this chapter I give voice to two scholar-practitioners who have pursued democratic and decolonial labor in contextual yet contemplative 'ways.' There are many examples from which I might offer fragrances of such labor (some of which have been wafting through this work). Here I choose just two: Howard Thurman and Gloria Anzaldúa. They embody forms of democratic praxis that not only transgress, but actively challenge, a religion/secular binary. As seen below, at times their critiques are explicitly directed towards academia's secularized scholarly praxis. Anzaldúa's and Thurman's work is also purposely decolonial in that they are actively laboring to subvert colonial, racial, and other oppressive mindsets in order to bring about a beloved community, "ese sueño" of democratic praxis. Their work thus further situates the need for academia to open itself up to multiplicities of ontological orientations as normative stances for theory, and in particular to spiritual and religious perspectives.

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[1] Thurman, *Mysticism*, 14.

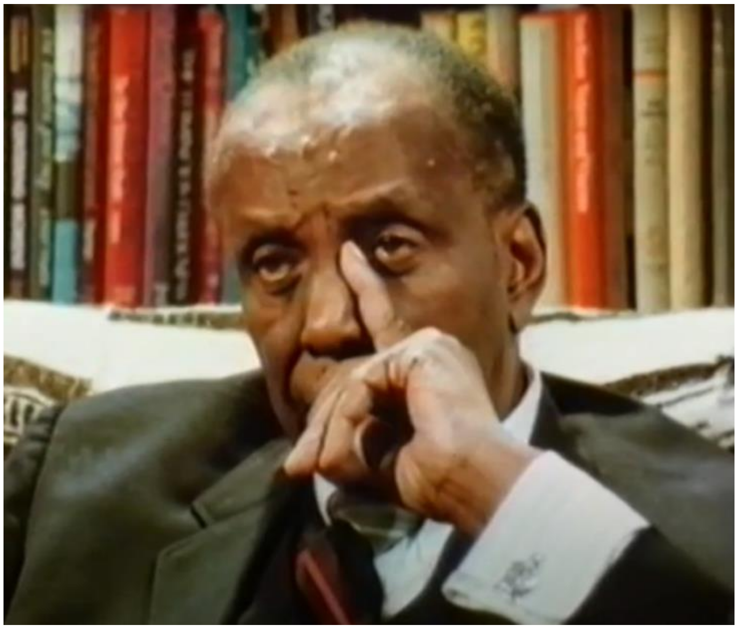
[2] Anzaldúa, *Light*, 189.

I have argued extensively now for the acceptably of multifarious orientations for scholarly praxis. Accordingly, I labor in this chapter to make explicit some of what is lost when secularist gazes are assumed to be normative. I do so mainly by drawing out contrasts between hard constructivist ontologies and the religio-spiritual inflected philosophies of Thurman and Anzaldúa. I also persist in highlighting colonial and racial dimensions of making secularist ontological orientations normative. Anzaldúa and Thurman continue to stream powerful (and funky) currents of democratic atmospherics, while further enfleshing arguments made thus far. They also provide grounding and existential embodiment for reflections in the final two chapters.

In the following chapter, I will discuss the scholar-practitioner, expand upon "philosophy as a way of life," and introduce the notion of a contemplative discourse. The latter might take place across academia, similar to scholarly practices of deconstruction, analyses of power, or use of the social sciences. Thurman and Anzaldúa offer embodied examples for each of the above, as scholar-practitioners for whom philosophy was a way of life, and as illustrations of contemplative discourse. In the final chapter, I will introduce the idea of a "beloved community of religious diversity," as one possible scholarly field that embraces a liminality of democracy, gravitating more around "affinities of spirituality" than research "objects." Reverberations of these affinities can be felt below.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the liminality of democracy was conceived of as a place from which new cultural conditions can be formed, and whose success is ultimately predicated on an “interweaving” of “minds and hearts.” The liminality of democracy pointed towards religious undertones and spiritual nuance in democratic praxis, without turning aside from its funk. It also brought attention to creating community across radical difference, and to harnessing resources that appear in the depths of our particularity. Thurman and Anzaldúa provide superb examples of a liminality of democracy, embracing currents of imagination, love, empathy, nonviolence, utopian interruptions, religio-spiritual experience, and apophatic assemblages. Each utilizes the particularity of their own experience—peering down into the “cracks” and “roots” of their lives—in order to glean insight for democratic life.

Howard Thurman's Sniffer



Howard Thurman, 1976. Screenshot taken from an interview, "Conversations with Howard Thurman."[3]

I spend the beginning and end of this section on an embodied performance, one Thurman gave towards the end of his life. Namely, an interview to Landrum Bolling in 1976, from which the picture above is taken. Quotes below are from this interview unless otherwise attributed.[4] In the first half of the interview, Thurman speaks about his well-known immersion in nature as a child. In his youth, Thurman often had spiritual experiences. Their locus was not the church but the sounds of the ocean and the rhythm of the sea and the panoply of starry skies. Thurman loved walking about in the quiet of the night. He tells of how he befriended a large oak tree as a child that became his "companion." One can sense the great joy, calm, and peace Thurman received—and was still receiving—from such experiences. His deep, rolling voice moves slowly, yet with a childhood excitement in describing his experience. His long arms, and even more elongated fingers, meander gently around his body as he speaks of the spaciousness and mystical qualities of such experiences. Thurman discovered in them that he was part of nature, and nature was part of him. These experiences—combined with the powerful example of dignity and self-worth provided by his grandmother (who was born a slave)—allowed Thurman to develop an unshakeable sense of self that could not be impinged upon by his outward environment. Thurman was adamant throughout his life that his sense of "inherent self-worth" was not "derived from any attitude or judgement in his environment." It was not a socially-constructed self, but one that emerged from spiritual experiences of what he called "the root of my being." It was this sense of self that Thurman discovered in the depths of nature mysticism as a child. Thurman consistently credited these types of religio-spiritual *experience* in his written work as the primary factor in helping him to combat racism. These experiences revealed to him a unity with all of life at the root of his being. In doing so, they allowed him to avoid internalizing the inferiority complexes of racist tropes, brutally enacted upon him by the white supremacist culture that surrounded him. For Thurman, spiritual experience was the essential component of his decolonial praxis, and no doubt such experiences guided him throughout his life.

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[3] "Conversations with Howard Thurman, Part 1 and Part 2." The screenshot is from Part 2.

[4] "Conversations with." The quotes from the interview parallel for the most part Thurman's writings. For many of them, nearly identical quotes can be found in his written work. It is also worth noting that the interview can easily be found on YouTube, in two parts, as "Conversations with Howard Thurman."

Such guidance is seen clearly in Thurman's much discussed "Khyber Pass" experience, which he described as being "as close to a religious vision as I've had." This vision or mystical experience occurred during Thurman's pathbreaking trip to India, as part of the first African-American contingent to meet Gandhi.[5] The trip would result in far-reaching consequences for the civil rights movement in the United States, helping to shape powerful modes of nonviolent resistance, bringing back a transmission of Gandhi's *ahimsa* ("non-harming") and *satyagraha* ("truth-force" or "soul-force"). According to Kipton E. Jensen, the transmission was further shaped significantly by "Thurman's philosophical influence and spiritual genius," as it helped give birth to a "distinctively African American philosophy and method of nonviolence."[6]

The trip furnished Thurman with something of a spiritual compass, and his Khyber Pass experience guided him for the rest of his life. While traveling over the pass, Thurman became gripped by an existential question: Is it possible for human beings to experience a transcendence of the power dynamics of race, class, gender, and more through spiritual experience? Is it possible to create conditions where spiritual experiences of unity can overcome the social constructions of race, class, gender, and more? As Thurman describes it:

> It was an experience of vision. We stood looking at a distance into Afghanistan … All that we had seen and felt in India seemed to be brought miraculously into focus. We saw clearly what we must do somehow when we returned to America. We knew that we must test whether a religious fellowship could be developed in America that was capable of cutting across all racial barriers, with a carry-over into common life, a fellowship that would alter the behavior patterns of those involved. *It became imperative now to find out if experiences of spiritual unity among people could be more compelling than the experiences which divide them*.[7]

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[5] For a recounting of this trip see Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt, *Visions of a Better World: Howard Thurman's Pilgrimage to India and the Origins of African American Nonviolence*.

[6] Jensen, *Howard Thurman*, 9.

[7] Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream*, 24, emphasis mine.

The key, in other words, to Thurman's democratic praxis, and to which he devoted the rest of his life, was "experiences of spiritual unity." In the depths of such experience, Thurman always reinforced the singularity of the individual, the uniqueness and preciousness of every personality, as upheld and accented, never falling into a diminished state of similarity or sameness. Nevertheless, experiences of unity—with nature, with fellow human beings, with other species, with God—were the key to undermining power dynamics, and essential to decolonial praxis. Luther Smith describes Thurman as an "American prophet," notwithstanding his universal religious and spiritual impulses. Smith defends his moniker by pointing out that a "prophet's identity is deeply rooted in the history, ideals, hopes, and mission of [their] culture. Prophets are products of their culture, speaking to specific traditions, problems, and purposes of their culture."[8] Thurman, as his white professor and mentor at Rochester Theological Seminary failed to comprehend, always knew that he and his "black skin must face the 'timeless issues of the human spirit' together."[9] Thurman's contemplative life was never separate from his context as a Black man in a white supremacist society,[10] nor from his role as a prophet-

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[8] Smith, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet,* 19.

[9] Thurman, *With Head and Heart,* 60.

[10] In *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*, one of Thurman's most concise yet profound works, he writes:

> [A]ll my life I have been seeking to validate, beyond all ambivalences and frustrations, the integrity of the inner life. I have sensed the urgency to find a way to act and react responsibly out of my own center. I have sought a way of life that could come under the influence of, and be informed by, the fruits of the inner life. The cruel vicissitudes of the social situation in which I have been forced to live in American society have made it vital for me to seek resources, or a resource, to which I could have access as I sought means for sustaining the personal enterprise of my life beyond all of the ravages inflicted upon it by the brutalities of the social order. To live under siege, with the equilibrium and tranquility of peace, to prevent the springs of my being from being polluted by the bitter fruit of the climate of violence, to hold and re-hold the moral initiative

sage of American democracy. As seen in the last chapter, Thurman remained throughout his life inspired by religio-spiritual ideals of democracy, which he found reflected within his nation's founding documents, even if never embodied. Thurman's influence on the civil rights movement was also profound, as a number of recent works highlight.[11]

Tempting as it is to allow myself to begin a treatise on Thurman's work and its extensive value for questions facing us today—I am perhaps personally more drawn to Thurman's example, thought, and work than to that of any other scholar—I will restrain myself to the general trajectory of this chapter: that is, to provide examples of decolonial praxis in contemplative keys in order to ground a need for greater ontological capaciousness in scholarly labor. Along these lines, Kipton Jensen's recent work on Thurman and philosophy of religion laments that "Philosophers have tended to dismiss Thurman as a religious mystic or a theologian, as though that somehow places him outside the scope of philosophical analysis."[12] Jensen argues that Thurman was a "profound philosopher," and that there is great need today for a better appreciation of Thurman's "genius as a philosopher of education, philosophical personalist, political pacifist, moral psychologist, social activist, identity theorist, philosopher of religion, prophetic pragmatist, social theorist, and liberationist philosopher."[13]

> of my own action and to seek the experience of community, all of this to whatever extent it has been possible to achieve it, is to walk through a door that no man can shut. (4-5)

[11] See Jensen, *Howard Thurman*; Dixie and Eisenstadt, *Visions*; Gary Dorrien, *Breaking White Supremacy*; Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell*; Pollard, *Mysticism.*

[12] Jensen, *Howard*, 5.

[13] Ibid., ix.

Jensen’s description of Thurman’s philosophy, seen below, reminds one of Pierre Hadot’s articulation of ancient philosophy as a “way of life,” which has found contemporary resonance in the halls of academia. Hadot, whose work I discuss more in the following chapter, showed how ancient philosophy did not aim at systemization as much as spiritual transformation, where philosophical discourse was but one “spiritual practice” among others geared toward the attainment of contemplative goals.[14] An openness to Hadot’s work in academia—not merely as historical labor, but also as prescriptive for what philosophy can be (a sentiment Hadot himself argued for)—shows the possibility for modes of spiritual transformation as an aspect of academic praxis, at least for some. Once again, the boundaries between theology, philosophy, and religious studies become, well, *liminal*. The fact that Hadot’s prescriptions are characterized as philosophy, while other quite similar approaches might be deemed theological—and thus out of bounds in a secular academy—is indicative of an unhealthy religion/secular binary at play. In the following chapter I will explicitly frame Hadot’s articulation of ancient philosophy as a type of contemplative discourse. Such a framing removes unnecessary boundaries between philosophy proper, little “t” theology, and spiritually transformative ontological orientations, as well as exposes the arbitrariness of such boundaries.

When one listens to Jensen’s description of Thurman as a philosopher, resonances with Hadot’s philosophy as a way of life are easily heard. According to Jensen, Thurman’s philosophy “offers us something better than, or at least something different and more practically minded than, a philosophical system: he personified a philosophical life, one lived with courage and conviction, distinguished by service to the disinherited and downtrodden in what he understood to be a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity."[15] Thurman's philosophy could also accurately be described as contemplative discourse. Thus, Thurman provides one archetypal example of contextual, embodied philosophy as contemplative discourse engaged in authentic decolonial and democratic praxis. As Jensen puts it, "Thurman was a spiritual genius…but he also exemplifies all the traits of a prominent and empowering strand within the black philosophical tradition."[16] Such discourse is more than appropriate for (secular) scholarly work in democratic and decolonial keys. In fact, it is essential for it.

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[14] See Hadot, *Philosophy*.

It is imperative to make explicit that Thurman's work cannot be understood capaciously through lenses of a hard constructivism or analyses of power, at least not if it is to be taken seriously. I have heard more than a few scholar-colleagues speak of Thurman with reverence and awe, yet do so while seemingly adamantly opposed to his actual ideas (e.g., that power dynamics can be diminished or even erased through spiritual praxis). However, one simply cannot take Thurman's thought seriously without acknowledging what is at the heart of it, namely an experiential reality that exceeds the bounds of social construction in a life-affirming, ameliorating, perhaps even inconceivable, 'way.' To take Thurman's thought seriously is to accord him the weight and respect he deserves as a philosopher, as well as a broader thinker (even a prophet-sage) on democratic and decolonial praxis.

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[15] Jensen, *Howard*, xiv.

[16] Ibid., 5.

One may disagree with Thurman, of course. Yet taking him seriously means confronting these aspects of his thought. Thurman, as does Anzaldúa below, explicitly challenges hard constructivist frameworks, as well as much discourse on power dynamics. Thurman's decolonial praxis does not in any way *deny* power dynamics, or the abuses of racism and systemic oppression, as we have seen. At the same time, Thurman's philosophy, indeed his "way of life," gravitates around spiritual experience that proves power dynamics to be far from all-encompassing or all-powerful. For Thurman, human beings have not just 'micro-resistances' at their disposal, but well neigh macro-resistances. These macro-resistances lie in human potential for spiritual growth. Ultimately, for Thurman, they lie in transformational experiences at the "root of one's being," where one discovers an identity entangled with all of life, with a dignity and infinite worth that lies beyond social constructions, beyond all "vice and virtue" (not unlike Whitman's 'solar judgement' in the previous chapter). Such experience was the guiding light of Thurman's philosophy.

Recognition of this fact places spiritual experience at the center of Thurman's thought. This recognition is important for creating decolonial communities of inquiry that can embrace diverse approaches. Creative tensions can then be present amongst multifarious religious, spiritual, and secular orientations, tensions that can be supported as positive aspects of democratic praxis. When this element of Thurman's thought is elided (*elidere*, "to force out"), his thought may become too easily assimilated into status quos of discourse today.

Consider Thurman's experience at the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples. This church was one of the first inter-racial, inter-religious churches in the country.

Established in 1944 in San Francisco, Thurman was a lead pastor and co-founder of the church. Thurman's work at the church was an explicit outgrowth of his vision on Khyber Pass, a place where he could put his vision to the test.[17] At the church, Thurman discovered that "experiences of unity *are* more important and crucial than all the concepts, prejudices, ideologies, fears that may divide. … If you can multiply these experiences of unity over a time interval of sufficient duration you can undermine *any* barrier that separates one man [*sic*] from another."[18]

As philosophical and ontological claims go, this is an important one that challenges many frames of discourse today. Note that Thurman's claim does not come from religious dogma, it is not a 'belief' in this sense. Nor is Thurman's claim the result of a closely argued philosophical system, or the consequence of an analytic inquiry into a particular problem. Thurman's claim is clearly not the result of an underlying philosophical system with a hard constructivist ontology.

Rather, Thurman's philosophy explicitly emerges through a lens of 'experience.' It is also exemplary of philosophy as a way of life. Thurman's religious experience on Khyber Pass—what I might even call an interspiritual vision, given its transformative power and multiple spiritual influences from varied religious sources (nature, the Black church, his grandmother, India's pluralistic religiosity, the nonviolent philosophy of Gandhi's *ahimsa* and *satyagraha,* the ideals of American democracy)—gave orientation not only to Thurman's philosophical work, but also to his spiritual and *political* praxis.

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[17] For the story of the "Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples," see Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream*.

[18] "Conversations with Howard Thurman."

Thurman resisted being labeled a theologian.[19] His view of religion was as a conduit for spiritual energies, particularly love, to flow into the human family so as to create "beloved community" (and hence, was also democratic praxis). Vital to beloved community was religio-spiritual experience. The nature of reality in its most profound dimensions was revealed to Thurman as an experiential unity with all of life that, paradoxically, only deepened the particularity and individuality of everyone and everything. As Thurman writes in his most sophisticated philosophical work, *The Search for Common Ground,* "From my childhood I have been on the scent of the tie that binds life at a level so deep that the final privacy of the individual would be reinforced rather than threatened."[20]

For Thurman, there is always a profound, creative tension between the depths of each person and their social embodiment. Ultimately, one's identity cannot be predicated or encompassed by one's surrounding environment. Returning to the interview, Thurman speaks of a "deep paradox at the center of his conscious life," responding to a question from Bolling about the "unity of mankind [*sic*]," and whether this goes beyond "social unification." Thurman watches Bolling intensely throughout his question, a single bony, aged, (*knowing?*) left index finger extends up, resting on his nose, eyes wide, head nodding (a scene from which the above picture is taken). Thurman lets out a deep sigh, almost as if becoming weary with the thought of trying to express this most essential of paradoxes, to which he has devoted his entire life.

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[19] See Smith, *Howard Thurman*, 46.

[20] Thurman, *Search*, xiii. Jensen also speaks of *Search for Common Ground* as Thurman's most "impressive philosophical achievement" (Jensen, *Howard*, 2).

He responds that, on the one hand, he has always been driven to experience his own "me-ness," "to lay claim to the very root of my being." It is this place/experience that Thurman discovered in nature as a child, and later in the depths of spiritual practice. It is a liminal place/experience that exists thoroughly beyond cultural conditioning, where "none of the vicissitudes of life could affect the depth and knowing" found there, "not race or culture or any of these things." It is a place/experience of a more fundamental identity than that bestowed upon one by others. An identity that is in unity with all life, yet utterly singular, unique. In this same place/experience, at that same root of one's being, is also a fundamental necessity to be in relation with others, and with all of life. One is already *in* community, whether one realizes it or not, because others are also a part of everything. They are present within this unity, in some sense a part of one's very self, and of everyone and everything else as well.[21]

Thurman's relationality is predicated on what he calls the "love-ethic" of Jesus, discovering a depth dimension in the other that "is beyond all of their faults…and all of their virtues." When this liminal root is found, one discovers that the root of one's being is "thrown together" with the roots of all others. Such a discovery underlies Thurman's decolonial praxis: "When that happens, I could reclaim any distorted relationship between us."

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[21] There is a kind of process theological understanding in Thurman here, as a number of Thurman scholars have pointed out. Jensen makes this point referencing Mozella Mitchell's description of Thurman's *Search for Common Ground*. Mitchell describes *Search* as putting "into the perspective of process theology the many strands of [his] keen concerns in the intense lifelong struggle for wholeness, not simply for himself but on behalf of community" (as quoted in Jensen, *Howard,* 2).

Thurman remains unwavering that his sense of relationality springs from such a liminal discovery, and takes time in the interview to explain himself. The “key” for his experiences of relationality is the “experience of himself.” Only by going down into one’s own depths, into the very root of one’s being—ever found “in the tight circle of uniqueness”—does one discover an experience of “coming up *inside* every other living person.” One experiences the other literally as part of oneself, and oneself as part of everyone else. “One doesn’t go this way,” Thurman tells Bolling, as he extends one arm laterally from his breast outward towards Bolling, his hand now pointing directly at Bolling. It is “not the way of the sociologist or political philosopher,” but of the “religious person.”

The affirmation of the other in the root of their being is but a reflection of the affirmation Thurman discovered in the root of *his* being. The particular gives way to the universal, resonating within the liminality of democracy. Such an affirmation brings about, for Thurman, an interior freedom from cultural and socio-political oppression: “The environment could never destroy me because I would never say ‘yes’ at my center to the external judgement.” Out of such an affirmation Thurman was able to “look out at the world and affirm others.” Yet this sense of affirmation “goes and comes,” like the tides of the sea in Thurman’s youth. One can lose contact with it, even after discovering it, and so one must find ways to keep it “nourished and fed.” It is not a merely cognitive affirmation, but rather direct, embodied, sensual *experience,* which transmits a knowing affirmation. Experience of this liminal center of ourselves *is* the affirmation, one might say. As a youth, Thurman’s time in nature fed this affirmative, affective knowing—the dark nights and starry skies he strolled underneath, the sounds of the ocean, his friendship with an oak tree. As he grew older, practices necessary for maintaining this knowing became his spiritual praxis.[22]

This is why Thurman remained dedicated to a search throughout his life, as he says in the interview, for "his own scent." In his interactions with others, in his joy-filled yet agonistic practices of interracial and interreligious community building, in his relentless democratic praxis from a deeply contemplative perspective—Thurman stayed true to his own experiences of the world and of the liminal depths of reality. He did so despite the discourse of his times quickly moving away from such perspectives towards more oppositional modes of resistance.[23] The scent of his own identity—wafting from the "root of his being"—this was how Thurman navigated democratic and decolonial praxis. *There was a fragrance to it.*

Thurman tells Bolling, again with his right hand by his breast, but now extending the long, bony index finger in Bolling's direction, "My assumption is that if I ever can't pick [this scent] up in you…" his finger makes a kind of jabbing motion towards Bolling, and then a long pause follows as Thurman relaxes back into thought.

Finally, with a slow smile, Thurman brings his hand back to the side of his face, the long finger now pointing directly at his nose as it begins to bob up and down, as if he is finally getting at some great itch: "…my sniffer is off. So I have to work on my sniffer, because [the scent is] there." Thurman's meaning is quite clear. If he fails to recognize his *own* depths in his encounter with another, in which a liminal space is discovered that affirms the other "beyond vice and virtue"—if he can't quite pick up on this *scent*—then he must return to the root of his own being, and refamiliarize himself with who *he* is, at these profound levels of experience.

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[22] See Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*; Thurman, *The Creative Encounter*; and Thurman, *Mysticism and Experience of Love*.

[23] One gets a clear sense of this in the final chapter of *The Search for Common Ground*, which I discussed in the previous chapter.

Hence, Thurman's decolonial praxis is one of discovering the "the very root of his own being." In this place/experience he simultaneously discovers a doorway into the roots of every other living creature and thing, which is now recognized as a part of him, and he of it (or them). One must then continually nourish and feed this experience, paying attention to the fragrance that percolates in this liminal womb of reality. To discover, become familiar with, sustain, and eventually follow this fragrance in each and every encounter—with others, with nature, with the cosmos itself—this is what, for Thurman, guides his decolonial and democratic praxis. It does not proceed according to cognitive classifications, or hermeneutics of suspicion, or even a dogmatic belief in the infinite worth of every person—but rather by his "sniffer"—which is to say according to intuitive, sensual, embodied experiences of the depths of reality that had to be constantly renewed. Such liminality can be experienced in multiplicitous ways for Thurman—in prayer or meditation; in another person's "fact";[24] in community, as Thurman attempted to do at the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples —or perhaps in the sounds of the tides, or even a tree with whom one is befriended (for who is to say who befriends whom?). Always, though, these experiences are affirmative of one "at the root of their being." Always, they are affirmative of others at the roots of their being—an affirmation

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[24] See Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*, especially 12-23, as well as the opening epigraph of this chapter.

"beyond vice and virtue."[25] And always, they are ameliorating of the human condition itself.

The spiritual experiences of unity that Thurman describes and works to induce in others are not meant purely for themselves, but to "alter the behavior patterns of those involved," to subvert power dynamics of race, class, and creed, and to anchor an affirmative identity at the root of one's being beyond vices and virtues. This happens not as a result of a singular experience, but of experience that is maintained over time, forming habit patterns within the *time being.*[26] We see a need for consistency and constant renewal of religio-spiritual experience, necessary to accomplish the sought after goal that Thurman speaks of. This goal is thoroughly embedded in the world and its complex political dynamics. That goal is beloved community—a place where human relationality can be experienced beyond unhealthy power dynamics. Such labor might rightly be described as *decolonial praxis.*

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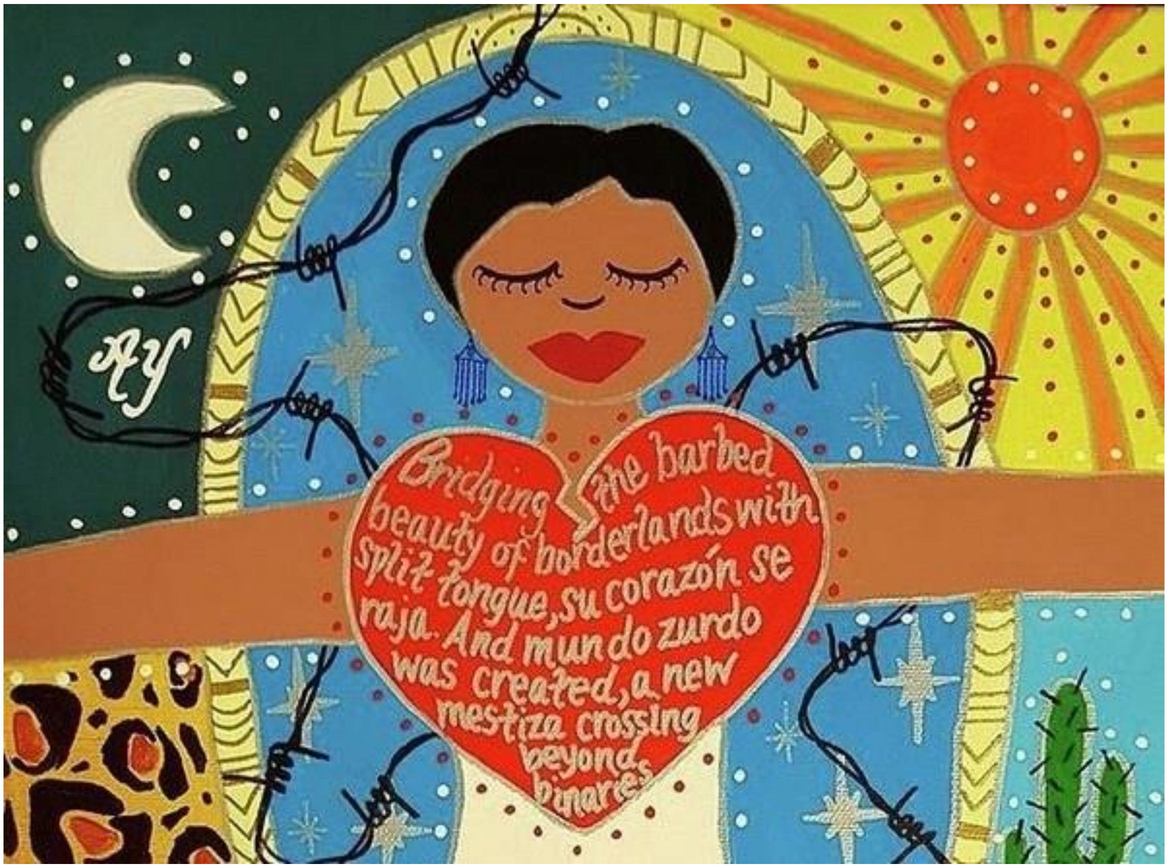
[25] Ibid., 14.

[26] Here I signal a work-in-progress, tentatively titled *For the Time Being.*

Gloria Anzaldúa's Nos/Otras and las Nepantleras


AY
Bridging the barbed beauty of borderlands with split tongue, su corazón se raja. And mundo zurdo was created, a new mestiza crossing beyond binaries

Icon of Gloria Anzaldúa, by artist Angela Yarber, part of "The Holy Women Icons Project," now known as The Tehom Center (icon commissioned by transqueer activist theologian, Robyn Henderson-Espinoza)[27]

Gloria Anzaldúa's work overlaps with Thurman's liminal sense of decolonial praxis. Combining Indigenous religio-spiritual teachings with scholarly notions of identity formation and an abiding respect for the power of language, Anzaldúa's decolonial praxis inhabits a multi-dimensional cosmos—one that enfolds liminal spaces of a spiritually efficacious and healing nature. We have already seen this in the previous chapter, with her use of the Nahuatl concept of *nepantla*, a liminal ‘in-between’ space, sometimes described as a shamanistic bridge between worlds. Here I take a deeper plunge into Anzaldúa’s work, showing how her concepts of *nos/otras* and *las nepantleras* give rise to a contemplative decolonial praxis that takes account of the trauma and brokenness that occurs in our fractured world, particularly amidst marginalized identities, races, and cultures.

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[27] The Tehom Center, https://tehomcenter.org.

For the following section I contain myself (for the most part) to a chapter of Anzaldúa’s oeuvre from her late work published posthumously as *Light in the Dark / Luz en lo Oscuro*, titled “Geographies of Selves—Reimagining Identity: Nos/Otras (Us/Other), las Nepantleras, and the New Tribalism.”[28] As mentioned in the previous chapter, *Light in the Dark* was written during the last decade of Anzaldúa’s life and represents, according to womanist scholar AnaLouise Keating (also Anzaldúa’s friend, colleague, and editor of *Light in the Dark*), “Anzaldúa’s most sustained attempt to develop a transformational ontology, epistemology, and aesthetics.”[29] This attempt is characterized specifically as “decolonial” praxis by Keating.

Anzaldúa does not relegate language to a backseat within her spiritually efficacious, indigenous inflected ontology and what Keating calls her “transformational aesthetics.” Language serves as “a linchpin of sorts,” where “language, the physical world, the imaginal, and nonordinary realities are all intimately interwoven, words and images matter and *are* matter; they can have casual, material(izing) force.” Keating goes on to describe an "Anzaldúan aesthetics [that] enables writers and other artists to enact, materialize, and in other ways concretize transformation. … writing is ontological—intimately connected with physical and nonphysical beings, with ordinary and nonordinary realities."[30] This has long been a stance within many contemplative and religious traditions. For instance, *lectio divina*, a Christian practice of spiritual reading developed in the monastic tradition, assumes God's presence can be experienced in a transformative way through contemplative readings of scripture. Many contemplative traditions recommend readings of the words of their own sages—specifically because such words are embedded with efficacious, transformational affects. Contemplative reading speaks to how language can be impregnated with affective energies, which can then produce transformative effects in the receptive reader, especially one who has been prepared thru contemplative practice.

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[28] Anzaldúa, *Light*, 65-94.

[29] Keating, “Editor’s Introduction,” xxix.

As I explore Anzaldúa's chapter, the above is important to keep in mind. Given Anzaldúa's emphasis on "intentional, ritualized performance of specific, carefully selected words [which have] the potential to *shift* reality," I both direct readers to her primary work (especially *Light in the Dark / Luz en lo Oscuro*), and quote extensively from it below. For Anzaldúa these concepts are not just concepts, but proceed from and *embody* a multi-dimensional reality that is, for her, a locus of decolonial praxis. Attempts to encompass Anzaldúa within a hard constructivism or analyses of power—even when Anzaldúa makes extensive use of the latter in its modes of resistance to socio-political structures and systems of oppression—seeps affective power from her discourse, a transformative power she so hoped it might carry. It is also to domesticate her thought. Anzaldúa herself expressed unhappiness with how her work was received, both popularly and on a scholarly level. She felt that scholarly reception to her work downplayed or simply ignored the spiritual and indigenous perspectives at the heart of her labor, domesticating it in order to fit into materialist frameworks and/or more oppositional thought. She also felt that too often her challenges to the status quos of many discourses went unheeded.[31]

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[30] Ibid., xxxi, xxxii.

In her chapter on "Geographies of Selves," Anzaldúa speaks from the perspective of one whose body has been gendered and racialized in a U.S. society where certain behavior from men and women is expected, as well as "certain comportment from queer mujeres, certain demeanor from queer hombres, certain conduct from disabled, and so on." For people of color, these expectations take on intersectional nuances, "due to the traumas of racism and colonialism." This is the context for Anzaldúa's work, and her motivation is that "together we can alter cultural beliefs, behaviors, attitudes about their meaning."[32] For Anzaldúa, none of the identity categories—Chicana, queer, feminist, lesbian, writer, artist, activist—are enough to encompass her. She feels closed in by these binary categories, even as she chooses some as identity labels. They "limit the growth of our individual and collective lives," and we are in need of "fresh terms and open-ended tags that portray us in all our complexities and potentialities."[33]

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[31] See Keating, *Transformation Now*, especially the introduction and first chapter, 1-59. One way Anzaldúa challenged status quos was towards greater inclusion and less oppositional praxis. Keating talks about how "Anzaldúa proposed nepantleras' connectionist thinking as an alternative to the oppositional thought we generally employ" (Ibid., 17). Keating believes scholars in particular tend to focus on Anzaldúa's mid-career, where she "can function as a spokesperson for Chicana, Lesbian, and Chicana Lesbian identities," utilizing her work in "ways that unintentionally preserve the status quo." At the same time, "they rarely examine Anzaldúa's more inclusionary early and late work—her radical challenges to social identities and her visionary calls for planetary citizenship" (Ibid., 24). On the importance of spiritual and indigenous realities to Anzaldúa's thought, and scholarly tendencies to dismiss them, see Keating, "Editor's Introduction."

[32] Anzaldúa, *Light*, 65, 66.

To where does she turn in search of resources? A la Thurman, Anzaldúa turns to a tree she befriended in childhood, "el mesquite:"

> When I think of "moving" from a sexed, racialized body to a more expansive identity interconnected with its surroundings, I see in my mind's eye trees with interconnected roots (subterranean webs). When I was a child I felt a kinship to a large mesquite.
>
> *El mesquite and its gnarled limbs reign over the portal, the house, and the yard. Its fifty- or sixty-feet-deep roots tap the same underground water source as the windmill. When she [Prieta] stays still long enough her feet worm themselves like roots into the moist core, forming an umbilicus that connects her to el cenote, la noria interior, and to the earth and all its creatures.—"El Paisano is a Bird of Good Omen"*[34]

Similar to Thurman, nature was a space—an experience—that was healing, ameliorating, and sacred for her: "Nature is my solace; it allows my imagination to stir. Sea, wind, trees evoke images, feelings, thoughts that I acknowledge as sacred." Sometimes, if one is receptive enough, "a new conocimiento/insight will flash up through the cracks of the unconscious," forming part of a new narrative that "works itself through my physical, emotional, and spiritual bodies, which emerge out of and are filtered through the natural, spiritual worlds around me."[35]

The context of a raced and gendered body immersed not only within a dominating cultural milieu, but also within a multi-dimensional cosmos filled with spiritual bodies and energies, is key to understanding the decolonial praxis that Anzaldúa performs. These spiritual energies emanate in and through nature, as well as imaginal dimensions of human consciousness, and her concepts of *nos/otras* and *las nepantleras* cannot be understood without reference to them. Pertinently, Anzaldúa directly associates these liminal concepts with scholarly praxis: "Like immigrants, those in the academy find themselves constantly trafficking in different and often contradictory class and cultural locations; they find themselves in the cracks between the world."[36]

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[33] Ibid., 66.

[34] Ibid., emphasis original.

[35] Ibid.

Anzaldúa situates herself both as an insider to certain discourses—mainly around Chicana, queer, feminist, and intersectional struggles that affect people of color—and as espousing principles (such as ontology, liminal spaces, and spiritual realities) that are equally applicable to those of all social identities and colors. This complex interplay is not easy to tease out. While she often writes ostensibly within an insider discourse, she is also quite clearly writing for peoples of all identities and colors. For example, the implications seem clear when she says, "we must unchain identity from meanings that can no longer contain it; we must move beyond externalized forms of social identity and location such as family, race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, nationality." Again, in the passage just prior to this, one finds the following: "Constant trafficking, negotiating, and dialoging across boundaries results in a profound new mestizaje, one that transgresses the biological and encompasses cultural mixtures. This new mestizaje eschews the racial hierarchies inherent in older mestizaje. We do not allow ourselves to shelter in simplistic colonialist notions of racial difference, exclusionary boundaries, and binaries (such as other-insider)."[37]

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[36] Ibid., 71.

Anzaldúa speaks to the particularities of certain oppressions in communities of color, utilizing an insider discourse among those immersed in such oppressions. Yet, at the same time, implications that apply to all peoples, regardless of race, creed, gender, and sexuality come to the fore. This type of tension rides throughout Anzaldúa's work, and my guess is that it is a conscious one. It feels important to mention here, both as a strong dynamic in her concepts of *nos/otras* and *las nepantleras,* as seen below, and as an acknowledgement of the contexts I myself bring to bear in my dialogue with Anzaldúa's work. These contexts include being categorized as a member of the dominant culture (white, male, straight). There is little doubt that those involved today in decolonial labor have to navigate complex questions of social location and privilege. For Anzaldúa, there can be no escape from this, as such is the liminal conditions in which new culture can be born. It is also, one might add, part of the *liminality* of democratic praxis. Yet, as Anzaldúa says, it is "because we are forced to deal with interracial conflicts and negotiate our numerous and varied social positions in the cracks between realities/mundos, [that] we may access experiences and abilities that can catapult us into creating innovative, inclusive identities."[38]

Nos/Otras emerges within such contexts, which is to say conflicts of identities. Anzaldúa introduces the concept explicitly within dynamics of "wounding" that go on in

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[37] Ibid., 73.

[38] Ibid., 74.

"the academy." This wounding is particularly pronounced for "people of color and other outsiders," who are already traumatized by the larger societal dynamics at play, yet it is also a wounding enacted amongst and within marginalized groups. We (academics) "may feel threatened by those who possess a different viewpoint or different kinds of knowledge/conocimiento. Fear and ignorance (desconocimientos) of the other—those who come from a different race or class; have a different skin color or gender; dress, speak, or are 'abled' differently—may be the source of our problems." When others do not react as we expect them to, we lash out, often in attempts to protect our own identities. We must learn to hold our identities lightly, Anzaldúa admonishes, in order to "dismantle the identity markers that promote divisions. … Intimate listening is more productive than detached self-interest, winning arguments, or sticking to pet theories."[39] For we are all "mutually complicitous—us and them, nosotras y los otros, white and colored, straight and queer, Christian and Jew, self and Other, oppressor and oppressed."[40]

Nos means "us" in Spanish, while *otras* means "others" and *nosotras* means "we." Anzaldúa utilizes the slash, nos/otras, "us/them," to theorize her practices of identity narration and modes of transformative, democratic coalition building. The slash represents the cracks between identities, cracks between cultural worlds—indigenous, Mexican, queer, lesbian, feminist, American, scholar, artist, spiritual activist. The cracking, "la rajadura," allows for a perspective to arise from the cracks themselves, a liminal space from which Anzaldúa first theorized her space of nepantla as "a way to reconfigure ourselves as subjects outside binary oppositions, outside existing dominant relations." As an

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[39] Ibid., 77-78.

[40] Ibid., 79.

> identity born of negotiating the cracks between worlds, nos/otras accommodate contradictory identities and social positions, creating a hybrid consciousness that transcends us versus them mentality of irreconcilable positions, blurring the boundary between us and others. We are both subject and object, self and other, haves and have-nots, conqueror and conquered, oppressor and oppressed. Proximity and intimacy can close the gap between us and them.[41]

The concept of nos/otras remains allied with various feminist and other discourse around relationality and fluidity of identity, as well as intersectional discourse among womanists and other peoples of color. However, I find Anzaldúa's concept of *nos/otras,* as well as *las nepantleras* below, to be quite pertinent to white identity as well. Much discourse today works to situate white people *into* specific identities as "white" (or other identity categories), complicating their too easy positioning within dominant culture. Doing so brings attention to the ways in which uncritically assumed identities give support to the smooth functioning of a dominant culture that marginalizes non-normative identity formations. A question arises here however: How should one hold the labeling of such binary identities, either for oneself or others, given Anzaldúa's constant refrains of overcoming binary identities? (and specifically naming, though sporadically, white, straight, and masculinity as part of the binary identities to be let go of)

It seems clear that Anzaldúa's suggestions for moving outside of binary identities also has meaning for those who inhabit identities privileged by the dominant culture. If one inhabits an identity that is never confronted or questioned—either by the dominant culture, or by others looking to disrupt dominant culture through decolonial praxis—one might avoid the "cracking" that leads into liminal identity configurations, as well as new culturally creative spaces. One might fail to participate in nos/otras. Working with our identities is a way of bringing into awareness the interior wounding that is present and happening in any and all identity formations that keep us from "proximity and intimacy" with one another. It is a way of undermining power dynamics so as to give rise to these feelings of woundedness—feelings of inferiority that are always already lurking just below the visage of any tightly held identity, consciously or unconsciously—so that we might begin to live into the liminal spaces the cracks disclose.

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[41] Ibid., 79.

Thurman's decolonial prescriptions above can also be applied to white identity. If one were to discover an identity at the "root of one's being," for example, an identity that is affirmed beyond all cultural structures and conditionings, and yet this same self is somehow a part of everyone else—and everything—then a basis for self-worth could never be sought after through holding others as inferior. Nor could one exploit nonhuman life as inherently other from oneself.

Anzaldúa's nos/otras, similar to Thurman's decolonial praxis, presents difficult issues for hard constructivist ontologies. Her syncretistic ontology speaks of multi-dimensional spiritual realities, which partake of inspiration and knowledge from ancestral indigenous traditions (especially Toltec and Náhuatl traditions). Anzaldúa also utilizes insights from other religious and contemplative traditions. She recruit's Buddhist ontology, for instance, in arguing for a "primal distinction between self and other [that] is illusory because the existence of the self is, itself, an illusion." Thus

> There are no “otras”—we all emerge from humanity’s basic shared, communal ground, an emotional-spiritual ground of being. Nos/otras (as the slash becomes increasingly permeable) puede ser el nuevo nombre de seres que escapan de jaulas.[42] The task of remaking our selves and our cultures is in our own hands; the task of las nepantleras is to point the way.[43]

Nos/otras is a theory of relational identity formation that emerges from the cracks of Anzaldúa’s embodied, complex, and marginalized identities. Ultimately, nos/otras orients one towards spiritual realities in the liminal, ontological spaces of nepantla. The cracks in identities, *las rajaduras*, “give us a nepantla perspective, a view from the cracks, rather than from any single culture or ideology.”[44]

Las nepantleras, a term briefly introduced in the previous chapter, refers to those who choose to live more or less permanently in the liminal spaces of these cracks. In doing so, las nepantleras might serve as bridge-builders and spiritual guides for others. They live betwixt and between cultural worlds and spiritual realities, risking a life that never feels at home in any particular identity space or ideology or culture: “Dwelling in liminalities, in-between states or nepantlas, las nepantleras cannot be forced to stay in one place, locked into one perspective or perception of things or one picture of reality.” In so doing they “construct alternative roads, creating new topographies and geographies of hybrid selves who transcend binaries and de-polarize potential allies. Las nepantleras are not constrained by one culture or world but experience multiple realities."[45] They live "on the slash between 'us' and 'others'":

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[42] My translation: “Nos/otras (as the slash becomes increasingly permeable) can be the new name of those who escape from the cages [of binary identity formations].”

[43] Ibid., 81.

[44] Ibid., 82.

> They trouble the nos/otras division, questioning the subject's privilege, confronting our own personal desconocimientos, and challenging the other's marginalized status. Las nepantleras recognize that we're all complicit in the existing power structures, that we must deal with conflictive as well as connectionist relations within and among various groups. Ensuring that our acts not mirror or replicate the oppression and dominant power structures we seek to dismantle, las nepantleras upset our cultures' foundations and disturb the concepts structuring their realities. Las nepantleras nurture psychological, social, and spiritual metamorphosis.[46]

The "spiritual metamorphosis" that Anzaldúa describes is key to her difficult prescription that "our acts not mirror or replicate the oppression and dominant power structures we seek to dismantle." Anzaldúa often brings awareness to ways in which status quos of current discourse fail this task, and ways in which those attempting decolonial praxis can reproduce structures of oppression—reifying identities, promoting divisions, and/or cutting ourselves off from potential allies.[47] We reproduce structures of oppression mainly because of the wounding we all carry, wounding enacted upon us from the dominant culture as well as from others. This is why healing is so important to Anzaldúa's decolonial praxis. Anzaldúa defines healing "as taking back the scattered energy and soul loss wrought by woundings," an orientation that parallels indigenous spiritual teachings.[48] When one chooses to go through this healing process, and then to remain and work in and from liminal spaces, one becomes a nepantlera.

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid., 82-83.

[47] See Ibid., 76.

[48] Ibid., 89.

Being a nepantlera is also a *political vocation.* It is very much about our shared life together. Transqueer, nonbinary, activist theologian Robyn Henderson-Espinoza writes that:

> So much of the work of Chicana Feminism, Decolonial Feminisms, and the work of Gloria Anzaldúa used symbols, religious, cultural, and spiritual symbols to accelerate their work. Often, the symbols they used helped to fortify and accelerate a commitment to embodied resilience. And, spirituality for these theorists was a deep commitment to the ways that spirituality is a technology of resilience, and because spirituality is a technology of resilience it is deeply political.[49]

In "Our Collective Becoming: Politicizing Spirituality," Henderson-Espinoza speaks of contemplative practice and spiritual healing as a political act of resistance—one that not only resists, but also leads to a "coalition politics" of "collective becoming." Instead of depoliticizing spirituality, Henderson-Espinoza looks to "politicize spirituality in ways that help us practice emergence, generativity, and liberatory models of belonging." Transformation and healing become profound political acts, technologies of "embodied resilience," and folds of "collective liberation."[50]

As seen in the previous chapter, nepantleras dwell in liminalities, where one's identity cannot be circumscribed by cultural, religious, ethnic, or racial identities. The stability of one's identity becomes predicated on "liminality and fluidity." Working between cultural and spiritual realities, a nepantlera becomes a "spiritual activist engaged in the struggle for social, economic, and political justice, while working on spiritual transformations of selfhood."[51] Calling attention to these spiritual dimensions of Anzaldúa's work is essential for taking her decolonial praxis seriously.

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[49] Henderson-Espinoza, "Our Collective Becoming: Politicizing Spirituality."

[50] Ibid.

Anzaldúa calls las nepantleras "agents of awakening" and "spiritual activists," who must "*choose* to occupy intermediary spaces between worlds, *choose* to move between worlds like the ancient chamanas who *choose* to build bridges between worlds, *choose* to speak from the cracks between the worlds, from las rendijas (rents)."[52] Las nepantleras are those whose acts of healing are part of their political labor, and whose spiritually transformative 'ways' of walking in the world constitute political acts of decolonial praxis.

Similar to Thurman above, Anzaldúa's philosophy can be characterized, in Hadot's sense, as "philosophy as a way of life." That is, her philosophy itself is meant as a transformative discourse that affects all aspects of one's life. Philosophizing also means adopting particular practices, what Hadot called "spiritual exercises." Philosophy may thus orient one towards spiritually efficacious transformations of embodied consciousness. For Anzaldua, the contemplative aspects of her philosophy remain attached to our embodied context and wounded identities. Las nepantleras "develop esta facultad, a realm of consciousness reached only from an 'attached' mode (rather than a distant, separate, unattached, mode), enabling us to weave a kinship entre todas las gentes y cosas." One strives to affect a healing of their wounds and to stabilize themselves in fluid, liminal perspectives that allow one to hold identities lightly, but be responsible for such identities nonetheless, for they are also a part of one. After embodying such a state, one may labor as a nepantlera, bridging cultural and spiritual worlds for others. This requires a "seeing through" our cultural conditioning, into "the meaning of deeper realities," and then modeling the "transitions our cultures will go through…preparing them for solutions to conflicts and the healing of wounds."[53]

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[51] Anzaldúa, *Light*, 82, 83.

[52] Ibid., 93.

Anzaldúa's work could also reasonably be described as *contemplative discourse directed towards academia in the name of decolonial praxis.* The following brings this point home:

> How do those of us laboring in the complex environments of an academy indifferent and even hostile to spirit make our professional work into a form of spiritual practice? By joining intellectual work with spiritual work into a spiritual activism. We must build a practice of contemplation into the daily routines of academic and professional life. Contemplation allows us to process and sort out anger and frustration; it gives us time for the self, time to allow compassion to surface. La compasión es una conversación sostenida.[54]

Translating the final sentence, "Compassion is a conversation sustained," in many ways captures succinctly the long running argument of this entire project. In order to sustain a conversation, in order to embody compassion, one must allow a diversity of cultural orientations, religious orientations, ontological orientations, and ethical perspectives to be present within the conversation itself. An exploration of sustaining such conversations, as academic communities of inquiry, is the focus of the final two chapters.

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[53] Ibid., 83.

[54] Ibid., 92.

The epigraph from Anzaldúa in this chapter describes decolonial praxis (in contemplative keys) as involving processes of "unlearning identity labels" and "unlearning consensual 'reality'" through acts of "non-doing." One allows the identities that have formed and reformed one to come apart, to lose their hold over us, and to adopt forms of non-harming that undermine such identities, refusing to reify them. There is a sense of *consenting* to the process itself, a receptive process of "non-doing." In that process, spiritual openings emerge in the cracks between identities. If we can learn to sustain the liminality of such openings, and perhaps be guided by others who have successfully explored such liminalities, then ameliorating spiritual energies can arise through multi-dimensional cosmic realities. The spiritual fecundity of nepantla enacts healing within us (and hence healing outside us). A new identity may be formed, even if it might be a fluid, liminal, or even an "empty" one.

The epigraph is actually taken from an alternate outline of Anzaldúa's chapter discussed above, "Geographies of Selves," which Keating provided as an appendix to *Light in the Dark.* Even in her writing, Anzaldúa maintained a liminal space, always experimenting with alternate ways of enacting the spiritual ideals and decolonial praxis she aimed to inhabit.[55] The very last section of the alternate outline is titled "Decolonizing Identity," and consists mainly of the epigraph above. It ends, however, with echoes of Thurman's concentration on the individuality of each person, and the unique gifts they have to offer the world through their own liminal identity configurations. Once again, in the particular are found lessons for all. Thus, it seems a fitting end to this chapter, and its highlighting of alternative and unique forms of decolonial praxis in contemplative keys: “*The myth of our lives struggles to be heard. Each of us has a story within us; we can speak it through the various disguises and voices of our different personas.”*[56]

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[55] See Keating, "Editor's Introduction."

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[56] Anzaldúa, *Light*, 189, emphasis mine.

CHAPTER SIX

VISTA OF A SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONER: PHILOSOPHY, THE RELIGIOUS, AND CONTEMPLATIVE DISCOURSE

The essential element [of philosophical life] is in fact, one could say, non-discursive, insofar as it represents a choice of life, a wish to live in such and such a way, with all the concrete consequences that that implies in everyday life.

—Pierre Hadot, “La philosophie antique: une éthique ou une pratique?”[1]

[I]ndigenous communities had intensely spiritual lives… But they had no religion. … Rather, [elders] will argue, their whole cultural and social structure was and still is infused with a spirituality that cannot be separated from the rest of the community’s life at any point.

—Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, & George Tinker, *A Native American Theology*[2]

Having offered examples of contemplative philosophies for decolonial praxis in the previous chapter, I now turn to some of the implications of this project as a whole, both in this chapter and the final one to follow. With the examples of Thurman and Anzaldúa in hand, the table has now been set for such an exploration. Rather than recounting my narrative in the concluding chapter, I prefer to begin the process of summing up here, leaving these last two chapters for a constructive engagement that emerges organically from arguments seen thus far—something of a meal now that the table has been set. As we survey the table, our settings include the following (forgive the outline format):

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[1] As quoted by Arnold I. Davidson, “Introduction,” 27.

[2] Kidwell, Noley, and Tinker, *A Native American Theology,* 12.

Setting the Table: A Recap

- A redefining of the secular in terms of contemporary cultural conditions, with particular attention to conditions of religious, ethnic, cultural, and racial diversity within democratic settings—as opposed to notions of the secular that connote impositions of reductive ontologies, such as a hard constructivism (Ch 1)
- Academia as a locus of professional thinking and education within vibrantly diverse democracies, and as to some degree responsible for an inculcation of democratic praxis within society (Ch 1)
- Atmospherics of democratic praxis, with currents of *imagination*, *empathy*, *hope, failure* and *funk*. In other words, atmospherics emerging from the "rugged, often blood-stained hope, hope fiercely breaking out of the dark-womb beauty…of struggles for the creative transformation of 'ordinary' women, men, and children"[3] (Ch 4)
- Such atmospherics spoke to the *liminality of democracy*, a place from which emergent cultural conditions might be born through an "interweaving" of multifarious "hearts and minds." The liminality of democracy was marked by affective textures of particularity, equality, nonviolence, and decolonial praxis—as well as undergirdings of a religio-spiritual nature—accessing an oneiric acumen for democratic becoming (Ch 4)
- The liminality of democracy also embraced multiplicitous currents of democratic and decolonial praxis, and brought attention to ways in which collaborative community amidst radical difference might be enacted. Key to such enaction is an ability to be in intimate dialogue across critical difference, a dream of the idea(l) of democracy itself (Ch 4, 5, passim)
- An investigation into the ways in which an anachronistic religion/secular binary inhibits democratic praxis, including:
    - A religion/secular binary as a product of the West's unique historical trajectory, particularly as entangled with past Christian authority structures that were hegemonic throughout much Western history—and as a concept central to the modern imaginary (Ch 1, 2, 3)
    - A concomitant analysis of how this trajectory—with Christian, White, Western, and secularist superiority complexes—plays a strong role in academic disciplinary formations, particularly in the disciplines of theology, religious studies, and philosophy, the latter seen more clearly below (Ch 2, 3)

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[3] Harding, Is American Possible, viii.

  - Extended analyses of ways in which an anachronistic religion/secular binary continues to be upheld in academia, particularly around the study of religion. This included techniques such as *rhetoric of the secular*, as well as *essentializing non-sequiturs* (often seen in analyses of power). These techniques rely upon a definition of the secular as reductive ontologies, mainly in the guise of a hard constructivism. Such techniques were seen to enact a "repetition of the colonial event" in scholarly praxis, prizing objectification over transformative encounters, or a "return of the imperial as the empirical," in the words of Arvind Mandair. I dubbed the attempt to make reductive ontologies hegemonic for scholarly praxis a *secularist gaze* (Ch 2, 3)

- A difference between big "T" Theology and little t" *theology* (via William Hart). Big "T" Theology denotes confessional, dogmatic, church-based enterprises, while little "t" *theology* is a philosophically based, academic form of scholarly praxis that embraces open, fallible, revisable forms of inquiry. The latter is more akin to philosophy that operates outside of reductive secularist ontologies—and thus is eminently appropriate for a secular academy—while the former's proper place remains in divinity schools or seminaries (Ch 3)

- The importance of changing dynamics of religious and spiritual practice in the West, especially in the U.S. This includes a growing *dêmos* that classifies itself in multifarious religious and syncretic ways, with White Christianity on the decline, other religious traditions on the rise, and increasing self-identifications that actively subvert a religion/secular binary, such as "multiple-religious belongers," "interspiritual," "nones," and "spiritual but not religious." Lying on the table is also the growing *political* significance of speaking to, and for, multifarious ways of being religious, especially for the future of the Democratic party in the U.S. (Ch 3)

- The reality that many students are looking for ways to explore a deeper significance to their lives around religio-spiritual and socio-political praxis. As traditional religious structures decline, traditional religious institutions are increasingly unable to provide such guidance. Many students look to academic classes to help with such needs, especially in religious studies classrooms (Ch 3)

- A rebuttal of critiques against contemporary religio-spiritual experimentation as fundamentally consumeristic or self-centered (Ch 3)

- Disciplines such as comparative theology helped provide theoretical and ethical resources for theorizing amongst difference. Comparative theology was also seen as a methodology that can at times help shepherd formations of religio-spiritual identities for students (as Stephanie Corigliano suggested). This was in contrast to some of the originary models for the discipline, such as necessitating embeddedness in particular religious identities or traditions. It was argued that today, multifarious orientations towards religion and spirituality can proceed side-by-side with one another, within shared communities of inquiry (Ch 3)

- A recontextualization of secularist orientations, such as a hard constructivism or scientific materialism, as also *religious* orientations, in the sense of orientations towards the nature of reality, or "ontological orientations." This work continues in these final chapters, especially below with John Thatamanil's definition of the religious as "comprehensive qualitative orientation" (Ch 1, 2, 3)
- Two examples of decolonial praxis in contemplative keys. Howard Thurman and Gloria Anzaldúa revealed how spiritually transformative practices can lie at the core of decolonial praxis (for some), and served as exemplars of many of the running arguments seen above. I argued that Thurman and Anzaldúa should clearly be considered worthy of the moniker 'scholarly praxis' in democratic, decolonial settings. Their liminal, religio-spiritual orientations towards democratic becoming and decolonial praxis challenge normative stances of a secular academy. The scholarly praxis of Anzaldúa and Thurman cannot be easily categorized as either theology, philosophy, religious studies, cultural or critical theory, but rather as something "in-between" these disciplines, in the liminal spaces among them (Ch 5)
- A delineation between 'religion' and the 'religious,' which has been played up throughout and comes into greater clarity below. 'Religion' refers to the Western construction of the term, predicated upon the model of Christianity, in particular connoting bounded, non-porous containers centered around assentation to dogma. Religion in this sense has been haphazardly applied to other experiments in human *religious*-ness, as terms such as 'Hinduism' or 'Confucianism' imply. The projection of a particular version of Christianity onto other human religiosities was seen to have colonial consequences, originally engaged in with explicit notions of Christian, White, and Western superiority. The *religious,* on the other hand, refers capaciously to human experiments in religiosity. For example, much of the religio-spiritual experimentation discussed in chapter three, such as "interspiritual orientations," could certainly be considered of a religious nature, but may not accurately be described as practices of a 'religion.' Eastern and Indigenous religiosities may have a difficult time fitting into categories of 'religion' (as seen, for instance, in the second epigraph above), yet they are certainly participating in experiments of human religious-ness. John Thatamanil's definition of the religious below offers a more direct engagement with this term than the more amorphous way it has been utilized thus far (Introduction, passim)
- A running theme throughout has been one of *liminality*. Those spiritually efficacious, *nepantla*-like spaces of the "in-between," in which empathic, imaginal, and entangled

difference subsists (as in atmospherics of democratic praxis). It was argued that within liminal spaces might be found *resonances* in felt-registers of being. These affective, atmospheric resonances took various forms, from "affinities of spirituality," to imaginal democratic dreams, to the reality of religious referents. Such liminality was also discovered in an apophatic absence at the center of democracy—as well as in an orientation to religious studies itself (Ch 3, 4, 5)

- One final 'table setting,' the dream or idea(l) of democracy as holding promise for dialogical communities amongst real difference is perhaps more like the table cloth than a particular setting. Pull it from underneath and everything else crashes down. I have translated such dreams into academic discourse by emphasizing the need for multiplicities of ontological orientations to serve as normative bases for scholarly praxis, particularly in secular settings, as a matter of both democratic and decolonial praxis (passim)

With the table now set, I explore in this chapter a certain type of liminal space in academia that can speak directly to issues outlined above. Such a liminal space lies in the intersecting horizons of theology, religious studies, and philosophy, where untapped resources for democratic and decolonial praxis are discovered. This is the home of the scholar-practitioner, who lives on the slash of a religion/secular binary. The scholar-practitioner may or may not have a 'religion' identity, even if they most often have a religious one. A scholar-practitioner also recognizes that today one's religious, spiritual, and scholarly journeys take place amongst diversity, amongst difference. In a public academic setting, the scholar-practitioner can utilize their embodied expertise to create environments of dialogue and learning, challenging students to develop their own 'ways,' and to embrace their lives with a certain fullness of spirit. A fullness of spirit that aligns itself in service to others and to one's communit*ies*—local, national, global, and cosmic—is surely also democratic praxis. The scholar-practitioner provides a model for molding one's character and action with one's reflective intellect, and lives "philosophy as a way of life.” As the examples of Thurman and Anzaldúa reveal, a scholar-practitioner does not necessarily separate their scholarly work from their spiritual praxis, yet nevertheless *chooses* to function within diverse communities of inquiry, at least in academia, and thus labors in respectful and intimate engagement with difference.

This chapter, in tandem with the following, represent an exploration (liminal as it may be) of resources to envision the possibility of emergent academic disciplinary formations that are perhaps more appropriate for our *saeculum*. These disciplinary formations would not subsist upon an anachronistic religion/secular binary, but rather would embrace a liminality of democracy, potentially embodying multifarious ways of knowing and being-in-the-world.

One might recall that I began this project with an overview of an essay by Robert Ford Campany in the introduction (‘the straw that broke a camel’s back’). Campany’s essay looked at possible translations of ‘religion’ into medieval China, highlighting problems with interpreting human religiosity within purely Westernized (and Christian) constructions of the term. Since then, I have been utilizing ‘ways’ (written with single quotes) as a loose translation of the Chinese *daos*, which we recollect can be translated as “paths” or “ways.” Importantly, a religious way does not necessarily imply boundedness in a container, nor necessarily a collective identity. These are possibilities, but are not definitive of religious ways (as they arguably have been in traditional Western understandings of religion). One may walk with others along a way, however there is always a kind of individuation in my use of the term. Each of us walks our own ways in the world, and the walking of a way represents something of a singularity within the time being. At the same time, as process thought, feminist thought, and many religious referents attune us to, these ways are simultaneously ‘always already’ relational.

While a religious way does not necessarily overlap with religion (though it might), it does overlap with ‘philosophy as a way of life,’ at least when seriously undertaken. Hence, I begin below with an exploration of philosophy as a way of life, amongst the in-between spaces of theology, philosophy, and religious studies. These delineations will once again be seen to partake in problematic colonial formations. What to do with such disciplinary formations, however, in light of decolonial praxis is not so clear—leaving one in the twilight, we might say, of a liminal space. Building upon such a trajectory, I then turn to John Thatamanil’s innovative definition of the *religious* as “comprehensive qualitative orientation.” Thatamanil’s sense of the religious only further complicates the divisions between theology, religious studies, and philosophy. In addition, Thatamanil’s definition provides an illuminating exposition as to why secular orientations also function as religious ways.

Following upon this sense of the religious, I come more clearly into the constructive aspect of the project. I put forward an understanding of ‘contemplative experience,’ as well as a need for experience to reclaim a prominent place at the table of scholarly praxis. This sets up a penultimate section wherein I discuss religion from an indigenous as well as a Whiteheadian process perspective, as “ways of living” leading to embodied wisdoms. Finally, I aim to ‘call-in’ a contemplative discourse *across* academia. That is, a *discourse,* rather than a discipline—one that might range across academia—much like other discourses (e.g., critical theory, deconstruction, analyses of power, sociological analysis, etc.). In the following chapter, I come closer to articulating something like a discipline—even if it too remains liminal—as a "beloved community of religious diversity."

(Not So) Strange Bedfellows: Philosophy, Religious Studies, and theology

In the previous chapter, I referenced how Thurman's and Anzaldúa's scholarly praxis functioned as a form of philosophy as a way of life, as well as an aspect of their democratic and decolonial praxis (in contemplative keys). Their academic labor became a type of spiritual praxis. The term, "philosophy as a way of life," comes from Pierre Hadot's work on ancient philosophy.[4] Hadot reveals how ancient philosophy functioned more as a type of contemplative discourse than what we think of today as "philosophy." As a historian of ancient philosophy, Hadot showed that common assumptions across academia that ancient philosophers were attempting something akin to modern philosophers—e.g., using discourse to construct a systematic understanding around an object of interest—were false.[5] Rather, ancient philosophical discourse was but one aspect within a larger methodology of *philo-sophia*, a "love of wisdom," the goal of which was transformation. As Hadot put it,

> During this period, philosophy was a *way of life.* This is not only to say that it was a specific type of moral conduct. … Rather, it means that philosophy was a mode of existing-in-the-world, which had to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual's life.[6]

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[4] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*.

[5] Davidson, "Introduction," 19.

[6] Hadot, *Philosophy,* 265.

The transformation of the philosopher involved a deep-seated change in one’s being-ness, in order to live in harmony with the nature of the cosmos. Hadot describes this philosophy variously as “a method of spiritual progress,” or as “the necessity of pursuing spiritual progress,” or as “an invitation to each human being to transform [themselves]. Philosophy is a conversion, a transformation of one’s being and living, and a quest for wisdom.”[7]

Thus, ancient philosophy consisted of not only of an orientation towards the nature of reality, but also practices that had to be performed on a daily basis, often with trusted teachers and communities of practitioners. All of these were aspects of a philosophical life, meant to bring about an ontologically significant transformation. Philosophical discourse was but one of these practices, and not meant to stand on its own as a systematic construction. For example, Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* is not meant to be a systematic philosophical construction or even personal reflections meant for publication, but rather is a practice of *hypomnemata,* enactive “reminders,” or a kind of affective notekeeping—daily notes written to oneself as a disciplined spiritual exercise.[8] Aurelius was performing a spiritual praxis meant to discipline his thoughts and ultimately align himself, in an embodied, habitual way, towards harmony with the underlying nature of the cosmos. It is because we are witnessing Aurelius engage in what are private spiritual practices, meant to invoke an ontological transformation in the deepest recesses of his being, that Hadot believes his writings have exerted such a "fascinating power…over generations of readers."[9]

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[7] Ibid., 265, 275.

[8] Ibid., 179-202.

Philosophical discourse in this sense is engaged in as spiritual praxis, a contemplative discourse aiming to orient practitioners towards soteriological-inflected transformations.[10] This is what is meant by philosophy as a way of life. Hence, with its strong spiritual resonances, it may be argued that ancient Greek philosophy functioned much more like many Eastern, African, and Indigenous forms of philosophical discourse than Western philosophy after the rise of Christianity. In the West, the institution of Christendom led to the separation of theology from philosophy.[11] Along this trajectory soteriological concerns had to be ceded to big "T" Theology, while philosophy could only pursue its agenda as a (patriarchally disparaged) "handmaiden to theology." Eventually philosophy could be considered a legitimate discourse on its own, but only at the cost of ceding soteriological concerns to the Church, and then staying more or less within the confines of an ontologically reductive understanding of reality.[12] This is how most contemporary Western philosophy still functions today, more or less directly along the lines of a religion/secular binary. In fact, in this initial separation between theology and philosophy, one finds the inceptive catalyst for a religion/secular binary.

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[9] Ibid., 201.

[10] I use "soteriological" here in a more liminal sense, inclusive of religious realities such as *bodhi* ("awakening") or *moksha* ("liberation"), while noting the Christian nature of the term.

[11] Hadot also shows how spiritual practices of ancient philosophy became subsumed within Christianity, mostly within the contemplative monastic tradition. See Hadot, *Philosophy*, 126-144.

[12] See also Bin Song, "Comparative Theology," discussed in the following chapter.

The fact that Greek philosophy functioned more like what we would today call a *religious* tradition complicates too easy attempts to trace Euro-Western civilization back to Greece. Given that the pinnacle of ancient civilization, philosophy proper, arguably reflects Eastern, African, and Indigenous cultural modes more than later European ones, one might want to reassess claims of the "Greek lineage" within Western civilization. In the following chapter, for example, Bin Song's pre-Christian reading of Aristotle shows that a Ru (Confucian) orientation resembles closely Aristotle's notion of a "liberal arts education," more than it does contemporary categories of religion. As we saw in the introduction, John Thatamanil has suggested that "[p]erhaps it is safer to think of pagan wisdom traditions as narrowly philosophical rather than as religious because their reception into Christian traditions need not then be recognized as itself a kind of religious hybridization."[13] It is this inchoate delineation—between religion and *philo-sophia*, spurred by the consummation of early Christianity to imperial power following Constantine—that grows over time into a religion/secular binary.

Hadot's work on ancient philosophy thus brings up a pertinent point. Why, for instance, do we consider the writings of Stoics, Epicureans, Plato, or Aristotle as philosophy, and *not* as religion? After all, the ways in which ancient philosophy was practiced are, as Bin Song writes of Aristotle, "comparable to visions of human life shaped by spiritual exercises in many religious traditions."[14] From a decolonial perspective, I'm not sure there is a real difference here. This can be seen when one recognizes that at least some of what we (the West) denote as “religion” in other parts of the world—such as Confucian-“ism”—may actually resonate structurally more with ancient philosophy than with contemporary concepts of religion. Hadot’s articulation of philosophy as a way of life arguably resonates more strongly with many Eastern and Indigenous traditions than does the idea of bounded, non-porous, religions predicated on declarations of faith statements, or on assentation to religious authorities.

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[13] Thatamanil, *Circling*, 26.

[14] Song, 101.

For example, Robert Neville has pointed out that for Confucians, Buddhists, Daoists, and many forms of Hindu religiosity, depth and virtuosity of practice is more important than membership in a particular religion. In other words, “it is less important what official religion one belongs to than it is whether one’s practice is deep enough to bring freedom, release, harmony, and spiritual achievement.”[15] Robert Campany, as we saw in the introduction, described how in medieval China, “people’s relation to *daos* is not one of passive containment, membership, or sheer belonging. People seek, travel, follow, abandon, or deviate from *daos,* rather than simply being contained in them.”[16]

What we think of today as the delineations between philosophy, theology, and religious studies are clearly historical anomalies of Western culture, ones which lie along a religion/secular binary. When we label human practices as religious, we must be careful to recognize that such labeling does not necessarily correspond with how one thinks of ‘religion.’ Human practices of religiosity may differ, for instance, in being confessional or not, as well as in other ways. Decolonial praxis performed amongst authentic religio-spiritual diversity perhaps inevitably leads to a deconstruction of the disciplinary boundaries between theology, philosophy, and religious studies (and even science, as seen below).

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[15] Neville, *Religion,* 58.

[16] Campany, “On the Very Idea of Religions,” 305.

Returning to William Hart's distinction between big "T" Theology—as a confessional, dogmatic, church-bound practice—and little "t" *theology,* as "an open, revisable, hypothetical form of inquiry" into the nature of reality, one can see that big "T" Theology is clearly modeled on Christianity. This practice translates more easily to Abrahamic faiths, particularly in being confessional and dogmatic (though by no means could all Christian, Jewish, or Muslim theology be considered confessional and dogmatic). However, it is not at all clear that such a concept of Theology overlaps with the application of the term religion.

To be more specific, it is not clear that the concept of big "T" Theology allows for a non-distortive description of religious life outside Abrahamic circles. As we have seen, some religio-spiritual orientations do not easily lend themselves to notions of confessional or dogmatic enterprises—particularly ones that frame themselves around depths of practice and/or virtuosities of spiritual attainment (and this may include, for instance, lineages of Christianity such as that found in Thurman). Accordingly, they do not correlate with big "T" Theology.[17] Rather, they arguably correlate much more with *theology,* which Hart argued for as a perfectly reasonable and valid scholarly practice. Well…almost.

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[17] Some contemplative traditions, of course, may align with a practice of Theology—Eastern Orthodox Christianity comes to mind—but this does not refute the fact that it is by no means a *necessary* component.

There is still something of importance missing from Hart's notion of *theology*. This missing piece lands precisely along lines of the rehabilitative work done in chapter two around the concept of "experience." In other words, what is needed for a more capacious and nuanced understanding of *theology,* is the use of *experience as evidentiary*. As experience becomes evidentiary, we move into the realm of the scholar-practitioner, and into philosophy as a way of life. What scholar-practitioners add to Hart's argument is a strong emphasis on praxis leading to habitual transformations of embodied human consciousness. Hence, experience as evidentiary is a *sin qua non* for the scholar-practitioner, just as it was for ancient philosophers.

Neville makes an explicit argument for this type of scholarly praxis within the discipline of philosophical theology. His recent three-volume philosophical theology argues extensively for first-order issues of a religious nature to be included within philosophy proper, and in particular within secular university settings.[18] At the heart of such philosophic endeavor lies the category of experience:

> *Philosophical Theology* holds that philosophy proper ought to include within itself both theological reflection on ultimate dimensions and also the experiences of ultimacy that are involved in religion. Philosophy is a way of engaging the world as its object, this includes engaging ultimate realities and ultimate dimensions of human existence. In the long run, this engagement is experientially based.[19]

Neville positions his work clearly within scholarly communities of inquiry, utilizing an interdisciplinary approach that includes fields of hard sciences as well as social sciences, and situates it within a broader theory of inquiry. Even though Neville's inquiry is directed towards “ultimate realities and ultimate dimensions of human experience,” it is framed as an invitation for a diverse community of inquiry, resonating with a liminality of democracy. Neville’s approach is not confessional because it is also explicitly described as unbeholden to any particular religious framework or authority. Neville’s musings on, experiences of, engagements with, and philosophical articulations about ultimacy are posited as fallibilistic hypotheses to be revised and corrected as evidence proceeds—evidence which *includes* experience—perhaps even as the inquires most important category.

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[18] Neville, *Ultimates*; Neville, *Existence*; Neville, *Religion.*

[19] Neville, *Religion*, xviii.

Consider also a recent work by Ayon Maharaj, *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality: Sri Ramakrishna & Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion.* Maharaj contextualizes his work as philosophy of religion, but more importantly for decolonial praxis as “cross-cultural philosophy.” Maharaj allies himself with movements towards cross-cultural philosophy more broadly, noting Bryan Van Norden’s *Taking Back Philosophy,* briefly discussed in the introduction. Maharaj leans into the more transgressive elements of Ramakrishna’s discourse, however, in contrast to Van Norden and Jay Garfield. As seen in the introduction, the latter arguably tame religio-spiritual elements of non-Western discourse such as Buddhism and Confucianism, while strategically arguing for their inclusion in contemporary, secularized versions of philosophy. Maharaj does not shy away from arguing for experience as evidentiary, as the key to understanding Ramakrishna’s contributions to philosophical thought. Maharaj argues that Ramakrishna’s philosophy is based around his spiritual experience of *vijñāna,* which integrates the personal and impersonal aspects of ultimacy in a non-hierarchical way. He describes Ramakrishna’s philosophy as “best characterized as ‘Vijñāna Vedanta,’ a resolutely non-sectarian worldview—rooted in his own mystical experience of *vijñāna*—that harmonizes apparently conflicting religious faiths, sectarian philosophies, and spiritual disciplines."[20]

As he develops Ramakrishna's thoroughly pluralistic view of reality, Maharaj puts Ramakrishna in dialogue with traditional Hindu philosophy as well as a creative dialogue with Western thinkers. He argues that Ramakrishna's "manifestation model of mystical experience" provides a vista that harmonizes and goes beyond perennialist and constructivist views of reality, addressing long-standing problems in philosophy of religion. Crucial to Maharaj's argument is that Ramakrishna's philosophy does not arise through rational deduction, but emerges out of his experience, a form of philosophy as a way of life. "Crucially, Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views were based not on intellectual speculation but on his own spiritual experiences."[21] Maharaj argues further that Ramakrishna's view of reality is, in fact, by its very nature, impossible to discover purely through rational deduction. According to Ramakrishna, our experiential apparatuses of knowledge production thoroughly exceed that which can be deduced thru rational speculation, though rational thought can be helpful in orienting one towards religio-spiritual experience. Religio-spiritual experience, however, involves special faculties of "nondiscursive" knowledge which brings forth evidence of ways of knowing that cannot be accessed thru rational speculation.[22]

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[20] Maharaj, *Infinite*, 6.

[21] Ibid., 16.

[22] Ibid., 192-193.

Given a more or less equal status in terms of critical reflection and rational reasoning among secularists as well as scholar-practitioners (as I also argued for in chapters one and three), Maharaj argues that scholar-practitioners are in a better position to theorize about religious experience. Philosophers who pursue religio-spiritual experience "are in a far better epistemic position" than secularist philosophers in thinking about the nature of religio-spiritual experience in particular.[23] Maharaj suggests, for instance, that John Hick's neo-Kantian inspired pluralistic philosophy of religions, with its distinctions between *noumena* (*das Ding an sich*, "the thing-in-itself") and *phenomena,* is less convincing that Ramakrishna's pluralistic "manifestation" model, precisely because it fails to take into account realities dis/closed in religio-spiritual experience. The unbridgeable gap between experience and reality hypothesized by Hick "stems from the fact that Hick arrived at his theory through intellectual reasoning rather than direct mystical experience," in contradiction to Ramakrishna. Maharaj makes a variety of detailed arguments for why experience should count to some degree as evidentiary for scholars. In terms of democratic praxis, allowing for experience to serve as evidentiary, at least to some degree, also serves to refocus the scholar amidst the contexts of their lived realities, bringing attention to how theories are *embodied*, and to existential concerns in one's life. To live philosophy as a way of life is to embrace experience as evidentiary, with or without 'mystical experience.'

Maharaj describes "cross-cultural philosophy" as a movement away from the strictures of comparative philosophy, "toward more creative and flexible paradigms for engaging in philosophical inquiry across cultures."[24] The goal of cross-cultural philosophy is not just to compare texts and note similarities and differences, but, in Garfield's words, "to do philosophy, with lots of texts, lots of perspectives, and lots of hermeneutical traditions—to make the resources of diverse traditions and their scholars available to one another and to create new dialogues."[25] This type of (decolonial) scholarly endeavor could become—when experience is also held as evidentiary—a kind of disciplinary home for scholar-practitioners. A scholarly community of inquiry now begins to come into view, one whose road has already been paved in many ways by comparative theologians, various area studies (including Dharma, Indigenous, Buddhist, and Contemplative Studies), cross-cultural philosophers like Maharaj, and others. Such a community of inquiry approaches closely what I call a beloved community of religious diversity in the following chapter.

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[23] Ibid., 191.

Another example of the difficulty of Western disciplinary delineations for non-Western thought is seen in B. Alan Wallace's description of Buddhism's engagement with the West. This engagement is complicated at its very inception by the imposition of Western disciplinary formations. Wallace's analysis drives home the need for decolonial praxis to embrace a blurring of disciplinary boundaries, as well as an openness to experience as evidentiary. As a longtime practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism who has a PhD in religious studies (and studied physics as well as philosophy of science), Wallace openly inhabits the stance of a scholar-practitioner. His decolonial critique concentrates on ways in which Buddhist thought and practice is made amenable to Western academia, including science along with philosophy, theology, and religious studies. The terms ‘science,’ ‘philosophy,’ and ‘religion’ are all Western terms, which since the Enlightenment have traditionally delineated separate disciplines of inquiry (considering for the moment religion as a mode of inquiry). Wallace notes that we cannot “assume from the outset that Buddhism will somehow naturally conform to our linguistic categories and ideological assumptions.”[26] Buddhism includes elements of all three of the above modes of inquiry, while being irreducible to any one of them. Philosophy and religious reflection were never separated in Buddhist thought (or, we might note, in other modes of Eastern and Indigenous thought, as seen below), and Buddhist modes of inquiry also parallel in many ways scientific methodologies. In terms of its parallels with science (a point also made below by Mattieu Ricard), Wallace presents Buddhism as positing “a wide array of testable hypotheses and theories concerning the nature of the mind and its relation to the physical environment.” Such hypotheses, according to Wallace, have been “tested and experientially confirmed numerous times over the past twenty-five hundred years.”[27] This leads Wallace to conclude that it is misleading to categorize Buddhism “as a religion to the exclusion of its scientific and philosophical elements.”[28]

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[24] Ibid., 4.

[25] As quoted in Ibid., 5. Cited as Jay Garfield, *Empty Words,* viii.

Such disciplinary dizziness is due to the lack of fit within preestablished Western academic categories, categories based upon historical clashes between Christianity and philosophy, theology, science, and the study of other religions. Clashes, one might add, with colonial overtones. Yet, for a Buddhist scholar-practitioner, none of these could ever really be separate disciplines. Buddhist philosophy and science is also Buddhist religious praxis, and vice versa. There is no delineation between secular and religious ways of life.

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[26] Wallace, “Introduction: Buddhism and Science—Breaking Down the Barriers,” 5.

[27] Ibid., 8.

[28] Ibid., 20.

While methodologically similar to science in some respects, Buddhism differs in applying its methodology to subjective mental phenomenon and their interactions with the natural world, as opposed to rejecting outright—as Western science often has—subjective experience from its research. In other words, Buddhism in many ways utilizes processes of inquiry that overlap with scientific inquiry, yet brings experience as evidentiary into the fold. In addition, while including these "elements of rigorous experiential inquiry and rational analysis," Buddhism also clearly embodies aspects of religious life, such as human flourishing, human destiny, and the meaning of life.[29]

According to Wallace, Buddhism must be accepted and engaged on its own terms if there is to be any true dialogue. Further, it is a colonial imposition to simply delineate Buddhism into categories of Western thought. Wallace goes on to engage in an extended critique of scientific materialism as well as postmodern thought in this regard. Paralleling arguments made throughout this project, the former is portrayed as a "new religion" engaged in its own type of religious fundamentalism, while the latter's incessant need to reduce Buddhism to poetic metaphors and cultural embeddedness (or even power dynamics as seen in chapter three) presents its own type of homogenizing colonialism. Truth claims about the nature of reality are at the heart of Buddhist practice, Wallace asserts, and these claims are said to be verifiable through inner experience that cuts across cultural difference.

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[29] Ibid.

In the end, Wallace argues for a more holistic praxis of inquiry, one “with a wide range of modes of investigation and analysis.” He asserts that the quest to know reality necessitates this kind of collaborative endeavor, “especially when it comes to the nature of human existence, and specifically the nature of the mind, consciousness, and the human soul, the notion of nonoverlapping magisteria between religion and science is simply untenable.”[30]

Wallace’s work highlights an important need for decolonial praxis around Western forms of methodological inquiry. When engaging with academia, Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu, Indigenous, Sikh (and we have now seen examples of all of these in this project), and other forms of thought shed light on our own subjective Western categories, bringing awareness to the dangers of privileging our own preconceptions.[31] As *democratic* praxis, this expands our horizons for more capacious modes of inquiry. As Wallace says, Western science has often left humanity in the dark as concerns the “potentials of consciousness, subjective experience … and the pursuit of a life of meaning and fulfillment.” And I note that this wasn’t on accident, but a result of Christendom and that incipient break between theology and a love of wisdom (philosophy). Religious authorities usurped explorations of consciousness and subjective experience, for such matters were to be mediated by the Church. Today, unfortunately, much of the secular humanities does the same, with secularists and their hegemonic ontological reductionisms now functioning as the self-appointed mediators of human subjectivity. At the same time, as Wallace also acknowledges, academia's "modes of open-minded inquiry may well complement those of Buddhism and other ancient contemplative traditions," at least when not devolving into scientism or secularism.[32]

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[30] Ibid., 26. Wallace cites here the Dalai Lama’s insistence that Buddhists must relinquish their beliefs if they are shown to be false by science, showing the high value attributed to scientific inquiry as one aspect of a *shared* holistic, interdisciplinary praxis. Such a stance is quite amenable to a beloved community of religious diversity, as presented in the following chapter.

[31] Ibid., 27. Wallace makes this point directly with reference to Buddhism.

What seems to be needed, if I may be so bold, is an academic orientation explicitly open to diverse scholar-practitioners. Within such a discipline, modes of transgressive thought (at least to a secularist gaze) might be brought together as normative stances for scholarly praxis. Such orientations were seen in Gloria Anzaldúa's indigenous-inflected decolonial praxis, Howard Thurman's contemplative philosophy, and examples from Neville, Maharaj, and Wallace above. For a scholar-practitioner, the divides between theology, philosophy, science, and religious studies do not always make sense. Stephanie Corigliano writes in her essay, "Religious Studies, Theology & the Scholar-Practitioner," that "many scholar-practitioners within contemplative studies do not fit neatly into the standard category of religion," yet "their questions, concerns, and research agendas do fall somewhere between the established fields of Religious Studies and Theology. … [T]he scholar-practitioner sits within each of these and yet, simultaneously, outside of both."[33] It is in those liminal spaces among disciplines that scholar-practitioners find a 'field' (perhaps an affinity of spirituality?) that feels more at home. When one adds emergent religio-spiritual identities to the fold of scholar-practitioners—which may transgress traditional understandings of religion and the secular (as seen in chapter three)—current disciplinary formations make even less sense.

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[32] Ibid., 20.

[33] Corigliano, "Religious Studies, Theology & the Scholar-Practitioner."

Corigliano goes on to note that “Though scholar-practitioners may (or may not) stand outside of a conventional religious category,” many are deeply concerned about issues of “race, class, empire, sexuality, gender, and the environment.” She makes the further point that “the emerging voice of the scholar-practitioner is an important facet for…the possibility of constructive theological work that is capable of addressing the concerns of social justice, including racism, gender, and post-colonial concerns.” Corigliano places the scholar-practitioner not only within liminal spaces ‘in-between’ academic disciplines, but also as aligned with democratic praxis. She speaks of the scholar-practitioner today as an “emergent voice,” allied with a liminality of democracy as envisioned here, drawing “from contemplative practice, combined with a rigorous desire for knowledge grounded in traditional sources, emerging research, and new ideas.”[34] The failure of academia to provide much of anything resembling such an orientation for students interested in building transformative lifestyles—and thereby contributing to our shared democratic life—speaks to a profound need for new disciplinary formations. That many of these students end up in religious studies departments is telling. These unhealthy dynamics hinder our democratic praxis and exacerbate cavernous rifts in political culture, in part by empowering extremist voices that represent a relatively small portion of the population.

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[34] Ibid. Corigliano’s articulation of the scholar-practitioner, who may well be involved in religio-spiritual experimentation, yet is also deeply interested in issues of social justice, might be cited as yet another counterfactual to the critiques of religio-spiritual experimentation as self-centered, or as reducible to neoliberal consumerism. See chapter three for a discussion of these points.

One of the things that makes the moniker of ‘scholar-practitioner’ appealing is how it transgresses both traditional disciplinary boundaries as well as traditional understandings of religion. Scholar-practitioners exist today not only within religious traditions, but also *amongst* them. They form something like a community amidst religious traditions, yet an individual scholar-practitioner may or may not be embedded in a particular religion. Suffice to say for now that the gravitational *field* for an assemblage of scholar-practitioners is perhaps more an “affinity of spirituality,” than a definitive linguistic formulation. An affinity of spirituality in William Connolly’s sense, as a somewhat liminal affective experience at a ‘visceral register of being,’ which is able to “jump across different professions of creed, doctrine, and philosophy.”[35]

Is an academic assemblage around a return of the scholar-practitioner into the folds of university life possible? What might such an assemblage look like? What would it *feel* like? Even *smell* like (a la Thurman’s sniffer)? To be sure, I believe a return of the scholar-practitioner has generally already arrived.[36] It may be a nascent return at this point, inchoate perhaps, but present nonetheless. Such a return, once it gains force, might spur an emergent space within the locus of professional thinking and education—and hence within culture itself—for a democratic praxis of *demosophy*, democratic wisdom, and perchance even a beloved community of religious diversity.

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[35] Connolly, *Capitalism,* 40. We first encountered this quote, and Connolly’s notion of affinities of spirituality, in chapter two.

[36] See the introduction for further discussion of this point.

For the scholar-practitioner, one's philosophy becomes a way of life. A life attuned to (and attuned by) various spiritual praxes, where one's learning proceeds from an appreciative study of human experimentation in religious, cultural, and political life. Such praxis might necessarily include an open acknowledgement of transformative potentials of embodied human consciousness. Many who commit to advanced studies of specific areas in the study of religion operate ostensibly as scholar-practitioners—in fields such as Buddhist, Hindu or Dharma studies, mysticism studies, Indigenous studies, spirituality studies, history of religions, philosophy of religion, cross-cultural philosophy, comparative theology, contemplative studies, or Whitehead's process thought.

Given arguments of my project thus far—namely in complicating a binary between religion and the secular, as well as delineating religion from the religious—a question remains: Is the scholar-practitioner actually doing something different than other scholars in the humanities? If so, where might such differences lie? John Thatamanil's innovative definition of the religious will help to parse such questions.

The 'Religious' as "Comprehensive Qualitative Orientation"—John Thatamanil

Thatamanil offers a working definition of the religious that is by no means restricted to 'religion.' His definition extends the work of religious becoming into cultural spheres, broadening an understanding of the religious beyond a religion/secular binary. At the same time, Thatamanil avoids relativism by arguing for (at least the possibility of) a "cross-culturally available dimension of human experience that can be recognized as religious." For Thatamanil, all human societies "engage in a kind of cultural labor that can be called religious." It is only in the West, however, that we see such labor broken up into so-called secular and religious spheres.[37] Thatamanil complicates this separation, showing how the secular also engages in the labor of religious becoming. Thatamanil's understanding of the religious provides one more vista in this project, perhaps the most damning of all for a secularist gaze.

Thatamanil bases his definition of religiosity on the insight that "every enduring human society takes up the project of *comprehensive qualitative orientation.*" A society may or may not have 'religion' (again, as seen in the second epigraph above), but every human society is involved in the work of comprehensive qualitative orientation. The "religious" refers to the cultural labor involved in such a project. For example, Thatamanil describes how Native American societies did not "demarcate religions as some special set of material and discursive processes over against the rest of communal life." Yet such societies certainly engaged in the cultural labor of comprehensive qualitative orientation.[38] Thus, to be religious means "to seek comprehensive qualitative orientation. … [it is] a transhistorical claim that human beings seek orientation *to the whole of things or reality as such* rightly understood."[39] Comprehensive qualitative orientation seeks to orient the whole person, "mind, heart, and body," to what is ultimately real. The qualitative dimension of religious orientations is what sets them apart from other types of orientation, such as scientific ones.[40]

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[37] Thatamanil, *Circling,* 156.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Thatamanil, "How Not to Be a Religion," 65.

The power of Thatamanil's definition of the religious becomes clear in the following passage (emphasis original):

> *Any qualitative interpretation of the felt character of the universe—that the universe is homelike or hostile, elegant and orderly, or absurd and random—I take to be religious when such an interpretation is accompanied by a commitment to practices that shape communal and personal comportment in the universe as so interpreted. Conversely, commitment to practices that so shape communal and personal comportment, such that they imply and generate a qualitative interpretation of the felt character of the universe—as, for example, worthy of human trust or as inimical to human habitation—is also religious.*[41]

Utilizing Thatamanil's definition, one can see how ontological orientations of all types lead to religious becomings. In particular, it highlights why secularist orientations, such as a hard constructivism or scientific materialism, are also *religious orientations.* That is, such orientations make *qualitative* judgements about the nature of reality as such, and then proceed to orient practitioners towards particular practices of "communal and personal comportment" that align with the overarching ontological orientation. I submit that when any orientation begins to claim that their 'way' is the be all and end all of scholarly praxis, then they experience a slippage into *religious fundamentalism*.

Thatamanil's concept of the religious brings attention to both cognitive frameworks (what he calls "interpretive schemes") and concomitant practices meant to instill the framework into the "heart, mind, and body" of practitioners (what he calls

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[40] Thatamanil, *Circling,* 160-161.

[41] Thatamanil, *Circling,* 164.

“therapeutic regimes”). In his attentiveness to both frameworks and practices, Thatamanil offers a critical analysis for understanding religious formations. Importantly, “Right orientation is thus a work of *transformation,* not merely *information*; in modernity, we have come to impute such work to the religions even if such work also routinely takes place elsewhere in the culture.”[42]

The fact that Thatamanil’s analysis runs in both directions, from frameworks to practices, as well as from practices to frameworks—allows for an interrogation of a broader array of phenomenon as “religious.” For example, Thatamanil is able to characterize neoliberal economic practices as doing “religious labor,” due to the ways in which they “tutor” human beings in “comprehensive qualitative orientation.” Calling neoliberal ideologies and economic practices “perhaps the most encompassing frame for meaning-making in our time,” Thatamanil sees a “neoliberal theology of capitalism” as imposing a “therapeutic regime [that] binds the mind-heart of devotees more completely than perhaps any therapeutic regime instituted and imposed by the world’s religious traditions if not in human history, then certainly in our historical moment.”[43] Thatamanil’s analysis of religiosity in economic theories and practices, a labor attended to by numerous contemporary academics, can be applied equally towards other qualitative orientations.[44]

For instance, ontological orientations of a hard constructivism, or of shifting assemblages and energetic configurations seen in political philosopher William

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[42] Ibid., 173.

[43] Ibid., 183, 189.

[44] See also Connolly, *Capitalism,* for instance.

Connolly's "world of becoming" (chapter four), or of a vibrant nature of matter in Jane Bennett's "vibrant materialism," or of an "agential realism" in Karen Barad's work, or of a performative constructivism a la Judith Butler, or of an encompassing nature of "biopolitics" and power dynamics a la Michel Foucault, or of a scientific religious naturalism as seen in Wesley Wildman's work—*all* of these are involved in *religious* labor, at least as understood here.[45] All of these theorists offer particular practices ("therapeutic regimes") that are oriented within their various conceptual schema ("interpretive schemes"). Hence, all of the above are involved in the cultural labor of enacting comprehensive qualitative orientation, and thus might be considered "religious." I choose to highlight such examples specifically because theses scholars would ordinarily be seen to pass some supposed test of secularity (perhaps with the exception of Wildman).[46]

Conversely, *practices* of scholarly labor can also be involved in religious labor. That is, they are practices that *"shape communal and personal comportment."* This includes practices such as sociological analysis, hermeneutics of suspicion, oppositional politics, and analyses of power, as well as the more liminal methodologies I have at times been accenting.[47] All of these "*imply and generate a qualitative interpretation of the felt*

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[45] See Connolly, *World of Becoming*; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*; Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Foucault, *History of Sexuality*; Wildman, *Science and Religious Anthropology.*

[46] As mentioned previously, Thatamanil does delineate between "interpretive schemes" that are religious, and ones that aren't. The difference lies in articulating a *qualitative* ontology, one that induces a felt orientation towards the cosmos. Scientific frameworks that do not devolve into scientism are, in theory, neutral in this regard, and thus need not be considered as 'religious.' All of the theorists mentioned above, however, theorize *qualitative* interpretations of the nature of reality with distinct "felt characters," as well as proscribe concomitant practices. Hence, they fall into Thatamanil's definition of the religious.

[47] Such liminal methodologies include the democratic and decolonial praxis of Gloria Anzaldúa's *las nepantleras*, Vincent Harding's imaginal, dream-filled democratic praxis, Catherine Keller's "apophatic

character of the universe." Examples of such affective dynamics have already been seen. In chapter two we saw process theologian-philosopher John Cobb reduced to an object for "data," rather than perceived as a colleague and interlocutor. In the same chapter, Buddhist religious experience was interpreted in a qualitatively different way (as power dynamics) than, say, how Buddhist philosophers might interpret it (as 'awakening'). The "felt character" exhibited in these examples is inflected by the academic practices being inhabited.

Scholarly practices, especially in the humanities, orient us towards others and the cosmos in particular ways, disciplining our bodies, minds, and hearts into modes of (inter)being and relational ways of being-in-the-world. Womanist AnaLouise Keating, whose "post-oppositional" approach was discussed in chapter four, has described for instance how a practice of "oppositional politics" ended up not only being ineffective for her in enacting political change, but also harmed her well-being in numerous ways: "My oppositional approach inhibited my growth, damaged my health, threatened my relationships, soured my worldview, and harmed me in other ways."[48] In other words, Keating's scholarly praxis induced an embodied, felt character of the world that affected her life in profound ways (and her recognition of this was a major impetus for developing a "post-oppositional" approach).

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assemblage," Cornel West's use of empathy and imagination, Martin Luther King Jr.'s *agape* and "militant nonviolence," Howard Thurman's spiritual disciplines, and Walt Whitman's multifarious democratic becoming.

[48] Keating, *Transformation Now,* 49. For an in-depth, appreciative critique of "oppositional thought," as well as suggestions for alternate approaches, see the Introduction and chapter one (Ibid., 1-59).

Thatamanil's definition of the religious allows one to see how scholarly praxes also function as religious ways, at least in some cases. They orient us around "reality" as the theorist posits it, and provide practices that discipline others into a shared sense of said reality. This is why academic work can be transformative for many. Thatamanil speaks of "the religious," as opposed to 'religion' or 'religions,' in order to emphasize that the work of the religious cannot be encompassed within religions.[49] This holds true both for societies who never separated out a sphere of religion, such as Native Americans, as well as those that have historically adopted a religion/secular binary.

Hence, Thatamanil's definition of the religious further undermines an anachronistic religion/secular binary. *If religious work is being accomplished on both sides of the binary, then the binary itself must be thoroughly rethought.* Broadening an analysis of religious phenomena to include all that goes into comprehensive qualitative orientation also allows for a more capacious understanding of religious syncretism. Given that "every community is shot through with multiple forms of religiousness, derived from secular sources and the various religious traditions," then all human beings are engaged in various forms of religious syncretism. According to Thatamanil, we engage in "comprehensive qualitative orientation by appeal to data from any number of sources—religious traditions, economic theories, market practices, quantum theory, and evolutionary theory to name a few." The question, then, is not whether or not to participate in religious syncretism, "but rather which forms are likely to be life-giving."[50]

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[49] Thatamanil, *Circling*, 172.

[50] Ibid., 191.

With Thatamanil's definition in hand, one might say that for the scholar-practitioner, part of their practice lies in gaining an awareness of the influences one is *already* swimming in, so as to be attentive to dialing negative influences down, and ameliorating influences up, *especially* at an affective, visceral register of being.

Thatamanil's convincing definition of the religious reinforces numerous points I have been making throughout this project. It illuminates problems with a Western understanding of 'religion' that cordons off religious labor into a separate realm apart from the secular. This separation allows the work of comprehensive qualitative orientation—including the positing of cognitive frameworks (ontological orientations) as well as concomitant social and political practices—to hide behind rhetoric of the secular. Secularist discourse ostensibly acts as if it is doing something fundamentally different than what happens in religion, or in theology, but the arguments I have made thus far frame much of this as an ideological illusion. Thatamanil's understanding of the religious shows that we are all involved in works of religious syncretism. However, our Westernized concept of religion allows us to discount this fact, to fetishize ideas of bounded, non-porous, religions as normative, as well as a separation of one aspect of life from another, religion from the secular. However, life itself is always religious in this sense, and thus one must take responsibility for the religious labor one intrinsically enacts throughout their life. A liminality of democracy asks of us to take responsibility for such religious labor.

Contemplative Experience

Thatamanil's concept of the religious resonates with my own understanding of "contemplative experience." Both bring attention to long-term embodiment—or transformations that become anchored in the body, mind, and heart. Contemplative experience, in my rendering, refers more to long-term, habit forming transformations than extraordinary, transient religious experience (which can be an aspect of contemplative experience). Thus, contemplative experience might be contrasted with another common term in academia, "mystical experience." Contemplative experience, in my framing, is akin to transformative processes within the religious, in the sense of comprehensive qualitative orientation, while mystical experience represents but one possible, but by no means necessary, aspect of religiosity.[51]

Mystical experience has often been studied as transient, extraordinary experiences of individuals, as described for instance in William James' classic *Varieties of Religious Experience.*[52] In contrast to this (yet sharing an 'affinity of spirituality' one might say), the field of contemplative studies tends to emphasize grounding in spiritual practices, as well as the ongoing development of philosophical orientations amongst communities of inquiry. In fact, it is these aspects (discipline, practices, a community of inquiry, the passing down of knowledge over generations, philosophical and metaphysical reflection) that define a contemplative tradition.[53] Contemplative experience then, in my framing, is less about *an* experience, and more about gaining contemplative “know-how.” In this sense it resonates with classic American philosophical notions of experience, as seen below.

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[51] This is not meant in any way to discard the importance of mystical experience or its study, which has long played a strong role in people's religious lives, as well as in many contemplative traditions. Rather, the contrast helps to frame my use of the term 'contemplative experience.'

[52] One of the four traits James assigns to mystical experience is that it is "transient." I use contemplative experience to denote an orientation towards long-term habitual transformations.

Scholar-practitioner Mattieu Ricard explains the depth of practice and years of cultivation of various states of consciousness that go into his contemplative tradition (a lineage of Tibetan Buddhism). Here the contemplative project is not something that happens overnight, or in the midst of a momentary experience, but rather is a “long-term project” requiring years and even decades (and in some frameworks lifetimes) of development. This is not unlike acquiring proficiency in other disciplines (minus the lifetimes…well, supposedly). Ricard describes a contemplative tradition as having “its own hypotheses, its own laws, and its own results,” where the expertise and certainty of conclusions gained is as compelling as that “derived from the discovery of the physical laws governing external phenomena.”[54] While Ricard speaks within the context of Tibetan Buddhism, he is quick to acknowledge that this type of rigor has long been present in numerous contemplative traditions, including Christian monasticism. Hadot’s articulation of ancient philosophy as a way of life, seen above, I would add as an example of a contemplative tradition that lies outside what we normally think of as religion (and I ask again, why do we think this?). Contemporary forms of religio-spiritual praxis provide examples that are unembedded in traditional religions as well.[55]

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[53] On these points see Komjathy, *Introducing Contemplative Studies*.

[54] Ricard, “On the Relevance of a Contemplative Science,” 271, emphasis original.

[55] See for instance, McEntee and Bucko, *New Monasticism.*

Hence, I employ the term *contemplative experience* to refer to this type of long-term project, using experience in a way similar to how we might refer to someone being 'experienced.' To become an experienced physicist, for example, requires a long-term commitment, where one's understanding of physics emerges only through the course of many experiences—in conjunction with careful reflection upon such experiences—most often practiced in dialogue and consultation within a community of inquiry. Contemplative experience in this sense would then include more than a single experience—a transient mystical or ecstatic experience—no matter how powerful or life changing. Contemplative experience thus conveys a seriousness and depth of cultivation that occurs over long periods of time, usually within committed communities of inquiry, resulting in embodied transformations of human consciousness. The collected magisteria of such communities—including practices, texts, stories and lore, theological and soteriological frameworks, all of which are embedded within unique historical and cultural trajectories—along with the community of practitioners, are what constitute a *contemplative lineage* or *tradition.*

Contemplative experience parallels in certain ways the classical American philosophic understanding of experience as well. Experience in the latter, as John E. Smith explains, is "intimately connected with 'knowing how' to respond to situations." Smith uses the example of a sailor, following Charles Peirce, to illustrate how this notion corresponds to our understanding of one who is experienced. When we say a sailor has "experience," he or she likely knows a lot about "boats, sails, and currents," but this alone does not capture what we mean. Rather, a sailor with experience is one "who knows how to respond to a shift in the wind or a brewing storm, and knows what is to be done next.” As Peirce put it, experience resides “not only in the head, but in the muscles as well.”[56] For an experienced contemplative, one might say that experience resides not only the head, not only in the body, but most importantly ‘in the heart.’

There is perhaps a difference, though, between contemplative know-how and the example of the sailor above. Contemplative know-how may be, well, more liminal. It may consist of an apophatic awareness; or awareness of a multi-dimensional, spiritually infused cosmos; or perception of *pratityasamutpada* (“co-dependent arising”) and the radical interdependence of all life; or an experience at the “root of one’s being.” Contemplative knowing might also be transmitted or communicated in explicitly *affective* ways, in ways that affect our felt-orientation to the world. Contemplative know-how is often seen to participate in a vibrantly multi-dimensional cosmos, with powerful energies that can be of benefit or of harm in human relations. Developing a ‘know-how’ of how to navigate such a cosmos, usually with a cosmic compass provided by the magisteria of contemplative traditions, in order to bring about ameliorating affects into life and consciousness, has often been the work of contemplative practitioners. An understanding of experience in this sense includes an embodied type of knowing that is inseparable from one’s action in the world, including habitual affective patternings of bodies. Contemplative traditions often teach bringing awareness to unconscious habit patterns through mindfulness of bodily sensations, thought patterns, and emotions—habit patterns conditioned by the contexts we live in. Lest we forget, a liminality of democracy acknowledges that our “context” may include not only the cultural conditions that surround us—but perhaps much more. For example, an ameliorating, multi-dimensional cosmos in which we live and move and have our being—as seen in Thurman's experiences at the "root of his being," or in Anzaldúa's liminal spaces of *nepantla*.

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[56] Smith, *America’s Philosophical Vision,* 4. Smith is paraphrasing Charles Peirce here.

Contemplative praxis is meant to transform one's being-in-the-world, the way one moves through the world with affective, emotional, cognitive, bodily, and even unconscious dispositions. These embodied aspects of contemplative life are also relevant to arguments complicating a religion/secular binary. Discourses widely considered secular perform a similar kind of labor, creating dispositions of embodied consciousness that reflect various ontological orientations and concomitant practices. In this sense, both are involved in the labor of the *religious*.

'Ways of Living' and Embodied Wisdoms—An Indigenous and Process Perspective

A further example highlights the embodied element of religious labor, continuing to expose why the religious cannot be circumscribed by religion, while also hypothesizing particular "embodied wisdoms" that result from multifarious religious ways. In characterizing religions as "ways of living," process philosopher Jay McDaniel writes:

> Influenced by [Whitehead's] account of experience in *Process and Reality* we come to think of a religion not so much as a belief system, but rather as a *way of living* involving all of the elements of experience… From a Whiteheadian perspective a way of living includes physical feelings, intellectual feelings, emotions, attitudes, bodily practices, social relations, subjective aims, remembered pasts, and hopes for the future. Religion is an experiential process. It is an activity of identity-formation,

> community involvement, worldview development, imaginative exploration, and ritualized practice—rather than as a settled and static fact.[57]

Experience as seen above is always relational and singular, made up of individual and collective elements, so that "no individual is an island and that solitariness itself, as lived from the inside, is a social reality."[58] A similar perspective will be seen in the following chapter, in Josiah Royce's notion of "interpretation," which lies at the heart of his development of a "beloved community." A major point of emphasis from a process perspective is the need to avoid suggestions of "homogeneity, stasis, or independence," either in our religious journeys, or in our religions. Hence, a religious life is made up of an ongoing and capacious "experiential process," one that is saturated with our context (or what Whitehead termed "prehension"). Our context is described above as including a vast array of experiential senses ("physical feelings, intellectual feelings"), vectors of movement ("subjective aims, remembered pasts"), social contexts ("identity-formation, community involvement"), practices ("bodily practices…ritualized practice"), and more liminal explorations ("worldview development, imaginative exploration"). It is a view of religion and the religious as a way of living that aligns with a liminality of democracy and echoes Thatamanil's more technical definition above, as well as Hadot's philosophy as a way of life.

McDaniel speaks of moving into a sense of "deep empiricism," where more liminal, affective, and intuitive dimensions of experience become equally part of our ways of knowing. He points to the wisdom of "relational knowing" in Indigenous traditions, describing wisdom as "embodied wisdom: that is, a *felt sense of the world* that is ritualized and translatable into practical action."[59]

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[57] McDaniel, "The World's Religions," 123-124, emphasis original. McDaniel's essay appears in an edited book on process thought's applications to philosophy and spirituality, among other disciplines, in service of advancing an "ecological civilization."

[58] Ibid., 122.

Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage: A Global Challenge, describes Indigenous knowledge as an "expression of the vibrant relationships between people, the ecosystem, and other living beings and spirits that share their lands."[60] In other words, knowledge is dependent upon our practices, our contexts, our physical environment, and perhaps most of all, on a relational awareness of all of these. The quality of one's awareness makes up a particular way of living—an embodied wisdom. For example, the embodied wisdom of indigenous knowledge is meant to work with, as well as enact, certain qualities of life. Again, from *Protecting,* "Indigenous knowledge is *the way of living* within contexts of flux, paradox, and tension, respecting the pull of dualism and reconciling opposing forces…Developing these ways of knowing leads to freedom of consciousness and to solidarity with the natural world."[61]

Seeing religious traditions as "ways of living" provides a slightly different accent than philosophy as a way of life, emphasizing a processual element—the "flux, paradox, and tension" in which practice is always already *happening*. As seen in indigenous ways of living, by learning to live in the liminal—in the in-between spaces among paradox, tensions, and opposing forces, "respecting" and "reconciling" radical difference—one develops another oneiric propensity. Such a proclivity, once honed, brings about a "freedom of consciousness" and a "solidarity with the natural world." These express a certain affective reverberation with the cosmos, a transformative enactment that becomes embodied in our felt-sense of the world, as well as in spontaneous, practical, and ritualized action. The 'freedom of consciousness' and 'solidarity with the world' obtained here is not a universal essence, as it is in at least some sense inextricably tied to one's physical surroundings, unique relationships, and the awareness one brings to their contexts. To create freedom of consciousness and solidarity with the natural world is more a way of living, and in some sense a skill-set, than a singular universal experience. The purpose of such a way of living "is to reunify the world or at least to reconcile the world to itself," bringing harmony to tensions between opposing forces, including within the natural world (without eliminating such tensions either). Seen thus, indigenous knowledge has the potential to bring forth embodied transformations in the world, ways of living that enact a unique sense of harmony and solidarity with the natural world. In other words, indigenous knowledge is an *embodied wisdom*—a feeling-toned awareness of the world matured into skillful means—one that might be utilized in many different contexts…if only listened to and supported. One I might add that is desperately needed in our times.

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[59] Ibid., 125.

[60] As quoted in Ibid., 129, emphasis original. Cited as Battiste and Henderson, *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge*.

[61] Ibid. emphasis original.

The development of such a liminal skill-set, an embodied wisdom, resonates with my sense of contemplative experience above, as habitual affective patternings of bodies and transformative ways of life. Here we see a *"way of living"* that engenders a particular habitual relationship of "solidarity with the natural world." Many Indigenous traditions are almost wholly based upon such an awareness. Tiokasin Ghosthorse of the Cheyenne

River Lakota Nation of South Dakota, for example, during a recent gathering by the Global Peace Initiative of Women, described his consciousness as simply "unable to be experienced as apart from the earth and other creatures."[62] According to many contemplative teachings, various 'nonhuman' influences are as much a part of our context as the cultures we are born into, and the degree to which they enter into our consciousness is mediated by our awareness.

As mentioned above, it is important to affirm that our context can refer to more than just cultural conditioning. Back in the introduction we saw Louis Komjathy, speaking from the field of contemplative studies, delineate between what he called "constructivist" and "contextualist" accounts. While a hard constructivism sees all human knowing as thoroughly conditioned, restricted, and encompassed by social construction, contextualism allows for a more capacious recognition of the contexts in which one is enmeshed. In this sense, contextualism is aligned with a liminality of democracy. Such contexts may include religio-spiritual experience, such as Sri Ramakrishna's *vijñāna,* Thurman's contemplative experience, Anzaldúa's *nepantla,* and other religious dimensions of reality, such as *bodhi* ("awakening"), ancestral planes within a multi-dimensional cosmos, spirits that share our lands, or a "transforming union with God." Such contexts are embodied modes of (inter)being that affect the world on an ontological level—as does our awareness of them—or lack thereof.

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[62] *Wisdom for this Time of Transition: A Conversation with Contemplative Leaders,* zoom conference, March 12, 2021. For more on the Global Peace Initiative of Women (GPIW) see their website: www.gpiw.org

In the contextualism of contemplative discourse a number of issues come to the fore. The first is the use of experience as not only a viable category, but also as a vital, embodied *way of knowing.* To argue for the inviolability of experience because it is difficult to analyze is to subtly miss the point. Such arguments function as a means to re-embed the very notion of "experience" as an objectified object that can be analyzed as opposed to *an aspect of knowing itself*. Experience is not an "object" that can be grasped and known from the outside concretely. To acknowledge experience as an aspect of epistemology is to harness the reality of alternate pathways of knowledge production—more embodied, more affective, and more ontologically capacious modes of being and knowing. Such alternate pathways of knowledge production have often formed diverse communities of inquiry around them, both inside and outside of academia, as the worlds many contemplative traditions attest to, as well as contemporary scholarly discourses of feminism, Black thought, and queer or trans theory.

Once a religion/secular binary is undermined, and secularity recontextualized as living amongst religious pluralism, there is no longer any legitimate reason for philosophical discourse to claim ontologically reductive orientations as normative for its practice. In fact, the opposite is true. *Reason itself* demands an opening up to a diversity of ontological orientations. As seen above, the endeavor to "fit" Buddhist philosophical discourse within ontologically reductive frameworks and Western disciplines, is to lose the capacity to even begin to understand the discourse itself. To cordon it off into area studies or even "Buddhist philosophy" (except as an area of specialty), is also to displace it as a viable *source* of theorization for the general scholar. The same holds true for a vast variety of philosophical discourse with multifarious spiritual and ontological orientations, including indigenous discourse that existed in ‘these States’ well before Europeans arrived.

‘Calling In’ a Contemplative Discourse Across Academia

The approach to religion seen above, as ways of living cultivating embodied wisdoms, is one that is once again able to recognize how scholarly praxis also enacts a religious labor—inducing habit patterns of our (inter)being-in-the-world, effecting and affecting our personal lives, our interactions with others, and our relationship with the cosmos. When religious ways are recontextualized in this sense, they can easily be seen to be much more widespread than the category of religion might suggest.

I wish to position my own approach to scholarly praxis as embedded in what I am calling “contemplative discourse,” which I see more as a broad genre than a particular discipline. Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski (whose work on the scholarly practice of critique was discussed in the introduction), describe a genre in terms of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s “family resemblances:”

> Rather than signaling a set of core criteria to which all models must conform, genre is now widely understood via the Wittgensteinian idea of family resemblances: individual instances of a genre may be related in disparate ways, but without necessarily possessing any single set of features that are common to all. A genre, in other words, is not an exclusive or internally homogeneous class, but a fluid constellation of discontinuous as well as overlapping modes.[63]

It is in a similar sense that I imagine a contemplative discourse across academia that might include a broad range of possibilities, including perspectives that emerge from both within and outside of religious traditions. In proposing a type of generalized contemplative discourse, I mean to indicate not so much a specific area of study, such as “contemplative studies,” but rather a discourse that might take root *across* academic disciplines, akin to discourses such as “deconstruction” or “critical analyses of power relations” or even “critique.” These discourses include disciplinary formations, but also operate in broader ways, where their analysis is applied across academic disciplines. I see contemplative discourse operating in a similar way, particularly among scholar-practitioners.

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[63] Anker and Felski, “Introduction,” 4. In their description of genre, Anker and Felski cite Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*.

The examples of decolonial praxis in contemplative keys from Thurman and Anzaldúa in the previous chapter are examples of contemplative discourse. The similarities between them do not consist of a “single set of features,” but rather a “fluid constellation of discontinuous overlapping modes.” Overlaps can be seen in in their religio-spiritual philosophies, their kinship in perspectives as people from racialized and marginalized communities, and in resonances of their prescriptions for democratic praxis. Prominent “discontinuities” are also readily apparent—Thurman didn’t identify as a lesbian, for example, and Anzaldúa was not a Black man. Contemplative discourse is one way to name a resonance between such ‘affinities of spirituality,’ as long as one is careful not to lose the socio-political registers of such work. As Corigliano described above, such registers remain one of the main concerns of scholar-practitioners today. I have provided a wealth of examples of contemplative discourse thus far that do not abstract from socio-political realities, such as found in Anzaldúa and Thurman, Martin Luther King Jr., Walt Whitman, AnaLouise Keating, John Thatamanil, and in the following chapter from Hyo-Dong Lee and Bin Song.

In chapter four, I contextualized my own contemplative approach as more in a mode of 'calling-in' than 'calling-out.' There I referenced the work of Black feminist Loretta J. Ross, speaking of a need to take account of the wounding and trauma we have all suffered from. Jane Bennett's work on Whitman also speaks to a quality of 'calling-in.'[64] Bennett acknowledges the important roles that more oppositional modes of critique and resistance play, yet speaks of her work on Whitman as offering "an indispensable supplement to them," more in a mode of "calling in than calling out." She notes that it is hard not to become "infected by the toxic plumes one vigorously opposes," and aligns herself with "Whitman's intuition that it is *also* important to detect and inflect the more positive inflows and outflows. To the extent that a democracy ignores or downplays these, it becomes ever more susceptible to noxious infections."[65]

From a contemplative perspective, our awareness functions in such a way as to dial up—or down—the affective and cognitive influences of that which surrounds us. Bennett's recognition that one's being-in-the-world can be affected by what we give our awareness to hints of contemplative teachings about the power of our awareness. These teachings assert that our awareness carries within it the power to transform our very being in the world. Such teachings can be seen extensively in Hadot's work on ancient philosophy, for example, and are found in virtually every contemplative lineage I know of.

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[64] We first encountered Bennett's work on Whitman in chapter four as well.

[65] Bennett, *influx & efflux*, xx.

One of the tell-tale signs of a contemplative orientation, it seems to me, is a wager on—and perhaps more than a wager, for many, an experience of—an ameliorating nature of reality. Contemplative orientations are geared towards the manifestation of an awareness that is aligned with undergirding elements of reality, seen in some sense as 'for us,' and for all of life, in its own way. Anzaldúa's nepantla is a liminal space that holds within it *efficacious* spiritual potentials. Thurman's contemplative experience brings awareness to an aspect of reality (at the "root of his being") that uncovers an identity *affirmed* by reality itself—beyond all "vice and virtue"—and connected to all of life. Above we saw Indigenous knowledge as a way of living that 'reconciles the world to itself,' learning to live skillfully amidst the tensions and paradoxes and opposing forces of the natural world, among "the other living beings and spirits that share their lands." Contemplative scholar-practitioners may posit, or even experience, ameliorating aspects of the cosmos, such as the presence of God, *nirvana,* the Dao, *vijñāna,* Allah, harmonious patternings (*li, ren)* of psychophysical energy (*qi*) under Tiān (天), the Great Spirit, etc. Such influences reveal themselves to many who spend extensive time in nature, being affected by the nonhuman beings and energies that surround us—such as Thurman's oak tree or Anzaldúa's *la mesquite*.

Discourses such as new materialism or affect theory may provide fecund milieus within which some aspects of contemplative life could be discussed, yet they also tend towards secularized worldviews. The thin red line, it appears to me, lies along the wager on (or experiences of) what one may call an *ameliorating nature of reality*. A power that could never be encompassed within social construction, and at the same time is positively 'for' humanity (and all of life in its own way). Such a power may exude compassion for all sentient beings and an overwhelming desire to alleviate their suffering, as for Buddhist Bodhisattvas, or discover *agape* as a driving force for evolutionary processes. It may express itself as potential patternings of *qi* that harmonize human relations with all of life. Or as an indissoluble aspect of one's embodied experience that is consciously entangled with all other species, land formations, and even the earth itself, as was above for Tiokasin Ghosthorse. Such examples do not possess a 'single set of features,' yet in their 'fluid constellation of discontinuous overlapping modes,' they exhibit ameliorating potencies, transforming the human condition towards wholeness and harmony. So-called secular discourses, including affect theory and new materialism, for the most part shy away from positing a fundamental nature of reality that is ameliorating, opting instead for one that is indifferent to human life so as not to be "religious" or "theological." The difference is important to note, but by no means debilitating—and I would add that there is evidence on both sides of the thin red line, at least at this point in our evolutionary 'context.'

I take a moment to note that "ameliorating" is, of course, a term of English language, with its own feeling-context, used by me in my context writing to you in your context. For me, the word seems to inflect a more or less accurate description (certainly not encompassing) of a trait most often found in contemplative descriptions of the nature of reality. As with all generalizations, it foregrounds one aspect while clouding over others. Perhaps, in this sense, a generalization, like a genre itself, is more like an atmosphere than an object, more a feeling-toned experience of the world, an affinity of spirituality, than an analytically precise concept. It is in this more liminal sense that I think of the terms 'contemplative discourse' or 'ameliorating.'

Contemplative discourse feels free to speak of transformative potentials of embodied human consciousness, possibly of a spiritual or religious nature. This includes how such transformative potentials might be enacted, what value they might have for our communal life, and what role they might play within broader socio-political issues of contemporary importance. Importantly, a contemplative discourse then has socio-political relevance, and can contribute to sociological as well as political theory. Contemplative perspectives may have much to say about current socio-political conundrums, such as how to navigate power dynamics amongst race, class, cultural, and religious difference (as seen in the previous chapter). My wager is that the idea of a broad-based contemplative discourse can reasonably knit together many theorists who are laboring in academia across various disciplines, but who feel hemmed in by assumed norms, or even as outsiders within their disciplines. Contemplative discourse, as a term, offers a clearer scholarly delineation for such theorists, while denoting shared resonances. A contemplative discourse embraces a liminality of democracy, and may allow for more collaborative labor in undermining an anachronistic religion/secular binary. A contemplative discourse is also meant as (but) one road along which scholars can pursue theorization amongst diversities of ontological orientations.

Contemplative discourse, as a genre as well as a community of inquiry, gravitates less around research objects as around fluid constellations and discontinuous, affective, overlapping modes—or what has been previously discussed as affinities of spirituality. This only adds to the political relevancy of such a discourse. We saw in chapter four how William Connolly’s notion of affinities of spirituality speaks to political constituencies forming across “professions of creed, doctrine, and philosophy.” We also saw, from

Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux, how one of the major political struggles facing the left-leaning Democratic Party in the U.S. in the coming decades is articulating a message that resonates with those from differing religious traditions, as well as with secular perspectives. Contemplative discourse can contribute to building collaborative constituencies that resonate across such lines. Already we have seen in this project a wide range of scholarly orientations resonating along affinities of spirituality. A contemplative discourse then might enact a symbiotic relationship across numerous existent fields in academia.

Beyond the idea of a contemplative discourse, what has become clear is that the elimination of any underlying, ontological, ameliorating influences upon the human condition as a *sin qua non* for scholarly praxis in secular university settings—is simply no longer a hypothesis that holds water. It is a relic of a bygone struggle against a hegemonic Christendom. Such an uncritical stance now functions as a colonial imposition, as has been argued extensively, and limits resources for democratic praxis.

My conjecture is that there are many scholar-practitioners already within academia, self-described or otherwise, who long for more capacious arenas in which to theorize, and from which to address the most pertinent questions facing our political lives today, without facing backlash from secularist and/or colonial gazes. Right now, many are separated by disciplinary formations. I think there is value in naming a cross-disciplinary contemplative discourse, bringing together an assemblage of voices to confront the problems we face today. As a shared resonance or affinity of spirituality, contemplative discourse does not have to be explicitly oriented as contemplative studies, or comparative work across religious traditions, or spiritual or philosophical discussions within a particular tradition, or as some other aspect of area studies. A contemplative discourse can maintain a symbiosis, and perhaps at times a synergy, amongst and within differing disciplines. In the same way that, say, “deconstruction” or “critical theory” operate as wide-ranging applications to many questions of academic value, so too can *contemplative discourse*. One can be a contemplative sociologist, contemplative philosopher, contemplative theologian, offer contemplative studies of religion, or be a contemplative political theorist. A contemplative discourse can range across many topics, from transformations of embodied human consciousness, to philosophy, to discussions of “ultimacy” or the nature of reality, to political theory, to ethics, and of course to democratic and decolonial praxis.

Finally, a contemplative discourse can also serve as a common moniker for scholar-practitioners across academic disciplines. This would include those within religious traditions, as well as those outside of traditions. It is worth recognizing that humanity has engaged in thousands of years of experimentation with spiritually transformative practices and ontologies, for the most part within contemplative lineages in religious traditions (as well as in “philosophical traditions,” as seen above). Such traditions have been working with “anomalous” or “mystical” experience for millennia (which also happens to make it not so anomalous), passing down knowledge and practices from generation to generation. Perhaps more importantly, these traditions have (most often) engaged in such explorations to harness a multi-dimensionality of human life and its transformative potentialities in order to enact expanded (even inconceivable) expressions of love, compassion, wisdom, harmonious becoming, sagehood, fervor for social justice, etc., *within* the world. These traditions have also long warned of the potential negative consequences such explorations can wreak, and have developed sophisticated methodologies and frameworks to help keep practitioners safe and headed in fruitful directions. As one enters into vast, cosmic territories of extraordinary experiences, energies, and beings with agency, these traditions have found that such multi-dimensional experiences are not necessarily friendly, nor always beneficial to the transformative possibilities one is hoping to enact. Hence a contemplative discourse can be of tremendous benefit to the increasingly large amount of "spiritual seekers" we see today. A contemplative discourse would help to address dangers of individualism, consumerism, appropriation, self-righteousness and quietism in spiritual quests (as contemplative traditions themselves have often attempted to do in their own ways). Further, such discourse can not only help to orient religio-spiritual lives in efficacious, ameliorating, and fruitful 'ways,' it can also help engender reflection on the socio-political realities in which spiritual journeys subsist. A contemplative discourse can cultivate a fecund space for the "spiritual activists" Anzaldúa spoke of, *las nepantleras*, and can do so in partnership and dialogue with those in traditional religious formations—explicitly as democratic and decolonial praxis.

The scholar-practitioner cannot cordon off their experience from their academic labor. And why should they? When feminist discourse accents the relational nature of the self, do we really believe the experience of females is not an essential aspect of such discourse? It is, in fact, *the* essential aspect of the discourse. The same holds true for much discourse on race, colonialism, etc. Why should religio-spiritual experience be somehow occluded from discourse simply because of a Western historical trajectory and its complicated history with Christendom? It's not as if everyone has access to female experience in the world, or queer experience, or Black experience. Nor is it that everyone who identifies as female, queer, or Black share the *same* experience of the world. Yet discourse that revolves around the experiences of female, queer, and Black folk has much to teach all of us, and it is doubtful that anyone at this point would claim otherwise.

However, there is more at stake here than just rehabilitating experience as a valid aspect of knowing. There is also the opening up of normative stances for theory that exceed the reductive orientations of a scientific materialism or hard constructivism. Why should such forms remain hegemonic?

In the spirit of moving beyond a religion/secular binary, let me point out that even secular thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and William Connolly, can be recognized as ‘scholar-practitioners.’ This is true in as much as they are attempting to define a particular view of reality and of human and social life within it—a *way of living* that includes practices which attempt to transform embodied human consciousness. Such practices might consist of the repetition and application of certain concepts, such as (respectively) deconstruction, biopolitics, performativity, or a Nietzschean ethic of respectful agonism. Each of these practices is meant to materialize a certain consciousness in the world, a consciousness the theorist would like to see and believes is illuminative of certain revelations of human social and political life. They are contributing to what Thatamanil described above as *religious* labor (or “comprehensive qualitative orientation”). Their intrinsic interests and theories are not necessarily different from that of other scholar-practitioners.

Hence, when I speak of a field of scholar-practitioners, what I really mean is *not* that the scholar-practitioner heralds something new in academia, because it doesn’t. What

I mean is the formation of discourses in academia in which scholar-practitioners can participate in ways that are not beholden to a hard, or soft, constructivism. Such constructivism is seen in the opining of human social construction as an ultimate limit of human consciousness. Strangely, the theorists above—Derrida, Foucault, Butler, and Connolly—would all be considered ‘secular’ in a kind of common-sense way, even given their vast differences of approach. (And noting that at least one, Connolly, has written an entire book on why he is not “secularist”—the apt titled *Why I Am Not a Secularist*—yet neither would he consider himself religious in any self-proclaimed sense.) But what does this actually mean? Does it mean that they have passed some imaginary test of scholarship that guards against a “return of religion” (a colonial test, as shown by Arvind Mandair in chapter three)?[66] Are they secular because they are ‘not-religion’? It would appear such an imaginary test of secularity is itself really just a ticket for passage through some form of constructivism.

One might interpret such a moniker—secular—as revolving around its own affinity of spirituality. Such an affinity of spirituality gravitates not quite around a hard constructivism, but more like a soft constructivism. All these theorists (Derrida, Foucault, Butler, Connolly) suggest a nature of reality that is more or less indifferent to human life. As a result, in some sense or another, human social construction becomes definitive of human meaning, and encompassing of resources for social, cultural, and political life. This affinity of spirituality is tied to an ontological orientation that hypothesizes the nature of reality as indifferent, which leads to the positing of particular modes of praxis, including academic analyses, proscriptions for social behavior, and moral or ethical stances (and there is almost always an inherently ethical angle included).

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[66] See the discussion of Mandair’s work in chapter two.

My purpose here lies not in an extended discussion of the differences between supposed secular orientations and contemplative perspectives or in the merits thereof (both, for example, often entail a general overlapping of social justice concerns). I do wish to point out, however, how constructivism in various forms can undergird substantial differences in theory, making such discourses supposedly more acceptable for a secular academy. My argument continues to be that there is no viable reason why the ontological orientations of, say, Derrida's deconstruction, Foucault's biopolitics, Butler's performativity, Jane Bennett's vibrant materialism, or Wesley Wildman's religious naturalism, should be more acceptable to a secular university than Anzaldúa's nepantla perspective or Thurman's contemplative philosophy. Particularly given decolonial concerns, ontological orientations that do not conform to constructivism should be seen as potentially acceptable departure points for scholarly praxis. As has become clear, I have in mind in particular religio-spiritual orientations that argue in various ways for a multi-dimensional cosmos that is held within an undergirding, efficacious, and ameliorating nature of reality. These perspectives can bring new insights, practices, and creative impulses to philosophical, political, and sociological communities of inquiry. Perhaps most importantly, their inclusion in such communities of inquiry is a necessary practice for democratic culture building.

A careful deconstruction of the religion/secular binary—in light of democratic and decolonial praxis—exposes that this is not a matter of scholar-practitioners / not-scholar-practitioners, but a matter of opening ourselves up *to the diversity which is* *already here.* It is already "among us"—*as us*—as *dêmos*. What we need is a little more of those imaginative, liminal, funky spaces where difference can be encountered, heard, affirmed…perhaps even loved. Transformational encounters amongst difference, held within an ameliorating reality, is at the heart of what I called an interspiritual space in chapter three—a space of difference and encounter that takes place in the depths of reality, depths which undergird surface level structures. Lying in these depths are many possibilities, both breathtakingly destructive and inconceivably ameliorating.

I've been making arguments throughout this work that scholarly fields which can embrace a diversity of ontological orientations are important for democratic praxis. A field formed around a diversity of scholar-practitioners, gravitating around affinities of spirituality, could be one such field. The particular affinities of spirituality I have in mind here are contemplative ones. Suffice to say contemplative speaks to the sensitivities of what we might normally think of as a "scholar-practitioner." Scholar-practitioners may be actively involved in spiritual practices meant to induce transformations of the human condition, for instance, and their studies of philosophy, theology, and/or human religiosity need not be seen as separate realms of endeavor.

Being a scholar-practitioner in this sense does not necessitate relinquishing one's critical perspective, nor granting religious or contemplative traditions unquestioned authority. I think there is much that religio-spiritual perspectives can learn from constructivist, critical discourse.[67] I also believe that critical discourses can benefit from the gifts and insights religio-spiritual-contemplative perspectives bring to bear, including their long histories of experimentation with practices, orientations, and human potentials to enact (something like) transformations of the human condition.[68] An opportunity exists here for a fecund relationality—a creative and synergistic give and take amongst multifarious orientations, willing to be in community across radical difference. For to enact democratic becoming, we actually have to learn *to live* with difference, *think* with difference, *imagine* with difference, form *community* with difference, and ultimately *embody* difference. This includes a difference of ontological perspectives. In order to move towards a "third founding" of America, as Eddie Glaude Jr. called for, we need the creative dynamism of a diversity of voices, perspectives, and practices, calling a truly multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-religious democratic culture into being. I'm not sure such a vision is attainable without the support contemplative perspectives can provide.

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[67] For example, many religious and contemplative traditions claim powerful and ameliorating transformative experiences at the heart of their traditions, such as "awakening" (*bodhi*), "divinization" (*theosis*), and "liberation" (*moksha*). Yet today, given over thousands of years of such practices, there still remain extensively embedded social dynamics of patriarchy within most of these traditions. This presents an opening for a critically reflective discussion of what exactly do soteriological goals such as "awakening"

Contemplative discourse remains in solidarity with the ultimate goals most oppositional discourse pursues—namely that of a radically diverse democratic culture that respects all of life (for many as sacred), and is resolute in pursuing socio-political structures that embody such respect. This obviously includes the work of dismantling systemic racism and finding reparative ways forward in light of our long histories of

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bring into the world (a discussion, I might add, that simply cannot take place in any kind of respectful, democratic, and decolonial form within a hard constructivist ontology). What do *embodiments* of awakening possibly leave out? And what type of interplay between diverse discourses such as religio-contemplative discourse and critical theorist discourse might prove beneficial to future embodiments of "awakening" itself?

[68] It is worth noting that the audacious attempts of contemplative lineages often occur in directions directly *opposed* to the operational cultural conditioning of the larger society in which they exist. Contemplative perspectives thus contain insights on ways in which the cultural conditioning we are born into and "swim in" might be mitigated and ameliorated, at least to some degree. Contemplative traditions are also almost unanimously more exuberant about the human potential to enact transformation, with much more at their disposal than "micro-resistances." Contemplatives declare "macro-resistances."

slavery, white supremacy, and genocidal policies towards Native Americans. However, as I argued in chapter four, a liminality of democracy does not conceive of politics as inherently antagonistic. Politics is also the highest art form of the human family, a question utterly entangled with the human condition itself. How can we actually learn to live together amongst difference, even *as* difference? This is the great question facing the human family.

Towards the Denouement

In this chapter, we saw a recap of previous arguments in this project, followed by a liminal exploration of the interstices between theology, religious studies, and philosophy. Lurking in these interstices was the scholar-practitioner, who may exist within, outside of, and among traditional 'religions,' and for whom philosophy, theology, and academic praxis is a "way of life," one that includes concerns for social justice and decolonial praxis. Pierre Hadot's work on ancient philosophy showed that philosophical praxis in pre-Christian times functioned as a spiritual tradition, arguably paralleling Eastern and Indigenous 'ways of living' more than contemporary Western ones. This line of thought brought up a number of pertinent points. First, religious traditions outside Abrahamic faiths have a more difficult time being categorized as 'religion' in juxtaposition to "philosophy" or even "science." In particular, it is not in any way straightforward to think of these traditions as necessarily "confessional" or "dogmatic." This realization has consequences for arguments that lie behind Western delineations of academic disciplines, especially the delineations between theology, philosophy, and religious studies (the demarcation between the former two marking as well the inception of a trajectory that traces into a religion/secular binary). These delineations were once again seen to hold colonial connotations today. Second, a need arose for experience to count as evidentiary for scholarly praxis, particularly as decolonial work amongst these disciplines continues to take place, as seen in Ayon Maharaj's cross-cultural philosophy utilizing Sri Ramakrishna's "Vijñāna Vedanta."

John Thatamanil's definition of the religious continued to complicate boundaries between the religious and so-called secular. The religious as "comprehensive qualitative orientation" paid attention to cognitive frameworks as well as practices, and crucially located religious labor in inducing a "felt character to the universe." One of the strengths of Thatamanil's definition lies in how it clearly reveals the religious work accomplished by supposedly secular ways of being, as seen for instance in exploitative economic practices. I extended this line of analysis to further articulate how supposedly secular discourses, such as Judith Butler's performativity, Foucault's biopolitics, or Derrida's deconstruction, *also* perform "religious" labor in this sense, thus further undermining supposed distinctions between secular and religious discourse.

Finally, I introduced a sense of contemplative experience as long-term transformations of our being-in-the-world, including affective patternings of bodies, and went on to discuss religion as "ways of living" from an indigenous and process perspective. Ways of living may give rise to embodied wisdoms, once again inducing a felt sense of the world, as well as unique skill-sets. Embodied wisdoms are tied to physical surroundings, practices, teachings, teachers, and a much more capacious sense of "context" than constructivism often allows for. This led me to 'calling-in' a contemplative discourse in academia, one that does not shy away from the reality of religious referents, transformative potentials of the human being, or an ameliorating nature of reality—while also bringing awareness to socio-political structures, the various contexts we bring to bear in our work, and our shared democratic life together. A contemplative discourse might operate similar to other discourses in academia, such as critique or analyses of power, ranging across various disciplines as a perspective from which one approaches scholarly praxis. It was also a way to begin knitting together a collaborative constituency of scholar-practitioners in academia, around a contemplative affinity of spirituality, with possible political implications down the road.

A contemplative discourse is one way to serve the bourgeoning spiritual interests of students who make their 'ways' into religious studies classrooms. Thus, contemplative discourse embraces a liminality of democracy in three main ways. First, it assists decolonial praxis in opening up academia to a wider range of ontological orientations. Second, it participates in a liminality of democracy by not rejecting the reality of religio-spiritual potentials in humanity. Third, it encourages liminal dialogical communities amongst critical difference, allowing for the development of democratic skill-sets, cultivating a capacity for intimate dialogue on issues of gravest importance in our lives.

Indubitably, this is but a vista of one scholar-practitioner. My own leanings in directions of post-oppositional politics are also caught up with my own ontological orientations. I cannot and do not claim that such leanings are separate from my own context, which includes privileged treatment by the society within which I have been born and continue to live. This society has extended certain privileges to me based upon the identity categories I fall into, privileges that have not necessarily been extended to others. Part of my context is also in the academic training I have received, as well as the teaching I have done. Yet another lies in the (inter)spiritual path I have walked thus far, as a way of life, and in the particular teachers, practices, and teachings I have undertaken. Yet, none of these contexts defines me. Each is but a liminal aspect of my embodiment, an opportunity to peer down into the cracks. One's context always remains somewhat undefinable and, perhaps, incommunicable. It consists not only of our cultural conditioning, but in our reactions to such conditioning, in our choices of the ways in which we choose to walk in this world, in the hidden and singular gifts we bring to bear on the world around us, as well as the habitual—and novel—patternings we form within the time being. Such is why our ultimate worth, value, dignity, can never be defined or encompassed by others or by our social surroundings—nor even by our own selves. For such ultimate worth lays forever beyond our vices…as well as our virtues.

Walt Whitman spoke in chapter four of an "adhesiveness of love" needed to hold democracy together, a religious element that partook of an ameliorating reality, and allowed for each thing to flourish in its uniqueness. He called such vision an "old, yet ever-modern dream of earth, out of her eldest and her youngest, her fond philosophers and poets."[69] For Whitman, this vision was also a lived reality of his own context, as his many poems attest to. Howard Thurman described the beloved community with a similar affinity of spirituality, sharing an embodied wisdom, or *felt sense of the world,* with Whitman. Thurman wrote, in a 1966 essay on "Desegregation, Integration, and the Beloved Community," that beloved community is primarily about "the quality of human relations experienced by the people who live within it." He goes on to describe beloved community as:

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[69] Whitman, *Whitman,* 949.

> a society in which there are no artificial barriers separating man from man [*sic*] or groups from one another—where the precious ingredient in each personality, unique unto itself, may be so honored by his fellows that it will enrich the common life even as it creates its own light in which to stand.[70]

Might it be possible to extend such an affinity of spirituality into an academic field? As both a democratic praxis and as a 'way of life'? A field that might support both scholars and students to discover their own "precious ingredients," to articulate their own ways of living—and in so doing, enrich our common life? The final chapter flows in directions of such liminal questions, within the atmosphere of an affinity of spirituality found here—amongst two 'sages of democracy'—amongst a *demosophy* if you will. Demosophy as embodied democratic wisdom, a felt-sense-of-the-world that might serve as a gravitational field for a scholarly community of inquiry. After the labor seen thus far in this project—destabilizing a religion/secular binary, recontextualizing secularist orientations as equally composed of religious labor, embracing a liminality of democracy, and understanding the religious as ways of living—such a field might rightly lead beyond secularity…and towards a beloved community of religious diversity.

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[70] Thurman, "Desegregation, Integration, and the Beloved Community." I am indebted to Kipton E. Jensen's work in discovering this essay of Thurman's. See Jensen, *Howard.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

DEMOSOPHY: TOWARDS A BELOVED COMMUNITY OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

I desire to share in the spiritual growth and ethical awareness of men and women of varied national, cultural, racial, and creedal heritage united in a religious fellowship.

—"The Commitment," from The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples[1]

When you find your way at this moment, practice occurs, actualizing the fundamental point [genjōkōan]; for the place, the way, is neither large nor small, neither yours nor others'. … here the way unfolds. The boundary of realization is not distinct… Do not suppose that what you attain becomes knowledge and is grasped by your intellect. Although actualized immediately, what is inconceivable may not be apparent. Its emergence is beyond your knowledge.

—Eihei Dōgen, *Genjōkōan*[2]

For I say at the core of democracy, finally, is the religious element. All the religions, old and new, are there. Nor may the scheme step forth, clothed in resplendent beauty and command, till these, bearing the best, the latest fruit, the spiritual, shall fully appear.

—Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*[3]

A Circumspect Panorama

The epigraphs above offer a three-pronged overview of my concluding chapter. In the first epigraph one finds "The Commitment," from the Church for the Fellowship of all Peoples, one of the first interracial, interreligious churches in the country, led by Howard Thurman for many years (as discussed in chapter five). Given the arguments I've made thus far, with an eye towards the liminality of democracy, a recognition of academia’s place in society, and a need for democratic and decolonial praxis— one might ask, “Why not a scholarly discipline for a ‘Fellowship of All Peoples?’” My formulation of a beloved community of religious diversity in the opening section below is a nascent reflection on such a question.

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[1] Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream*, 158.

[2] Dogen, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, 32.

[3] Whitman, *Whitman*, 949.

The second epigraph comes from Dōgen, founder of Sōtō Zen. Dōgen offers resonant concepts—in *genjōkōan* and *kattō*—that help put “skin, flesh, bones, and marrow” on the notion of a beloved community of religious diversity, entailing the middle sections below. I find in the rascally Dōgen fecund sources for reimagining scholarly praxis today. The epigraph gives a sense of the liminal spaces Dōgen constantly inhabited, both physical and spiritual. As we will see, Dōgen often complicated and complexified traditional Buddhist concepts and stories in order to approach ways of knowing that utilize yet exceed intellect. He embraced “words and letters,” yet also walked along ‘mountaintops,’ spoke with streams, rivers, and lakes, and admired plum blossoms, all as essential aspects of his lifelong education.[4] A way then “unfolds”—one with indistinct boundaries—belonging neither to ‘us’ nor ‘them,’ existing along that liminal slash (“*nos/otras*”), beyond a religion/secular binary. Dōgen’s ‘way’ manifests more in affective, liminal dimensions, than in concretized objects or analytical concepts.

The third epigraph offers one final reveal on that oft exploited line from Whitman in the previous pages. Not only does the religious element stand at the core of democracy, not only are all the religions “old and new” to be found there, they also have *work to do.* For authentic democracy may not emerge until a way is found in which they might bring forth their best, their brightest, their most precious gifts for the human family, what Whitman calls their "latest fruit, the spiritual." Demosophy speaks of such a way, resonating with a liminality of democracy, and it is with reflections upon it that this project concludes.

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[4] For a discussion of “sages on mountaintops,” and their value for contemporary academia, see the introduction.

In the penultimate chapter I began to draw together the many strings of this project into the vista of a scholar-practitioner—and made an argument for a contemplative discourse taking root *across* academia.[5] Such a discourse revolved more around "affinities of spirituality" than definitive linguistic formulations. Affinities of spirituality bring a circumspect panorama to the types of differences one encounters (*circum-spek,* "on all sides—to observe," "well-considered" or "deliberate"; *pan-horama,* "that which is seen from the whole"). That is, affinities of spirituality may help us to notice different "differences," as it were.

For example, in over two decades of gathering in dialogue with contemplatives from differing religious traditions, I have habitually heard the following sentiment expressed: That serious contemplatives from differing religious traditions often resonate with one another more than they do with some (sometimes even most) adherents within their own religious traditions. This has been a common refrain heard throughout the years. In turn, it begs a question; what differences do we pay attention to when we study 'religion'? What differences do we miss when we posit "incommensurable worlds?" Or simply view religions as various containers of teachings, practices, or revelations? Do we champion particular differences, concretizing them at the expense of other, perhaps more important, differences? Differences in religious containers, for instance, as opposed to the differences noted by the contemplatives mentioned above—differences apparently found *within* religious traditions? Differences found within religious traditions may simultaneously accent affinities of spirituality that resonate *across* traditions.[6]

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[5] For a review of many of the arguments of this project, a.k.a. "the strings," see the opening of the previous chapter.

One might learn to balance an awareness of differences with one of affinities. Affinities of spirituality offer a way to name, for instance, the more liminal, affective, praxis-oriented resonances that might be found among contemplatives—contemplatives in differing religious traditions, outside of traditions, in more than one tradition, or even as ancient philosophers. Similarly, fundamentalists in differing religious traditions can also be seen to share certain affinities of spirituality as well. Affinities of spirituality may give rise to "neoliberal resonance machines," or perchance to beloved communities of religious diversity. In both cases they ask us to grapple with more liminal differences and commonalities, ones not so easily concretized or captured in language, partaking of visceral registers of being. What might it mean to share more in common with others *religiously,* in terms of "comprehensive qualitative orientation," than one shares with many in one's own 'religion'? And what might this mean for *religious studies?*

Another question: Might differences across racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural experience learn to resonate together across varying "affinities of spirituality"? Might this be needed alongside the concretized differences so heavily accented today? Contemplatives provide one possible vector for such an assemblage (surely not the only one). Might contemplatives not resonate more strongly with one another—across affinities of spirituality—than across other assigned qualities? Thurman and Anzaldúa certainly believed so, as have many of the contemplatives I've spent time in dialogue with, contemplatives who embodied many races, cultures, contexts, and religions. Such assemblages may have much to teach us about democracy, our shared civic life together, issues of justice, and even a beloved community of religious diversity.

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[6] For one analysis of differences within and among traditions, see Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, which develops a "fractal" theory of religions. See also Race and Knitter, *New Paths for Interreligious Theology*.

Beloved Community of Religious Diversity

The term "beloved community" was first coined by American philosopher Josiah Royce, and later developed significantly in decolonial directions by both Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King Jr, among others.[7] Below I utilize Royce's idea of beloved community, along with its developments by King and Thurman, while adding to the mix weighty injections of an interreligious / interspiritual nature. In doing so I develop the outlines of a scholarly field, but it is held together more by a gravitational *field,* one might say, than by concretized research objects. Such a field has an apophatic center of gravity, similar to democracy itself, and revolves around contemplative affinities of spirituality.[8]

The beloved community was described by Royce as fundamentally a "community of interpretation." For Royce, the self was a relational, social, communitarian self, and in his late work, *The Problem of Christianity,* "interpretation" lies at the center of human consciousness. Indeed, for Royce our very sense of self is an "interpretation," and even "time" is understood only as an "interpretation." It is within acts of interpretation that human beings live out their actual lives. Royce felt that Western philosophy had been hindered by most often considering only two acts of cognition, "perception" or "conception." He proposed interpretation as a third act, a novel type of cognition that could not be explained by either perception or conception, nor as an amalgam of the two. Perception, as Royce described it, cognizes a "datum" of experience, a thing, or perhaps even a "change" (as with Henri Bergson). Conception, on the other hand, gives rise to a universal character, generalizing and abstracting. Yet, such acts of cognition are not sufficient for human knowing. Royce offers the example of our "neighbor's mind" to illustrate. Neither perception (do we see our neighbor's mind as a 'datum'?), nor conception (is our neighbor's mind a 'universal'?), are adequate to capture what we mean when we speak of our "neighbor's mind." Our awareness of our neighbor's mind is, instead, a new type of cognition altogether, an "interpretation."[9]

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[7] Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*; For further development of beloved community by King and Thurman, see Walter E. Fluker, *They Looked for a City*; Jensen, *Howard;* Thurman, *Search;* and King, *Testament,* especially 555-633 (*Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?).*

[8] "apophatic center" of democracy, see chapter 4; "contemplative affinities of spirituality," see chapter 6.

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[9] Royce, *Problem,* 273-296, especially 281. Royce tells us that the cognitive processes of conception and perception have dominated "a great part of the history of philosophy," Plato being representative of the primacy of "conception" (a universal) and Henri Bergson of "perception" (a data, or even a sense of constant change). Yet, it is interpretation that Royce asserts is the primary place we live our lives (Ibid., 277, 278). The semiotics in beloved community are based on those of Royce's colleague, Charles Sanders Peirce (for more on Peirce's semiotics, and their relationship to beloved community, see fn 38 below). Peirce's semiotics works well for contemplative perspectives, which may highlight the reality of religious referents.

For Royce, as well as for Peirce, "truth" is defined by reality itself, with our interpretations true to the degree in which they ultimately orient us towards the nature of reality as it actually is. Peirce embedded his semiotics within evolutionary theory, and developed a broad theory of inquiry, extrapolating from scientific methodologies. Royce contrasts this approach with the more functional pragmatism of William James. According to Royce, James utilizes the bouncing back and forth of concepts and percepts to develop "pragmatic leadings," rather than considering the more valuable act of interpretation. These "pragmatic leadings" are then judged on their utility, or as James famously put it, on the "cash-value" of the actions they lead to. For James, this is how truth is found, in the 'cash-value' of the actions spurred by concepts

Furthering his point, Royce discusses crossing the borders of another land, discovering a need to exchange one's currency. Utilizing a bank note to represent a conception, and the gold behind the bank note to represent perception (an example he takes from Bergson, who argued for the reality of the gold over the bank note), Royce investigates the situation of exchanging bank notes at a border where gold is no longer the coin of the realm. Here no synthesis of bank notes and gold will do, but a third process is needed, "which consists neither in the presentation of cash-values nor in the offering or accepting of credit-values. It is a process of interpreting the cash-values which are recognized by the laws and customs of one realm in terms of the cash-values which are legal tender in another country. … a special form of exchange of values, but a form not simply analogous to the type of the activities whereby conceptions are provided with their corresponding perceptions."[10]

For Royce, the example illumines how each of us lives out our lives, as a relational self constantly negotiating an exchange of values across borders of real difference: "Each of us, in every new effort to communicate with our fellow-men, stands, like the traveller [*sic*] crossing the boundary of a new country, in the presence of a largely strange world of perceptions and of conceptions."[11] It is through interpretation that we begin to cross such borderlands. Interpretation served the purpose, for Royce, of "uniting in some community the separated lives of…two distinct ideas,—of ideas which, when left

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(see James, *Pragmatism*), while for Peirce and Royce, truth lies in aligning ourselves with reality as it actually is.

[10] Royce, *Problem*, 282, 283.

[11] Ibid., 283.

to themselves, decline to coalesce or to cooperate, or to enter into one life."[12] Without interpretation, we are forbidden "to pass any of the great boundaries of the spiritual world, or to explore the many realms wherein the wealth of the spirit is poured out."[13]

The act of interpretation, then, serves to unite differing perspectives into communities of inquiry. A willingness to be in interpretive praxis with one another allows for "strange world(s) of perceptions and of conceptions" to become united in community, negotiating our "currency" with one another thru our interpretive praxis. For a community of *diverse* scholar-practitioners, the analogy is perhaps even more powerful than Royce's Western, Christian mind might have imagined (theorizing as he did within a relatively homogenous social milieu).[14] Scholar-practitioners today, such as those in comparative theology, stand like the traveler, "interpreting the cash-values which are recognized by the laws and customs of one realm in terms of the cash-values which are legal tender in another country. … a special form of exchange." Given the amount of religio-spiritual experimentation happening today in the United States and elsewhere—among comparative theologians, SBNRs ("spiritual but not religious"), multiple-religious belongers, interspiritual practitioners, and perhaps most importantly among everyday folk navigating lives amidst competing values of the "religious" (in Thatamanil's broad sense of the term)[15]—Royce's articulation of contrasting ideas entering into "one life" rings true in an intensified 'way.'

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[12] Ibid., 303.

[13] Ibid., 284.

[14] Royce was part of the classical American philosophical tradition, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He taught alongside William James at Harvard, was colleagues with Charles Peirce, and his views on race were influenced by one of his greatest students, W.E.B. DuBois. For more on Royce's views on race, see fn 28 below.

Consider for a moment Hyo-Dong Lee's autobiographical description of his theological journey into a "Confucian-Daoist-Donghak-Christian Theology of Qi," found in the edited volume *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative.*[16] Lee begins by describing the many religious influences on his life, from growing up in South Korea with Confucian rituals venerating his grandparents, to the chanting of Buddhist monks during Sunday picnics, to his baptism as an evangelical Protestant. Lee's multifaceted religious journey is complicated by a tension between the "cultural-religious milieu of 'diffuse religion' that assumed a loose sense of multiple religious belonging" in which he grew up—and the non-porous, exclusive, Westernized character of 'religion' he found embodied in evangelical Protestantism. Due to such complexity, Lee admits feeling challenged by an oft heard comparative theological dictum to be "rooted in a single home tradition."[17] Instead, Lee has chosen a theological methodology that grants equal epistemic value to multiple religious traditions in his life, hewing closer to the cultural environment in which he was raised.[18] In doing so, Lee offers a concrete example of how contrasting ideas can enter into "one life," through interpretive praxis that emerges within the locus of one's life experience.

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[15] For discussion of John Thatamanil's sense of the religious see chapter six. See also Thatamanil, *Circling.*

[16] Hyo-Dong Lee, "My path to a theology of Qi."

[17] Ibid., 234, 235.

[18] Lee writes that he rejects "the universal applicability of the idea of asymmetric belonging so as to allow for a bidirectional conception of the operational logic of comparative theology" (Ibid., 240).

Lee's deeply relational and empathetic comparative theological account found in his monograph, *Spirit, Qi, and the Multitude: A Comparative Theology for the Democracy of Creation,* offers an example of how such work can further both decolonial and democratic impulses. As seen in the introduction, Lee's work is guided by the labor of constructing "theological and philosophical underpinnings for the idea of democracy—this is, what may be called a *metaphysics of democracy.*"[19] His use of the Donghak tradition ("Eastern Learning," today known as Choendogyo)—a syncretistic, indigenous, and oppressed religion of Korea that led the "first attempt at democratic revolution in Korean history"—serves not only as a rich resource of liminal theological ideas, bridging theistic Christianity with nontheist traditions of Confucianism and Daoism. Donghak also represents a "voice 'from the underside of history,'" speaking to Lee's "liberationist impulses" that have always been part of his "theological quest."[20] Lee's sensitivity to numerous religious traditions, as well as to postcolonial, decolonial, and democratic praxis, offers an exemplary approach of comparative theological work that is non-appropriative, respectful of traditions, and liberative in its leanings.

Further, Lee's emphases on existential, embodied, lived experience as a locus for his philosophical and theological thought offers a nuanced version of a "theology without walls" (TWW) that aligns with democratic and decolonial praxis. Lee theorizes amongst multiplicities of ontological orientations, utilizing an interpretive praxis that takes account of socio-political realities, as well as a diverse array of religious, spiritual, and philosophical perspectives. Lee's interpretive praxis is also an embodied one, emerging from the locus of his own life experience. Lee articulates a cosmic perspective and transformative ways of being while also bringing awareness to the contexts within which he theorizes. One might even say Lee adopts a contemplative, contextualist perspective.[21] Lee's version of TWW, a burgeoning academic discipline that aligns with many of the sentiments of a beloved community of religious diversity, embraces a theological self that is thoroughly contextualist. Lee articulates a locus for scholarly praxis that is "encumbered and propelled forward by the weight of the historical layers of traditions accumulated and embedded in [our bodies]," and which remains "tethered to…concrete teachings and practices as a result of one's existential and historical embeddedness in particular traditions."[22]

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[19] Lee, *Spirit, Qi, and the Multitude*, xii. Lee is not referring to "democracy" in this sense as the particular Western expressions of democratic society, but rather an idealist version of democracy, as seen in the introduction.

[20] Lee, "My path," 238, 239.

It is the personal, existential, embodied nature of Lee's journey that grounds his theological thought in the flesh and blood of our complex interreligious, intercultural contemporary lives—struggling to enact better versions of human society and understanding. Lee's religious and theological journey is existentially and historically unique, yet in his willingness to undergo such a continuing religious journey, and in his courage to "interpret" and share its theological fruits with all of us—I find that I (the reader) become enriched, inspired, and enlivened. Even though the "concrete teachings and practices…of particular traditions" that I imbibe may remain different, my own religious journey is nonetheless now informed and affected (positively) by Lee's journey, through a shared interpretive praxis grounded in experience, receptivity, historical embeddedness, profound respect, and transformative encounter. In this process of interpreting the novel ideas of *others*—both to ourselves as well as to those around us—we begin to build an empathic solidarity with one another, in time creating widening circles of community. This type of intimate interpretive praxis, performed in empathy, love, compassion, and courage, is at the heart of a *beloved community of religious diversity,* as I present it here—both as a democratic religio-spiritual-political praxis, and as a scholarly community of inquiry.

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[21] See introduction for discussion of a contemplative, contextualist perspective.

[22] Lee, "My path," 240.

Royce's ontology of beloved community emphasizes that our capacity for this type of interpretative praxis does not arise from sense data or abstract concepts, nor from pragmatic leadings, but rather from a deeper place residing in the human being, the place from which poets and prophets and sages spring forth. Such a place, for Royce, is the true source of guidance and inspiration for the human family.[23] Hence, interpretation is "what we seek in all our social and spiritual relations; and without some process of interpretation, we obtain no fullness of life."[24] It is also an endless process, since each interpretation generated also generates, in turn, the conditions for a new interpretation: "By itself, the process of interpretation calls, in ideal, for an infinite sequence of interpretations. For every interpretation, being addressed to somebody, demands interpretation from the one to whom it is addressed."[25] When such interpretive praxis is wedded to spiritual praxis, a type of eschatological movement can occur. Interpretation then becomes "the great humanizing factor in our cognitive processes," ultimately allowing for the flowering of love within communities. The "will to interpret," a willingness to stay in community and interpretive praxis with one another, thus becomes a prime motivating factor in building beloved community, recalling the opening epigraph of this project, from Gloria Anzaldúa, "La compasión es una conversación sostenida" ("Compassion is a conversation sustained").[26] As Royce articulated it, "the Beloved Community, whatever else it is, will be, when it comes, a Community of Interpretation."[27]

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[23] Royce, *Problem,* 312. Royce's hermeneutical ontology overlaps in interesting ways with Sri Ramakrishna's "manifestation model" of religious experience, as articulated by Ayon Maharaj, briefly seen in chapter six of this project (see Maharaj, *Infinite*). Ramakrishna sees the divine as manifesting to each individual in an actualized, yet unique, way (in both personal and impersonal ways), rather than an objective (Cartesian) divine reality, or a (Kantian) divine reality whose true nature remains forever hidden beyond human consciousness. Similarly, Royce writes, "And, if, in ideal, we aim to conceive the divine nature, how better can we conceive it than in the form of the Community of Interpretation, and above all in the form of the Interpreter, who interprets all to all, and each individual to the world, and the world of spirits to each individual" (Ibid., 318). There are also resonances here with Whitehead's notion of God as the "poet of the world" (see Whitehead, *Process and Reality*).

[24] Ibid., 282.

Royce's beloved community is, of course, rife with Christian theological overlay, not a problem in itself but perhaps making it suspect from the get go. Nevertheless, provided it is properly mitigated with decolonial labor,[28] as seen in its further development by Thurman and King, as well as pluralized in the sense of adopting an interreligious/interspiritual praxis—and perhaps an openness to ontological pluralism—it seems one potential source for developing a fecund philosophical and epistemological framework. The semiotics at the heart of Royce's beloved community are based on those of his colleague, Charles Peirce. These have proven to be a fecund source for contemporary academics more generally.[29] Such a community of inquiry orients one towards coming face to face with the *other*, not in a sense of hegemonic domination—nor with a naïve pluralistic openness—but rather in mutual responsibility for creative and healing interpretative praxis. Importantly, the potency of such acts lies not merely upon human conceptual apparatuses, but are also undergirded by the religious referents of scholar-practitioners (a diverse array indeed). Consequently, in a beloved community of religious diversity, our interpretive praxis is undergirded by the referent we seek—namely the nature of reality as it is—in all of its subtle manifestations in and through embodied human consciousness.

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[25] Ibid., 290.

[26] Anzaldúa, *Light*, 92.

[27] Royce, *Problem*, 318.

[28] This is a good place to mention, in the spirit of decolonial praxis, that Royce may have held at least some problematic ideas on race, though this is also a somewhat mixed matter among scholars. Royce clearly ran ahead of his time in his racial views, and according to Jacquelyn Kegley was the only classical American philosopher, along with W.E.B. DuBois (a student of Royce's who influenced his views) and Jane Addams, to directly and substantially address race issues during his time (early twentieth century). Royce refused to essentialize notions of race, saw race as a social kind, and (according to Dwayne Tunstall) has been read as an "antiracist" philosopher by numerous scholars, including Cornel West, Eddie Glaude Jr., Alain Locke, and Jacquelyn Kegley. Royce has also been read as tacitly expressing support for antiblack colonialism by Tunstall. For competing articles on Royce's positions on race, as well as Royce's original writings on questions of race, see Royce, *Race Questions, Provincialisms, and Other American Problems;* Tunstall, "Josiah Royce's 'Enlightened' Antiblack Racism?"; and Kegley, "Josiah Royce on Race: Issues in Context."

In the spirit of exploring the notion of a beloved community of religious diversity (henceforth, BCRD) beyond a Christian basis, I note resonances BCRD has with philosophy and religion scholar Bin Song's articulation of a Ru (Confucian) form of comparative theology. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Bin Song utilizes a pre-Christian, decolonial reading of Aristotle, complicating once again our Western delineations between religion, theology, and philosophy. Bin Song writes that before Christendom, "[I]n Ancient Greece, theology was part of philosophy as a way of life which had rich spiritual and religious significances. However, per their transformed meanings in the Christian world, philosophy was deprived of these significances, and treated instead as an intellectual enterprise to focus upon concepts, argumentation, and rationalization."[30] It is Bin Song's search for a comparative theological method more amenable to his Ru identity that leads him into his reading of Aristotle, particularly around a "liberal arts" education. He shows how Aristotle's thought was domesticated by Christian authorities (and later, I would add, by anachronistic, secularized readings of "philosophy"), which "took away the rich spiritual and religious significance of ancient Greek thought, and accordingly displaced philosophy as a subservient analytic tool." Aristotle, of course, had intense interests in religious and theological ideas, where theology was an aspect of philosophy that inquired into the ultimate nature of being. Philosophy, for Aristotle, meant not only inquiry into what he called "the Unmoved Mover," but also a "longing for…mystical union with Nous,"[31] and an understanding of philosophy proper as "the result of an inner transformation."[32]

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[29] For more on Peirce's semiotics, see fn 9 in this chapter above, and fn 38 below.

It is worth noting how Bin Song sees a need to return to discourse prior to the rise of Christendom—and the break made between theology and philosophy—in order to find ways of thought that bespeak a greater affinity with his Ru orientation. Once one crosses this incipient delineation, between theology and philosophy, one begins down a path leading to a religion/secular binary. In the spirit of reassessing such a binary, this is a pertinent point to bring attention to. What might it mean to live along the slash, rather than on one side or other of the binary, in our scholarly praxis?

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[30] Song, "Comparative Theology as a Liberal Art," 99.

[31] Ibid., 101.

[32] Hadot, *Philosophy,* 269. Here is the full quote: "It is sometimes claimed that Aristotle was a pure theoretician, but for him, too, philosophy was incapable of being reduced to philosophical discourse, or to a body of knowledge. Rather, philosophy for Aristotle was a quality of the mind, the result of an inner transformation."

Apropos, it is in Aristotle's notion of a "liberal arts education" that Bin Song finds resources for a Ru comparative theology. According to Bin Song, Aristotle always included theology within liberal arts, as a place where "faithful, noble-minded and open-minded learners can flourish simultaneously their spiritual and intellectual life within varying educational communities." A liberal arts education also had political resonance for Aristotle. The point of such an education is *eudaimonia,* the highest attainment of human spirit and flourishing, and thus an "education of liberal arts should…enlighten citizens of all subjects necessary for humans' full flourishing."[33] A liberal arts education is not just four years of undergrad, but rather an unending, ceaseless process, that continues throughout one's life. In other words, it is a 'way of life.' Membership in such a community of inquiry did not revolve around adopting a uniform ontological orientation. Rather, a liberal arts education embraced multiplicities of religious and spiritual orientations, gravitating around a commitment to open-ended inquiry, and a search for the good life *amongst* difference. In doing so, Aristotle developed an inherently comparative methodology of inquiry that at the same time was thick with "religious and spiritual significance." The focus was never merely on rational deduction. As Bin Song puts it:

> These educational communities of liberal arts are indeed not equivalent to any exclusive membership community based upon unalterable faith statements; however, seen as a whole, they are an anchored, longstanding and growing community. In particular, per the Aristotelian model, this community of liberal arts does not exclude overt religious affiliates as long as these affiliates do not

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[33] Song, "Comparative," 100.

> absolutize and reify their own determinate understanding of faith, and hence, would like to incorporate the practice of their faith and the learning of the world into an organic way of life.[34]

Bin Song's reading of Aristotle is but one avenue upon which varying religious persuasions might develop nuanced versions of a "liberal arts education," further catalyzing a reassessment of the religion/secular binary in academia. Current categories and arguments still tend to revolve around Western understandings of 'religion,' and utilize Christianity as a reference point. A reconsideration of this binary entails expanding our social imaginary around the religious. As an example, Bin Song describes a Ru identity as "non-confessional," and unable to be defined by a "commitment to any unalterable faith declaration or performance." Neither is Ruism "an exclusive membership tradition," since it remains ever open to new forms of knowledge. Bin Song develops his Ru perspective through readings of Ru philosopher Wang Longxi (1498-1583 C.E.), and calls this orientation a "'seeded, open inclusivism,' undergirded by a pluralistic consciousness." Ruism as a tradition embraces a spiritual orientation that encourages practitioners to "incorporate elements from other traditions through a prudent judgment of their efficacy…thereby synthesizing them into a growing, organic body of human wisdom which nevertheless maintains continuity with classical Ruism." As seen above, Song shows how this Ru perspective aligns with the goals of Aristotle's liberal arts education more broadly. In fact, Bin Song characterizes a Ru orientation in this sense "as a liberal art *par excellence.*" While remaining rooted in his Ru orientation, Bin Song nevertheless finds an affinity of spirituality with a "broader community of whomsoever are intrigued by shared problems and issues in human lives. In a more concrete term, this community will be potentially extended to the entire humanity, and include anyone who cherish the value of liberal arts education."[35]

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[34] Ibid., 101.

Might what Bin Song reveals be of significance to decolonial and democratic futures? Note first that Bin Song's reading has come by way of an 'interpretation'—one with spiritual / soteriological grip and decolonial relevance—of Aristotle through a Ru perspective. A type of imaginal interreligious / interspiritual hermeneutic is at play, an example of the kind of interpretive praxis imagined in BCRD. What we learned through such interpretive praxis is perhaps even more significant—doing "theology" from a Ru perspective does not look like doing big "T" Theology.[36] Rather, it looks more like a form of open-ended inquiry—open to the whole of humanity, to anyone who might "cherish the value" of learning to become more human. It is more a type of liberal art than a 'religion,' remaining "thick with religious and spiritual significance" yet taking part *amongst* and *within* religious difference. Such a vision resonates strongly with a liminality of democracy. Bin Song, similar to Hyo-Dong Lee above, speaks to a kind of *demosophy,* a democratic wisdom, or a wisdom of the people (*dêmos-sophia*), open to discerning contributions from all of humanity. A BCRD places itself, purposefully, into such liminal spaces. BCRD may even find something like a disciplinary formation here, a space of scholarly praxis where affinities of spirituality might yet resonate more strongly.

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[35] Ibid., 111-113.

[36] "big 'T' Theology," see chapter 3.

In this sense, BCRD would like to help shepherd a greater hermeneutical openness into academia. A hermeneutics that is open to ways in which Western categories may be questioned, open to being exposed to novel patternings of thought, open even to transformative possibilities—embracing a hermeneutics of heart-minds. Hence, we might stand as "travelers" to one another, interpreting at the edges, the *eschatos,* of our experience. Once again, it is in such liminal places we find the home of the scholar-practitioner.

BCRD is also an attempt to address a need for democratic praxis in our educational system—a praxis that does not relegate "spiritual and religious significance" to the periphery. Why should such significance be banished to the peripheries? This is clearly not the case among the actual *dêmos*, where spiritual significance can be said to be widespread and growing. Current structures bespeak a lingering sense of superiority, slipped under the table, as it were, from one side of the religion/secular binary (Christianity) to the other (a secularist gaze that guards against a 'return of religion'). But what if scholar-practitioners don't hold to such delineations, and what if decolonial praxis continues to push us in more liminal directions beyond the binary?

Bin Song's notion of a "rooted" tradition I also find helpful. He speaks of a rooted tradition in contrast to a "'home tradition' because a 'root' is an anchored living-being, always undergoing adaptation, revision and growth, which is very different from the image that a bulwarked 'home' evokes."[37] This resonates with my sense of contextualist, contemplative perspectives. All scholars, in this sense, come from "rooted traditions," all are “anchored” in the living roots of their lives. One is ever “encumbered” by the “historical layers of traditions” carried in our hybrid bodies—for we are all hybrids.

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[37] Song, "Comparative," 112.

At the center of BCRD then is not necessarily a shared research “object” (even one of “ultimacy”), but rather the apophatic epicenter of a shared *Reality.* BCRD participates in an overlapping—as opposed to incommensurable—magisteria of human experience, including religio-spiritual experience. It is a *liminal* space, in which Reality itself is gravitated around. With such an apophatic, liminal center of gravity, the important thing is not necessarily an unseen “center,” but rather *a shared gravitational field*. BCRD reverberates with the apophatic qualities of both religious studies and democracy, as seen in chapter four—as well as a liminality of democracy. A gravitational field isn’t necessarily seen (conceptualized), it is more a *felt embodiment,* discerned not by direct observations, but by becoming aware of movements within its liminal fields. It is more like the movement of affinities of spirituality, and hence there is a *felt sense of solidarity* around which a BCRD gravitates. Given the atmospherics covered—and in lieu of Thurman’s sniffer—one might even call it a *smelt sense of solidarity* (notwithstanding a certain fetor to the phrase). In any case, it is a sense that we are all in this—whatever “this” is —*together.* Thus, BCRD functions naturally as to take part in practices that bespeak a liminality of democracy, such as Thurman’s dictate to follow his sniffer, Catherine Keller’s “apophatic assemblage,” or Anzaldúa’s advice to peer into the cracks (*rajaduras*).

As it turns out, this is not so different from the Peircean semiotics that lie at the heart of Royce’s conception of “beloved community” (particularly when these semiotics are extended as to hold experience as evidentiary, and develop an openness to ontological pluralism). While this is not the place to introduce a theory of inquiry, a brief meandering may prove advantageous. I leave such meandering to a lengthy footnote.[38]

Let me turn now to Thurman's and King's important further development of the concept of "beloved community." As we have seen in past chapters, somewhat extensively, various ways in which each spoke of community, I concentrate here on overlaps and differences. Both advanced the socio-political resonances of the concept in powerful ways, and one finds similarities as well as distinctions in how they framed beloved community. It might be said that such distinctions emerged from the roots of their lives, functioning within their own 'ways' of theological and philosophical praxis. According to Walter Fluker, the locus for both Thurman's and King's thoughts on beloved community "arose initially from their common experience of oppression and segregation as black Americans in the deep South." Given such experience, the "axiomatic questions" which underlay their visions of community always included the following: "*What is the most moral and practical method for overcoming racism in American society?"*[39]

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[38] While Royce was an idealist for much of his career, he became intensely interested in the semiotics of Charles Peirce late in his life. In *The Problem of Christianity,* Royce utilized Peirce's theory of signs and interpretation to develop his ideal of beloved community. Royce's embedding of beloved community within Peirce's semiotics also allows for a fairly seamless transition to envisioning a beloved community of religious diversity as a scholarly community of inquiry. Peirce's semiotics have become a fecund source for academics in general. Robert Neville has utilized Peircean semiotics in developing his own theory of inquiry, particularly around interreligious practices of philosophical theology (see, Neville, *Ultimates*, and Neville, *The Truth of Broken Symbols*). Wesley Wildman also utilizes Peircean semiotics in developing his "religious philosophy as multidisciplinary comparative inquiry" (Wildman, *Religious Philosophy*). Peirce's semiotics are even being used in biology today. The semiotics are particularly helpful regarding religious realities, as Peirce assumes that signs refer back to something real, as opposed to numerous postmodern discourses that embrace forms of relativism. The "truth" of any particular sign or interpretation lies in its ability to orient the interpreter around the actual reality lying behind the sign. Peirce's semiotics are triadic in this sense, involving a sign, referent, and interpretation, rather than just signs and interpretations as in some postmodern discourses. Peirce's semiotics always entail a sense of reality tied to evolutionary trajectories, and truth consists in orienting ourselves more surely, in "the infinite long run," to reality as it is (otherwise we become extinct). Thus, that which religious symbols point to can maintain their reality (or realities) within Peircean semiotics.

One way to describe BCRD is as a community of inquiry that labors to orient its participants more surely around the nature of reality as it is, yet to do so *in community*. Such a description, it is worth noting, aligns generally with the stated or assumed outcomes of other academic disciplines, including science, as well as humanities discourses, such as analysis of power relations, or even Judith Butler's performativity. These also labor to orient practitioners (as well as non-practitioners) around the nature of reality in various ways. For BCRD, it is just that a community of inquiry around our shared lives together need not restrict itself to hard constructivist ontologies.

Modes of social analysis and critique are helpful for orienting us more surely around reality as it is (as are scientific disciplines). This can be acknowledged, without discounting the fact that differing ontological orientations have contested notions of what constitutes the nature of reality as it is. Many religious and contemplative traditions might place more secular analyses within a facet of reality that exists alongside other facets of reality, such as transcendent, immanent, harmonious, sacred, divine, and/or empty or awakened facets of reality. Addressing relevant issues from one's own 'ontological orientation,' as well as one's *experience*, is an accepted—and expected—practice within a beloved community of religious diversity. Indeed, it is the lifeblood of a BCRD.

There are numerous other resonances I see with Peircean semiotics, particularly when one adds embodied, felt experience to the mix, and an openness to ontological pluralism. This is not the place, however, for a more detailed look. That will have to wait for a future work, and a full-blown theory of inquiry, along with a hypothesis of human consciousness, an ongoing project I am currently working on.

Fluker argues that it is King's final years of life and ministry, ones "beleaguered with controversy and sabotage," as well as an increasing realization of the intransigence of white supremacy, that "are the most crucial in understanding the maturation of his personal and intellectual growth in respect to community."[40] In chapter four, I discussed some of this context for King's late life, as he came out against the Vietnam war, and had a greater realization of the endemic crisis of poverty, particularly in urban ghettos. Fluker notes that discontinuities between Thurman and King are important as well, "perhaps more important than the continuities." The differences reveal "different dimensions" of the common problems each faced, as well as provide "new insights and directions" for creation of beloved community.[41] Fluker sees Thurman as concentrating more on the "the power of love as a means of overcoming the *internal* barriers of deception, fear, and hate," while "King emphasized love in respect to social justice and the organization of power in the creation of a responsible society."[42]

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[39] Fluker, "They Looked for a City," 35.

[40] Ibid., 39.

[41] Ibid., 49.

While the differences are important, they are also ones of degree, not kind. As seen in chapter five, Thurman saw the depths of spiritual experience as the key to creating cultures that *overcome* power dynamics. Prolonged exposure to spiritual depths, Thurman found, allows people to form relationships of equality and love that have the power to ameliorate race, class, and cultural power dynamics. While King concentrated on the organization of power in socio-political structures, it is also true that he saw the praxis of nonviolence as a *spiritual* practice, one that was profoundly transformative at the societal level as well as the level of the individual. King himself experienced such transformation in his own being, especially in the nightmarish final years of his life, from which exude an enhanced power and profundity of vision. The "common ground" that arises between Thurman's and King's vision of beloved community, as Fluker describes it, is "in their agreement that spirituality is the basis for social transformation and that the ultimate model of community is a personal/mutual one which seeks unity in diversity and guards the distinctiveness of persons in society."[43]

Some see religious or spiritual overtones within the American Academy of Religion (AAR) as a weakness, representing a kind of scholarly contamination in need of purging (or perhaps a sin in need of purification), as we saw in chapter four. This project asks if this is not a weakness, but a *strength*. The AAR is wonderfully diverse, after all, with vibrant multitudes of religious, racial, ethnic, and spiritual inclinations, as well as home to some of the best democratic minds in the country. It is where most of the theorists in this project might be found. What would it mean to simply embrace, outwardly, such contamination? Is it possible to make such contamination *normative* for ‘secular’ education as well?

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[42] Ibid., 46-47.

[43] Ibid., 48.

I don’t pretend to have answers for these questions. But educational institutions *do* need to seriously consider what a religion/secular binary means in our times. The colonial problems we have seen around such a binary are very real, and something needs to be done about it (not necessarily all at once). In some sense, education needs to regain a capacity to perform functions that work to uphold our democratic lives together. Our country needs this. Democracy needs it. For those who do hold to more spiritual inclinations, either inside or outside of religious traditions, there needs to be more explicit ways in which socio-political assemblages (including scholarly praxes) can be organized around “affinities of spirituality.” BCRD is one attempt to articulate a coming together of difference without negating it. A beloved community of religious diversity is oriented towards building empathic, rooted solidarities by learning from one another, on issues of greatest import in our lives. Thus, it is also democratic praxis.

There is a need to reconsider our academic life in light of the diversity that is now present among us, in light of democratic praxis, and in light of the undermining of an anachronistic religion/secular binary. Charles Taylor speaks about how we “fetishize our historical arrangements,” preventing us from foregrounding “the basic goals we are seeking," and thus "seeing our secular regime in a more fruitful light."[44] When we fetishize the historical structuring of disciplines, particularly around theology, philosophy, and religious studies—all disciplines at the heart of the historical, and often colonial, machinations of a hegemonic Christendom—we hinder ourselves from (re)assessing our shared democratic lives together in more fruitful 'ways.'

After all, "all the religions, old and new," are here now, and they are *us*. Perhaps it is the case that a field of gravity with profound spiritual and religious significance is *needed* for the maintenance and production of democratic becoming—even more so amongst so much religious (and secular) difference. Such a field today obviously cannot be a merely "Christian" one, but perhaps it could be an interspiritual one. Perhaps even a *beloved community of religious diversity*.

"A Kōan Realized in Life"—Eihei Dōgen

Eihei Dōgen (1200-1253), founder of the Japanese Sōtō Zen school, seems a strange place to turn to at this point. However, as discussed in the introduction, Dōgen was at the heart of this project when it began…before it evolved into, well, whatever this is. As Dōgen has been with me in some sense throughout it, it is but a natural turning in my own thought. Dōgen brings a further interspiritual impulse into my conclusion, as well as surprising democratic resonance. One might say he also conveys a number of 'affinities of spirituality' of interest for BCRD—among them two reverberating concepts for scholar-practitioners, *genjōkōan* and *kattō*. *Kattō,* or "twining vines," is helpful in particular when imagining a discipline of scholar-practitioners who herald from multiplicities of religious and spiritual (and even secular) orientations. Hence, Dōgen is also a natural place to turn within the project itself.

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[44] Butler, Habermas, Taylor, and West, *The Power of Religion*, 48.

Dōgen pledged to become a monk at age seven following the death of his mother, after his father passed away when he was but two. At his mother's funeral, it is said the young boy had an experience of "impermanence" as he gazed at slowly rising incense. There and then he committed to becoming a monk, fulfilling his mother's deathbed entreaty for him. Following thru at the ripe age of twelve, Dōgen left home to live at a Buddhist monastery.[45] He went on to study with many teachers, including Myoan Eisai, founder of Rinzai Zen, and traveled to numerous monasteries throughout medieval Japan. This was the Kamakura period in Japan, an "apocalyptic" time according to Dōgen scholar Hee-Jin Kim, as the samurai battled the aristocracy for control of crumbling social structures. Dōgen eventually traveled all the way to China in his pursuit of Dharma, and only after a long search would he meet his root teacher, Rujing, with whom he bonded deeply. After receiving Dharma-transmission, Dōgen traveled back to Japan in 1227, and founded the Sōtō Zen sect of Buddhism.[46]

In part due to the immense suffering present in Dōgen's life, particularly in his childhood, Kim describes Dōgen's religious stance as embodying a "compassionate understanding of the intolerable reality of existence," and as eschewing sentimental flights of transcendence.[47] It was a common trope in Dōgen's time that people lived in a dark age where the true Dharma had disappeared, and thus religious goals such as "awakening" (*bodhi*) were unattainable, and immoral behavior should be expected. Dōgen rejected this narrative, claiming that human nature is always both good and bad, regardless of one's existential realities, and hence awakening was just as possible in a "dark age" as in an age of enlightenment.[48] Perhaps we can take some inspiration from Dōgen's stance in our own times of racial injustice, wealth inequality, social unrest, and clima(c)tic crises.

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[45] Kim, *Eihei Dōgen: Mystical Realist,* 17-18. Dōgen was forced into a decision at such a young age by his uncle, who had raised him for nobility and pushed him to assume an aristocratic position.

[46] Ibid., 13-50.

What was of importance in philosophizing for Dōgen, according to Kim, "was not the relative significance of theoretical formulations, but how and what we did with the ideas and values inherited from the past—in other words, the authenticity of our philosophic activity." By "authenticity," Kim refers to how philosophical activity becomes embodied existentially in our lives, as a lasting, transformative 'way.' When performed as such, philosophic activity itself becomes what Dōgen called *genjōkōan,* and what Kim translated as "a kōan realized in life."[49]

Genjōkōan is an example of Dōgen's creative and playful use of language. It is also an example of how Dōgen often complicated traditional Buddhist concepts thru new interpretations, a habit we encounter again below with *kattō*. Dōgen contrasted *genjōkōan* with the more commonly utilized *kōans* of Rinzai Zen. The *kōans* of Rinzai parallel the understanding of a *kōan* as an illogical puzzle meant to be "intuitively and suddenly solved" in an experience of *satori,* or "sudden awakening."[50] Dōgen, however, critiqued notions of "sudden awakening," which were prevalent in Japanese Buddhism during his time. In contrast, he developed a notion of gradual or continual "awakening." Hence the title of an edited translation of Dōgen's work, *Enlightenment Unfolds.* The nuances of "sudden" vs. "gradual" awakening is part of what distinguishes Rinzai and Sōtō Zen still today.[51]

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[47] Ibid., 19.

[48] Ibid., 14-18.

[49] Ibid., 98. Kim describes Dōgen's attitude: "The philosophic enterprise was as much the practice of the bodhisattva way as was zazen [silent meditation]." This sentiment is also seen below in the fascicle *Kattō.*

According to Shohaku Okumura, *genjōkōan* articulates the essence of Dōgen's teaching of awakening as "continuous practice" (*gyōji*). *Gen-jō* (現成) and *kō-an* (公按) both consist of two Sino ideograms. *Gen* (現) means to "to appear," "to show up," or "to be in the present moment." *Jo* (成) means "to accomplish" or "to become." Thus, as a verb *genjō* means "to manifest or actualize," or "to appear and become," and as a noun, it refers to "reality as it is actually happening in the present moment."[52] In the second epigraph above, we see *genjōkōan* translated by Kazuaki Tanahashi as "actualizing the fundamental point."

In ancient China, *kōan* was a term for a law issued by the emperor, one that was "unchangeable and unquestionable." Hence, in its traditional, Rinzai Zen use, *kōan* came to connote "an expression of unchangeable truth or reality."[53] Dōgen, in his rascally way, further complexifies his own concept of *genjōkōan* by making use of an uncommon ideogram to denote *kōan*. The *kō* (公) of *kō-an* is the same in both cases, and has the meaning "to be public." Okamura describes *kō* as also having the meaning "to equalize inequality," the reference being to government officials whose job it is to "find fair and unbiased solutions to people's problems." Thus, *kō* references a need to create equality amongst the public.

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[50] See Heine, *Existential and Ontological Dimensions of Time in Heidegger and Dogen*, 185 fn 41.

[51] For a brief discussion of these differences, see Tanahashi, "Introduction," especially xxxii-xxxiii.

[52] Okumura, *Realizing Genjokoan*, 13-14.

[53] Ibid., 14.

The *an* of *kōan* is normally represented by the ideogram 案, which refers to a document on a desk, as well as a place to read, write, or think. Dōgen, however, utilizes a noncommon ideogram, substituting a more embodied expression of *an* (按), which means literally "to massage for healing."[54] More broadly, it can mean "to investigate in order to fix something that is out of order," as well as to "keep one's lot." Okamura describes *an* in this case as having the dual meaning of participating in a community according to one's talents, skills, and personality, as well as "to keep private." Dōgen's use of *an* (按) "meant recognizing one's place in society and performing one's duties and responsibilities within that place, but it also refers to the individuality of people. It means recognizing that we all have our own particular personality traits and capabilities that make us unique; we can't trade places with anyone else in this life."[55]

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[54] This noncommon use of *an* (按) includes within it the kanji for "hand" (手). While Okumura tells us that the difference between the two uses of *an* are hard to tell apart in Japanese, he turns to Dōgen's direct disciple, Senne, for clarity. Senne served as Dōgen's attendant for a time, edited Dōgen's written works, and composed (along with his own student, Kyōgō) the first commentaries on Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* (known as the *Okikigakishō,* or Goshō). These commentaries are considered by many to be the most authoritative, given the direct connection with Dōgen. In the commentary, Senne articulates the meaning of Dōgen's *kōan* specifically with reference to his uncommon ideogramic use: "*Kō* (公) means to be public, to equalize inequality. *An* (按) means to keep one's lot." (Ibid., 15-16)

[55] Ibid., 16.

Dōgen's *kō-an* gives a sense of attempting to heal inequality in the public, through a kind of intimate massaging that becomes healing. This involves staying 'in touch' with such inequality—in tune with the funk of a *dêmos*—resonating with a liminality of democracy. It also offers us another current of 'democratic praxis.' As Okamura describes it, Dōgen's *kōan* "refers both to the equality of all things (*kō*) and the uniqueness…of each and every being (*an*)."[56] In other words, it implies healing the public by becoming most fully ourselves. Dōgen's *kōan* imputes a responsibility to actualize the deepest possibilities of our own singular nature, and yet to do so while discovering how such actualization serves the whole. Given that *genjō* means actualizing the nature of reality in the present moment, as seen above, one might posit a creative, contextual "interpretation" of *genjōkōan* for us today. It's meaning might then be interpreted as something like: *to heal inequality by actualizing our deepest potentials in service to others—which, as it turns out, is none other than manifesting the nature of reality as it is actually happening in the context of each and every moment.* Or as Kim has poetically and succinctly 'interpreted' it, as "a kōan realized in life."[57]

"Kattō: Twining Vines"

Genjōkōan, as interpreted above, helps to further explicate some of the motivation behind a BCRD. Similar to sentiments seen in Thurman, Anzaldúa, King, and Whitman, *genjōkōan* points towards a healing and vibrant democratic praxis, with profound religio-spiritual resonance, that supports the flourishing of each and every person, and all of life. To form a beloved community of religious diversity is to embrace such a praxis. *Kattō* helps to further articulate how such praxis might flourish amongst great diversity, especially within a shared community of inquiry.

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[56] Ibid., 16.

[57] Kim, *Eihei,* 64.

Before moving on to *kattō* however, a question may arise; what gives one the right to 'interpret' Dōgen in such admittedly anachronistic ways? One response might be to reference my own contemplative, contextualist perspective, as discussed in the introduction, which looks to bring my own "contexts" to bear in my interpretive praxis. Another might be to point to the theme of this project, the liminality of democracy, and its openness to harnessing religio-spiritual teachings for democratic praxis. As it turns out, one might look to Dōgen himself as well.

Thomas Kasulis, in presenting Dōgen as "The Incomparable Philosopher," argues that Dōgen actually asks to be read in the context of his reader's life. Articulating a methodology of open-ended interpretation with existential/soteriological grip—not unlike that envisioned in a BCRD—Kasulis writes, "For Dōgen there can never be a final interpretation of any spiritual text. The truth of interpretation depends not on content, but on the attitude of the interpreter. Thus, even though one's interpretation of a passage may change radically through the years of practice, each interpretation may be true on the occasion it was developed."[58]

Kasulis helps to explicate in this specific case what I signaled more broadly in the introduction as a methodology of 'thinking with'—a *met/hodos,* connoting the pursuit of a 'way,' along with a liminal a sense of 'betweeness,' and importantly a sense of who one brings with one along the way. A methodology might then denote a community within which a participatory, communal adventure, *unfolds*, one where 'thinking with' becomes an essential aspect of one's own religio-spiritual path and democratic praxis. This is characteristic of the interpretive praxis in a BCRD. It is not that interpretation is relative, but that it demands a certain existential entanglement of a transformative or even soteriological nature. An interpretation requires some of our own blood and guts, that is, within it. According to Kasulis, Dōgen asks that we see his work "from our own cultural, historical, and personal perspectives."[59] Such a Dōgen-esque interpretive praxis was already seen above, as I followed Shohaku Okumura's performance of it, finding democratic resonance in *genjōkōan*. While it must be admitted that Dōgen fails democratic (and interspiritual) sensibilities in some senses, I cannot help interpreting him from such vistas.[60]

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[58] Kasulis, "The Incomparable Philosopher: Dōgen on How to Read the *Shōbōgenzō*," 97 fn 8.

Similar to Thurman and Anzaldúla, Dōgen's philosophical-theological praxis is deeply rooted in the context of his life. His unique religio-philosophical teachings are embodied within the particularity of his own religious quest, and his philosophical activity resembles a performance of his life experience.[61] Further, Dōgen himself recognized this to be the case, and emphasized the importance of contextual embeddedness to every journey, developing a kind of "mystical realism."[62] Dōgen avoided universalizing a singular experience as normative for all.[63] For Dōgen, one's life experience must become an authentic performance of one's religio-philosophical orientation. In other words, it is not just that Dōgen's context is reflected in his teachings—but also that Dōgen's teachings *necessitate* that one's context be reflected in one's *own* experience of awakening. Consequently, one's life experience becomes a performance of one's awakening, while awakening itself becomes a performance of one's singular life experience. This is what Dōgen called the "circle of the way," which manifests through "continuous practice" (*gyōji*), actualizing in each moment a desire for awakening, a practice of awakening, awakening itself, and nirvana. Even a Buddha's realization never ends, but rather consists of such a cyclical practice, of "aspiration, practice, enlightenment, and nirvana."[64] Given the democratic resonances of *genjōkōan,* and Okamura's suggestion that *genjōkōan* articulates the essential quality of *gyōji* ("continuous practice"), perhaps a democratic intuition might be phrased thusly: to

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[59] Ibid., 94.

[60] Dōgen was famously polemical towards other Buddhist sects and teachings, including ridiculing mantra-like prayer that was utilized in the Japanese Pure Land Buddhist traditions, while simultaneously preaching a "nonsectarian" and "catholic" Buddhism (Kim, *Eihei,* 46). Dōgen also held up a strict monasticism as the ideal form of life, and grew increasingly isolationist as he grew older, as well as derogatory of life outside a pristine monasticism. Such tendencies alert us to the creative liberty I am taking in recovering democratic resonances within Dōgen's thought. On the other, hand, as I've argued above, one might also consider this interpretive praxis a mode of *kattō* itself, as seen below.

[61] This can be seen, for example, in Dōgen's many creative interpretations of Buddhist concepts, such as *genjōkōan*, *kattō, dōkan gyōji* ("the circle of the way as continuous practice"), or *uji* ("the time being"), speak to an existential question that drove much of Dōgen's spiritual quest. Early in his journey,

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the young Dōgen became gripped by a conundrum: "Given that human beings are endowed with Buddha-nature from birth, why does one need to practice for awakening?" This question was particularly pertinent within the atmosphere of Japanese Buddhism at the time, where the Tendai tradition heavily emphasized a Mahayana doctrine of *hongaku,* or "original enlightenment." For more see Kim, *Eihei*, 13-50, especially 22-24.

[62] The title of Kim's excellent intellectual biography on Dōgen: *Eihei Dōgen: Mystical Realist.*

[63] At the same time, for Dōgen the nature of reality is universal in the sense of being empty (Skt. *sunyata*), as well as purely relational (Skt. *pratitya-samutpada*), *and* thoroughly contextual. Shohaku Okamura describes Dōgen's 'self' as a "knot in the network of interdependent origination." For Dōgen (and for Buddhism more generally), "There is no self that is without relationship to this network of the myriad things, and in fact, the self's relationship to the network *is* the self" (Okumura, *Realizing*, 140). Hee-Jin Kim also describes the uniqueness of Dōgen's thought in developing a self that is at one with the broader cosmos—since both the self and the cosmos are none other than Buddha-nature—while at the same time developing a self that is deeply personal and singular (Kim, *Eihei*, 151-153).

[64] Dōgen, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye,* 332-343.

actualize democracy means continuously exerting ourselves in public yet personalized ways, maintaining in each and every moment a desire for democracy, practice(s) of democracy, actualization of democracy, and enjoyment of beloved community. Call this a *genjō-dêmos-kōan—*to attune to the nature of reality, in each moment, manifesting healing in the public, amongst the *dêmos,* actualizing beloved community.

Kim describes Dōgen as a non-systematic thinker, whose writings embody a "loose nexus of exquisite mythopoetic imaginings and profound philosophical visions," based upon a "passionate search for liberation thru concrete activities and expressions."[65] Dōgen's (embodied) philosophical activity was therefore "deeply personal, existential, and soteriological."[66] In chapter four, I wrote of a need to be democratic caretakers, in allowing for—and nurturing—a flowering of reflections on the nature of reality, democracy, religiosity, spirituality, and socio-political structures. In the previous chapter, I wrote of philosophy as a way of life, and of a contextualist, contemplative discourse as scholarly praxis. BCRD imagines a diverse array of scholar-practitioners participating together in such an endeavor. In his fascicle *Kattō,* Dōgen offers additional reverberations for BCRD.

Kattō, a short fascicle (6-8 pages), is one of ninety-five such fascicles that appear in Dōgen's magnum opus, the *Shōbōgenzō* ("Treasury of the True Dharma Eye"). *Kattō* was written in 1243, near Kyoto, while Dōgen was abbot for a temporary monastery, as he sought to establish a new form of Buddhism in Japan. The word, *kattō,* translates as

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[65] Kim, *Eihei,* 9.

[66] Ibid., 147-148.

"twining vines." In traditional Zen parlance, *kattō* was a derogatory term, signaling "doctrinal sophistries and entanglements, attachment to words and letters, and theoretical conflict."[67] Dōgen, however, once again complexifies such a stance, describing the teacher-student relationship as akin to *kattō,* "twining vines." This was in contrast to the more traditional, stringently hierarchical relationship between teacher-student common in Japanese Buddhism. For Dōgen, *kattō* becomes a relationship of entanglement, of 'tangling' with one another, where contestation and even conflict become necessary aspects of an authentic transmission of Dharma. Dōgen thus emphasized the *positive* value of such entanglements, through which both student and teacher might grow.[68] As Dōgen writes in the fascicle: "'Teacher and disciple practice mutually' is twining vines [*kattō*] of buddha ancestors. 'Twining vines of buddha ancestors' is the life stream of skin, flesh, bones, and marrow."[69]

Dōgen goes on to expound upon the famous Zen story of attaining the "skin, flesh, bones, and marrow" of the teacher Bodhidharma, credited with bringing Buddhism from India to China in the fifth or sixth century. The story is of Bodhidharma's last conversation with four disciples, where each is told in turn that they have attained the "skin," "flesh," "bones," and "marrow" of their teacher. The story is traditionally interpreted to represent increasing levels of attainment, with the disciple (Hui-k'o) who attained the "marrow" seen as having the deepest realization, and hence is recognized as the true ancestor of the Zen lineage. Dōgen, however, offers a more, well, liminal interpretation—acknowledging differences in attainment and understanding among the disciples, but refusing to denote them as superior or inferior: "Know that *skin…flesh…bones…marrow* do not mean that one understanding is deeper than another."[70] Instead, Dōgen articulates each attainment as *jū-hōi,* "abiding in its own dharma-position." Each attainment is its own unique self-expression of Buddha-nature.[71] Dōgen then goes on to extrapolate beyond the four disciples in ways that resonate with democratic and interspiritual sensibilities:

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[67] Ibid., 96, see also 36.

[68] Ibid., 36.

[69] Dōgen, *Treasury*, 482. See also Kim, *Eihei*, 36.

> If there appear hundreds of thousands of disciples after the second ancestor [Bodhidharma], there will correspondingly be hundreds of thousands of interpretations. There is no limit to them. The number of disciples happened to be four, so there were just the four views of skin, flesh, bones, and marrow for the time being. However, many an expression is left as yet unexpressed and remains to be expressed.[72]

It is important to note that Dōgen is not trafficking in relativism either. It is not a matter of "anything goes," or of an equality of all perspectives in all times. Dōgen was quite clear about this, stating that superior and inferior views may indeed exist, and that the four views themselves are not necessarily equal, yet their "confirmation" (as "attainment") is. The confirmation of attainments is equal because each disciple is seen as participating in "total exertion" (*gūjin*), an authentic practice of the Way. Thus, each manifested in that moment an attainment stemming from their unique dharma-position. As a result, each view, as Kim describes it, "was not an approximation to, or a self-limiting manifestation of, the Absolute, but a self-activity or a self-expression of Buddha-nature."[73]

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[70] Dōgen, *Treasury*, 480; ellipses in original.

[71] Kim, *Eihei*, 98.

[72] As translated by Kim, Ibid.

In "Kattō" Dōgen upends notions of hierarchical standing, and suggests that the soteriological realization of Buddha-nature is not only particularized, in a personal way for each practitioner, but also apparently requires an illimitable number of interpretations as well as many expressions "as yet unexpressed." Each person, each time being, abides in its own dharma-configuration (*jū-hōi*), unique to each moment in its material, spiritual, and intellectual context. Further, every dharma-configuration 'always already' exists in equality and mutual interdependence.

What might it mean to take Dōgen seriously? That each person *already* exists in a unique dharma-configuration, a singular, 'always already,' awakened state?[74] Might something like this be applied, say, to Judith Butler's notion of "cohabitation"? Is it possible to imagine others with whom we cohabit our planet, our nations, our communities—with whom we might even vehemently disagree—as perhaps deluded, yet also as "abiding in their own dharma-position?" That is, might it be possible to hold the depth of another's humanity, and the inherent qualities of mutual harmony and equality that exist at such depth—one that is in some sense always 'abiding'—yet at the same time name clearly and steadfastly that which must be fiercely resisted, challenged, and ultimately abolished? Yet do so in a way that exudes compassion, and that aims to sustain the conversation? ("La compasión es una conversación sostenida.")[75] Might there be resonances here of both Thurman and King, who even in their darkest days admonished us to *love* those who must be resisted?

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[73] Ibid.

[74] In another fascicle, "Uji," Dōgen tells us that "attempts to escape from being the sixteen-foot golden body [of the Buddha] are nothing but bits and pieces of the time being" (Dōgen, *Treasury*, 107). In other words, we are always already in an awakened state, even if we remain unaware of it.

Dōgen also highlights how interpretive praxis within BCRD might be pursued within the unique "contexts" of all involved, without losing communal ties or existential grip (even of a soteriological nature). In so doing, Dōgen explicates the positive nature of constitutive difference, along with an equality of differing perspectives, without losing a sense of depth, or of awakening to the nature of reality as it is. Dōgen's philosophical activity lies not just in discourse, but also in practices, both social and spiritual, meant to enact a transformative being-in-the-world. Such transformation becomes rooted not only in our minds, but in our "skin, flesh, bones, and marrow"—and channeled through our hearts—the *shōbōgenzō,* that "wondrous heart of nirvana," the "treasury of the true dharma eye."[76]

The democratic-interspiritual intuitions implied in Dōgen's sense of philosophical practice become transparent when we understand that differing perspectives are not only authenticated, but are meant to exist as *kattō,* twining vines. From such a vista, "different philosophical and religious expressions are entwined vines, that is, conflicts, dilemmas, antinomies that are all too human and real to be brushed away from the texture of existence." Yet, these differences are not obstacles, but rather catalysts for growth and transformation—for each of us in our own ways, as we abide within our own "dharma-positions." Further, when transformation or awakening is "attained" or "realized," it does not result in a sameness amongst attainments, but rather both an equality *and* an upholding of particularity and difference. The "mystical realism" of Dōgen sees "the heritage and vitality of the Way of the Buddhas and ancestors in the entwined vines *[kattō]* themselves—not in an absence of or freedom from them."[77] Each entwined vine grows "of its own inner necessity without nullifying the others."[78] As Dōgen describes it:

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[75] Anzaldúa, *Light*, 92.

[76] The reference is to Shakyamuni Buddha's dharma transmission to Mahakashyapa, on Vulture's Peak, to whom Dōgen traces his Sōtō lineage.

> [A] vine seed grows into branches, leaves, flowers, and fruits that are intertwined in harmony with one another, without losing their respective particularities. For this reason, the Buddhas and ancestor are realized, and the kōan is realized in life.[79]

If one were to posit democratic values as embedded in, undergirded by, or reflective of the nature of reality—a possibility embraced by a liminality of democracy, and voiced in the atmospherics of democratic praxis—then even more explicit democratic resonances can be found. These democratic values include the dignity of every human being (and all of creation), equality, the preciousness of human difference, and the potential for harmonious becoming amidst radical difference.

Interpretive praxis thru a lens of *demosophy*—democratic wisdom or democratic philosophizing—acknowledges the strength and vitality of a radically differential *dêmos,* and our mutual entanglements therein. Philosophical activity then becomes about what we do with our inherited past, about actualizing all that we are, and about serving others—all in becoming most authentically ourselves. It means to heed those prophetic words of democratic praxis, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”[80] It is not enough to simply know this is the case at a theoretical or intellectual level, but rather we must “awaken” to the *reality* of it. We must learn to “see” and “enact” this reality in each moment, through aspiration, struggle, practice, and even attainment and enjoyment. What to make of our moment, of our *time being*, constitutes a locus of *demosophy*. It is somehow less about theoretical sophistication and more about our embodied reality, our blood and guts, perhaps even our Buddha-nature, our divinity, a harmonious becoming of Dao, a relational virtuosity of *ren* and *li*, the eschatological movement of Spirit, or the simple goodness of our humanity. The conflicts that abound in differing perspectives are not meant to be overcome, but are rather grist for the mill, fertilizer for our own awakening, compost within our democratic praxis.

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[77] Kim, *Eihei,* 98.

[78] Ibid., 99.

[79] Ibid. The quote is Kim's translation of *Kattō.*

This type of philosophy is not about forging a single, Hobbit-crushing “one philosophy to rule them all,” but is rather an arena for spiritual growth and democratic praxis amongst and within difference itself. It is a practice of demosophy, a beloved community of religious diversity. Speaking from, and even *for*, our context—with transparency, an openness to difference, a *met/hodos* of ‘thinking with,’ and an eye towards actualization of ultimate values, conceived in various ways. Such a funky yet jazzy, constructive yet contextual, secular yet religious, spiritual yet embodied form of philosophy is one that bespeaks the “skin, flesh, bones, and marrow” of democracy itself. The reflective beauty of that which undergirds democracy is expressed in one’s own process, one’s own truth, one’s own unique, singular contribution to our shared “garment of destiny.” Such philosophy may indeed become “a kōan realized in life.”

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[80] King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in *Testament,* 290.

Demosophy

At this point in my project, as we find ourselves in the denouement, one discovers not so much a space of conclusion—a conclusive space—as a liminal one. The problems I have laid out seem clear, solutions maybe not so much. Yet…perhaps that is the point. Wisdom, after all, *Sophia,* might just be found here, in the cracks (*rajaduras*). It is an apophatic sort of place, one where you can’t quite see all the way down into the cracks—and thus a place where the wise tend to deepen in their *un*knowing, as well as their hope-full-ness. It is a fitting twilight for such a project. Might this be a place where democratic wisdom can be found, in the cracks of our lives? Democratic wisdom—*demosophy*—leans into these cracks, letting go of a need for clear paths forward, or of concretized objects and identities to serve as guides, in order that we may participate in an “interweaving of hearts and minds,” in ese sueño of democratic becoming (Anzaldúa).[81]

Wisdom is, after all, according to at least one philosopher-sage, found only in knowing that one does not know, that one does not ever quite understand. Living in such a liminal space, *kattō,* twining vines, became for him a kind of performative praxis, a ‘way of life’—as a gadfly to those around him— ever clinging to that braying horse of socio-political life, arousing the *polis* from its indolence. For Socrates, “an unexamined life is not worth living,” and an examined life happens in twining vines, in interpretive praxis amongst those around us, on matters of utmost importance in our lives, and always with socio-political—and spiritual—resonance. A true practice of demosophy.[82]

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[81] Anzaldúa, *Light,* 22.

Demosophy is always a ‘wisdom of the people,’ of the *dêmos* (and not just of the people who claim to speak for them). Today that *dêmos* is a radically diverse one, culturally, ethnically, racially, religiously—and our diversity runs deeper than we might imagine. Diana Hayes traces Martin Luther King Jr.’s democratic praxis, for instance, not just to the struggle of Black Americans and the spirituality of the black church, but further into the “African roots of black spirituality and black faith.” This is a “spirituality and faith [that] sees no separation between the secular and the sacred.”[83] On another front, David Graeber and David Wengrow argue for surprising (and direct) Native American influences, particularly around our concept of “equality,” tracing early contaminating encounters between Native Americans and Europeans. These encounters led to the widespread dissemination of ideas like ‘equality’ throughout Europe, as certain Native American philosophers, whose arguments subsequently became pop literature throughout Europe, utilized the concept of equality to argue against the socio-political structures of Europe at the time, which displayed a horrendous lack of equality—in sharp contrast to

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[82] In a fitting quote for the conclusion of this project, Socrates, at the trial where he was sentenced to death for “corrupting the youth,” offered his response to proposals that would set him free, but only on the condition that he give up “philosophy,” after which he was found guilty and put to death:

> Athenians, I hold you in the highest regard and affection, but I will be persuaded by the god rather than by you; and as long as I have breath and strength I will not give up philosophy and exhorting you and declaring the truth to every one of you whom I meet, saying, as I am accustomed, “My good friend, you are a citizen of Athens, a city which is very great and very famous for its wisdom and strength—are you not ashamed of caring so much for the making of money and for fame and prestige, when you neither think nor care about wisdom and truth and the improvement of your soul? (Plato, *The Apology*)

[83] Hayes, “A Great Cloud of Witness,” 41.

Native American societies.[84] Of course, borrowing ideas and then committing genocide—partly in order to abject contaminating encounters—is a notorious exemplification of the colonial *sickness of superiority,* a sickness that continues to permeate our culture in so many destructive and heart-numbing ways today.

In African spirituality, as Laurenti Megesa describes it, "Relationships among all elements of creation…are the essence…because Africans believed that only through harmonious relationships is cosmic existence possible and its vital force preserved."[85] According to Hayes, a vital power, called *ntu,* causes "ontic changes" in people, allowing them to serve the wider community in powerful ways. A contemplative journey towards *Ubuntu,* or "full humanity," requires the development of "a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs to a great whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed."[86] Hayes argues that such an understanding was transmitted in and through African-American spirituality, in some sense participating in (what I might call) an interspiritual syncretism with Christianity on the other shore of an abyssal Middle Passage.[87] This leads to an African American "spirituality [that] is contemplative, holistic, joyful, and communitarian. … Unlike Western traditions, but in keeping with their African ancestry, there is no separation between the sacred and secular worlds, which are interwoven and lived as one holistic way of being in the world."[88] Hayes sees that "This understanding of community, of vital force, and of Ubuntu or full humanity lies at the heart of King's efforts to develop the Beloved Community."[89] Given efforts to place Black Americans at the center of the liminal idea(l) of America, it would seem that such an idea(l) can be seen to have African roots as well. For it is not an 'American' dream, but rather a dream of humanity, one that has been accessed and experimented within nearly all human cultures in various ways. In the United States today, there is simply an opportunity to further explore such a dream, amongst diversity the likes of which humanity has never seen before—and thus also amongst profound challenges.

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[84] Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity.*

[85] As quoted in Hayes, "A Great Cloud," 44-45. Cited as Laurenti Megesa, *What is Not Sacred?: African Spirituality,* 195.

[86] Ibid., cited as Magesa, *What is Not Sacred?,* 13.

[87] "abyssal Middle Passage," see Yountae, *The Decolonial Abyss,* 83-119.

The concept of Ubuntu resonates with Bin Song's Ru orientation above, in the quest to develop a fullness of humanity. This, I think, is where demosophy ultimately lies, in a shared quest, a *met/hodos,* a communal (ad)venture to develop the fullness of our humanity. To do so is to enact democratic becomings, and thus should be given a proper place within the locus of professional thinking and education in society. In such a (beloved) community of inquiry, oriented around Wisdom (herself), wisdom becomes not an object to be obtained—but a liminal, apophatic space in which one might grow, fail, and transform into a fullness of their humanity—serving our shared democratic life together. Democracy in this sense becomes a way of living, imbibing what Whitman called a "pervading religiousness," created and participated in by 'all the religions, old and new.' Whitman tells us that he "cannot too often repeat" that the word,

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[88] Hayes, "A Great Cloud," 46-47.

[89] Ibid., 45.

"Democracy," though often relayed in speech or print, "is a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawaken'd," one whose "history has yet to be enacted." As seen in the epigraph, democracy's *schema* ("appearance," or perhaps more *apropos*, "posture in dancing") may only "step forth, clothed in resplendent beauty and command," when the vitality of our religious diversity bears its "latest fruit, the spiritual." In the liminality of democracy, democratic praxis becomes the labor of enacting cultural conditions that might give birth to such vitality, to an interweaving of minds and hearts, and to socio-political structures that support the flourishing all, regardless of social identities—in order that each and all may serve our "collective becoming."[90] A beloved community of religious diversity is surely one aspect of such a collective becoming.

In one of those interesting peculiarities of history—or perchance of currents in more liminal atmospheres—Whitman actually coined the term "personalism" (in *Democratic Vistas* no less), which later became so important to the philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr. Personalism, as a school of thought, held "that all reality is of a tender, loving, personal nature; that God is the ultimate personality—which in fact resonated with the divine intimacy of slave spirituality."[91] Combined with an entwining nature of reality, so central to African spirituality as well as to King's democratic praxis (and to many of the entangled perspectives seen in this project), one finds an ameliorating reality that undergirds our democratic life—where whatever affects one, affects all—and where we are caught (like it or not) in “an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

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[90] Henderson-Espinoza, "Our Collective Becoming: Politicizing Spirituality."

[91] Burns, "Cosmic Companionship," 120.

To practice demosophy is first and foremost to accept our entanglement. However, this is not enough, at least from the perspective of many. An “adhesiveness of love” is needed, a liminal “advent of a sane and pervading religiousness.”[92] In other words, *something* like a beloved community of religious diversity is needed. A beloved community of religious diversity is perhaps more like one of those ‘consequential straws’ than a ‘revolution’ (televised or otherwise).[93] After all, I am only in one sense *naming what is already happening,* at least to some degree. We already learn with, mix amongst, borrow from, *infuse and are infused by,* others’ diverse life experiences. To do so is to be human. Demosophy has always been ‘happening,’ and there is no need to inoculate ourselves from it, or to abject such contaminating encounters after they happen. We all exist in beloved communities of religious diversity, both internally as well as externally, both inside and outside of academia—for there *is* no separation between secular and religious worlds. There is only a choice—how we *choose* to live our lives, and how we *choose* to mediate our shared lives together. Given such a choice, we can choose to reorient social structures so as to better reflect the needs of contemporary cultural conditions, or we can choose to continue to fetishize anachronistic structures that no longer serve our shared democratic lives in efficacious ways. One of the ways social institutions might evolve is towards a greater appreciation of the need, for many, of spiritual sustenance as an essential aspect of our democratic praxis—rather than relegating spirituality to merely an aspect of ‘religion.’

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[92] Whitman, *Whitman*, 960, 959.

[93] For a “consequential straw,” see the introduction.

What might arise from a beloved community of religious diversity in academia? As Wesley Wildman has written, one can never quite tell where “inquiry” might lead, so a liminal openness to unforeseen possibilities is always a necessity.[94] Such a necessity, one might add, is seen in all forms of efficacious inquiry. How else could someone pitch an idea as absurd as a four-dimensional reality that bends and warps space, speeds up and slows down ‘time,’ and shows the Earth to actually be traveling in a “straight line” *around* the Sun? Absurd…yet true nevertheless. And we all just happen to be inescapably caught in the absurdity of its entangled gravitation.[95]

A beloved community of religious diversity reverberates within a similarly entangled net of gravitation, one in which we might learn from one another across great difference, where we might embrace transformative, contaminating encounters, and where somehow—in ways perchance hitherto unknown—we might yet awaken that which “still sleeps, quite unawaken’d.” The liminality of democracy embraces such possibilities—even those that arise, as Dōgen speaks to in the epigraph above, in unapparent, liminal ‘ways.’ These ways may not be “grasped” wholly by our intellect. Lying in interstitial spaces, they clear paths for advents “beyond our knowledge.” Such a community, I suggest, would likely hold quite a bit of significance for many engaged in philosophical reflection and religio-spiritual experimentation amongst multiplicities of religious and secular orientations.

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[94] Wildman, *Religious Philosophy.*

[95] I refer here, of course, to Einstein’s general theory of relativity.

And why shouldn’t scholarly praxis take place within welcoming and spiritually efficacious communities, for those who wish to grow into a fullness of their humanity? In these liminal communities, one’s orientation towards the nature of reality, as well as toward socio-political realities of our shared lives together, might be worked out in a dialogical manner with a great variety of religious, spiritual, and secular orientations. This is one of the great needs and desires of many laboring for more efficacious democratic praxis today. In the United States, where we see the coming together of many disparate cultures, religious traditions, semiotic systems, and competing human values, holding acts of interpretation as a communal and healing praxis for greater understanding seems more than appropriate—and it may be essential for our ‘collective becoming.’

In his autobiography, Howard Thurman ends his chapter on The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in a telling way, bringing together the embodied contextuality and liminal spirituality at the heart of his democratic praxis. He does so in a such a way that the “funk” of democratic praxis remains. Tragedy and hope, embodiment and spiritual unity, are held together in Thurman’s poetic prose, as he tells the story of sitting with a young Japanese secretary in the office of the church, listening together to radio reports on the day the U.S. dropped a nuclear bomb on Hiroshima. The young lady had family there, and the two of them sat in silence, listening to the reports throughout the day, unable to share words, but only tears. Yet, something else was being shared, something liminal that ran deeper than words, undermining any distance between them—something that resonated equally powerfully with the spiritual experiences of unity that

Thurman so often spoke of. As Thurman put it: “We could establish no psychological distance between ourselves and the horror of the moment. The experience flowed together as a single moment in time. This was the Fellowship Church, not in action but in *being.*”[96]

This was what it meant to “*share in the spiritual growth and ethical awareness of men and women of varied national, cultural, racial, and creedal heritage united in a religious fellowship.”*[97] It meant being present to one another in the most trying of times, and developing the inner resources necessary so that one may do so. In the end, it was about simple human friendship and intimacy, beyond words and letters. This is the true revolution, the true locus of demosophy, what Whitman called “the old, yet ever-modern dream of earth, out of her eldest and youngest, her fond philosophers and poets,” and Anzaldúa “ese sueño.” Thurman concludes that it was the *fellowship* created in the church that was its true significance. The same, in the end, might be said of a beloved community of religious diversity. For the Fellowship Church, Thurman writes that its ultimate significance lied in the “abiding personal friendships” that grew out of the “qualities of being” that were present:

> It is in the realm of these friendships that the significance of the spread of the Fellowship Church community made its most abiding impact. … It was not the unique essence of any particular creed or faith; it was timeless and time-bound, the idiom of all creeds and totally contained in none, the authentic accent of every gospel but limited to none, the growing edge that marks the boundaries of all that destroys and plunders and lays waste. For a breathless moment in time, a little group of diverse peoples was caught up in a dream as old as life and as new as a hope that just emerges on the horizon of becoming [human].”[98]

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[96] Thurman, *With Hand Over Heart,* 162.

[97] Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream,* 158.

[98] Thurman, *With Head and Heart,* 162.

If a beloved community of religious diversity were to give rise to something similar, in the locus of professional thinking and educating in our society no less, I have no doubt that our democracy will be the better for it.

We need visions of religious studies, philosophy, theology, and the secular academy that better align with democratic praxis—as creative, imaginal, constructive work amongst multiplicities of ontological orientations, undertaken with an encumbered awareness of the social contexts of our shared democratic life. There is a tremendous need in democratic praxis for listening deeply to multiplicities of voices and orientations, granting them the integrity necessary for creatively bringing forth new, and better, structures of democracy. In fastidiously upholding an anachronistic religion/secular binary, pathways essential to democratic and decolonial labor become blocked.

Of course, this is but one voice, one vantage point, one vista, from which to glimpse a horizon. I do not intend it to be normative for all, but rather to symbolize a call for multiplicities of dreams and reflections—as well as a *met/hodos* of 'thinking with'—*being with* others in pursuit of a 'way.'

An entwining spiritual practice of *demosophy* always seems to necessitate, to one degree or another, walking along those liminal slashes—from a religion/secular binary to *nos/otras*—learning how to dance on a knife's edge there. It means living in the liminal, at least for a time. And perhaps over time—slowly, unpredictably, with sensitivity, and even astonishment—we might just learn to dance on that edge *together*. Bearing forth that *schema*, inhabiting the liminality of democracy, gives rise to an embodied performance—tentative, halting, and heartfelt—participating in a funky tango pulsating with the ‘skin, flesh, bones, and marrow’ of one’s life, bound and entangled with the lives of all. This project, for me, is but a humble rehearsal of such a performance. May it contribute to ese sueño. May it breathe old yet ever new currents of democratic praxis into our lives. And may it give rise to new wineskins, that they might hold ese sueño.

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