

LOST IN TRANSLATION: RELIGION AND THE WRITING OF HISTORY

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Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2012)

Brenna Moore, *Sacred Dread: Raïssa Maritain, the Allure of Suffering, and the French Catholic Revival (1905–1944)* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013)

Often repeated but little understood, the injunction to “take religion seriously” is as ubiquitous today as it is vague. As the phrase itself suggests, such a project is defined first and foremost by what it is not. It represents a reaction against a moment when religion was not “taken seriously” by historians, a moment when the dominance of Marxian approaches consigned religion to the status of an epiphenomenon whose truth lay outside itself—an expression of more fundamental social or economic forces. But beyond rejecting this form of demystification, what does it mean to “take religion seriously”? Does this entail an affirmation of the truth claims professed by the religious actors we study, or at least a “suspension of disbelief,” in the memorable words of Amy Hollywood?¹ What political commitments, if any, are implied in the admonition to “take religion seriously,” and what role does it prescribe for religion in the presumptively secular public sphere? More vexing still is the question scholars of religion are now asking with increasing urgency: does the term “religion” in fact denote a coherent entity?² Precisely what, in other words, are we being asked to “take seriously”?

These remain open and urgent questions for historians who study religious thought, but rather than engage with them, some would prefer to abandon the paradigm altogether and revive the Marxian approach it sought to displace.

¹ Amy Hollywood, “Gender, Agency, and the Divine in Religious Historiography,” *Journal of Religion*, 84/4 (Oct. 2004), 514–28, at 528.

² The most thorough recent investigation of this problem is the exhaustive volume edited by Hent de Vries, *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York, 2008). See esp. the introduction.

James Chappel has issued just such a “Plea to Stop ‘Taking Religion Seriously’” in a recent issue of this journal, taking aim at what he perceives to be the ahistorical tendencies built into the paradigm. For Chappel, whose definition derives from the “strong program” in the sociology of religion, “to ‘take religion seriously’ means to treat it as an independent variable that cannot be reduced to others.”³ If Marx is this paradigm’s nemesis, Chappel figures Alexis de Tocqueville—the “anti-Marx”—as its hero. Reviewing recent works by Emile Perreau-Saussine and Thomas Albert Howard, he skillfully draws out the Tocquevillean assumptions that inform them and lead them to treat religion as a transhistorical constant that affects, but is not affected by, external historical forces. To approach religions in this way, “to grant them a special reprieve from history,” he argues, “is to adopt the transcendental claims they make for themselves.”⁴ But protecting the integrity of historical analysis is not Chappel’s sole concern. What troubles him perhaps more is the political valence he discovers in these Tocquevillean approaches, which tend to treat religion as a *beneficial* force for social integration and, more specifically, as a tonic for a healthy democracy. This attitude seems particularly dangerous at a moment when “religious language increasingly muscles its way into public discourse” in America.⁵ So as to guard against the political and historiographical perils of such an approach, Chappel advocates a return to an older model that “courts the risk of being unserious about religion, translating the ineffably sacred into the mundane language of power.”⁶ Returning to Marx as a model, he concludes that religions “are best understood as expressions of the social, economic, and political projects that remain the historian’s primary interest. This may be reductive, but not every reduction is *ad absurdum*.”⁷

This is a rather surprising claim to read in a journal devoted to intellectual history, and one might well protest that it risks conflating historicism with materialism. Chappel is absolutely correct to demand that religious phenomena submit to the strictures of historical analysis and his essay serves as a welcome corrective to the ever-present risk of replacing one form of determinism in the study of religion with another. In resisting materialist approaches to religion, it is all too easy to attribute undue agency to religious commitments, conceived as the “truth” of a believer’s identity, as if they necessarily exist prior to, and therefore determine, all other forms of political or intellectual engagement. Refusing this

³ James Chappel, “Beyond Tocqueville: A Plea to Stop ‘Taking Religion Seriously,’” *Modern Intellectual History*, 10/3 (2013), 697–708, at 698.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 700.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 707.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 707–8.

form of reductionism, however, does not require us to revert to its materialist equivalent. This is precisely the false choice with which Chappel presents us when he allows one particular (and deeply flawed) approach to exhaust what it means to “take religion seriously.” By framing the choice in terms of variables—religion *either* functions as the unchanging independent variable that determines everything else, *or* it must be consigned to the status of a passive, dependent variable—we are left to choose between two forms of reductionism. And yet historians are not social scientists; they are not required to posit the existence of an independent variable that affects other aspects of human life while itself eluding historical change. In other words, even as Chappel attacks the ahistorical presuppositions of Tocquevillean approaches to religion, the alternative he offers opens itself up to precisely the same charge. By suggesting that religious claims “need not be taken at face value,” Chappel licenses historians to dispense with the actor’s categories that structure religious utterances, in favor of those the historian brings to his or her material. In doing so, he assumes that the “ineffably sacred” can in fact be translated into the presumably more universal “language of power.” But what is lost in this effort of translation? What historiographical and political possibilities are silenced in the process? And what becomes of intellectual history, in particular, when power is elevated to the status of a transhistorical master key capable of decoding all historical utterances?

In an effort to answer these questions and identify an alternative to the rival reductionisms outlined above, this essay examines two recent works that seek in very different ways to “take religion seriously.” Both Brad Gregory’s *The Unintended Reformation* and Brenna Moore’s *Sacred Dread* reflect upon the challenge that religious ideas and actors pose to secular categories of historical analysis. While Gregory’s approach falls prey to aspects of Chappel’s critique, I argue, Moore provides us with a model for critically engaged scholarship that refuses the false choice between treating religion as a mere artifact of historical context and elevating it into a transhistorical constant. By resisting the logic of the “independent variable” outlined above, her work demonstrates that attending to the ideational worlds of religious actors need not imply a straightforward endorsement of religious truth claims and of the political work they do. Instead, such work can and should illuminate the political ambivalence of religious phenomena: the way they function as sites of empowerment as well as constraint, and inclusion as well as exclusion. But “taking seriously” these religious worlds, Moore shows us, also means recognizing limits to the imperative of translating religious utterances into the secular vocabulary of political and historical discourse. To attend to these limits is not to throw up one’s hands in the face of alien religious worlds, but rather to resist the urge to master their alterity by consistently translating them into the more familiar (and less unsettling) language of the political, social, or economic. If religious ideas and practices

occasionally present a scandal for the practice of history, this is in part because they call attention to the historian's own positionality. By highlighting the gap that separates the historian from his or her object, the study of religious phenomena therefore offers a particularly fruitful opportunity to probe the secular categories and assumptions that structure historical scholarship.

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Since its publication in 2012, Brad Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation* has elicited fierce controversy and provoked a salutary conversation about the place of normative commitments in historical scholarship.⁸ The central argument of the book is nicely encapsulated in its subtitle: "How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society." Its aim is to establish an etiology of the ills of modern life, and in particular of the "hyperpluralism" of competing ethical, metaphysical, and political viewpoints that preclude any clear consensus on fundamental "Life Questions." Gregory finds the origins of this modern predicament in the at once institutional and intellectual revolution set in motion by the Reformation, the effects of which far exceeded the intentions of the reformers themselves, who of course did not set out to secularize society when they broke with the medieval Church. And yet, Gregory argues, the Reformation nevertheless set in motion a series of shifts in metaphysics, epistemology, politics, ethics, economics, and the institutions of knowledge production—Gregory devotes a chapter to each of these fields—that together produced the "fissiparous" secular world we now inhabit.

Rather than attributing this process to the particular doctrines professed by the reformers—although *sola scriptura* and *sola fide* come in for criticism in chapters 2 and 5 respectively—Gregory is most concerned with the *fact* of doctrinal disagreement inaugurated by the Reformation. For Gregory, doctrinal disagreement "is the most fundamental and consequential fact about Western Christianity since 1520" (45). It rent apart the shared intellectual framework that had served to unify the various categories of knowledge and orient them towards a common Christian end. In its stead, the reformers placed their faith in the authority of Scripture, but this only multiplied and intensified doctrinal disagreements while robbing Christians of the institutional framework that had hitherto settled such disputes. Modern philosophers turned to reason as an alternative foundation for knowledge, but Gregory argues that this only added to the proliferation of incompatible truth claims unleashed by the

⁸ See, for instance, the forums on Gregory's book at *The Immanent Frame*, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/the-unintended-reformation>; *Catholic Historical Review*, 98/3 (July 2012), 503–16; *Church History*, 81/4 (Dec. 2012), 912–42.

Reformation. The ultimate outcome of the doctrinal controversies it launched was the systematic relegation of religious truth claims to the status of subjective knowledge and their marginalization within institutions of higher learning that now increasingly committed themselves to ostensibly more “objective” forms of knowledge capable of being shared across confessional lines. In the absence of any unifying framework for moral and metaphysical consensus, Gregory fears that “ubiquitous practices of consumerism are more than anything else the cultural glue that holds Western societies together” (236).

The consequences of Reformation-era doctrinal disputes were thus not limited to the intellectual realm, Gregory argues. They also vitiated the shared moral community that was indispensable for a substantive ethics of the common good—the guiding principle of medieval economic and political life. The result of this moral and intellectual fragmentation was the formation of confessional states that sought to impose doctrinal coherence through force. The terrible human and financial costs of the confessional era eventually inspired experiments in toleration that disentangled religious from political belonging, ultimately giving rise to the modern democratic principles of freedom of religion and church–state separation. The ethical corollary of these political transformations was the development of a formal ethics of individual rights no longer beholden to a teleological understanding of human nature. And yet this ethical and political shift, Gregory maintains, presupposed a shared set of Christian values that the tide of secularization has now eroded, and secular rationales derived from the natural sciences or reason cannot provide an alternative warrant for cardinal liberal values such as human rights. This leads Gregory to the dire conclusion that “the intellectual foundations of modernity are failing because its governing metaphysical assumptions in combination with the findings of the natural sciences offer no warrant for believing its most basic moral, political, and legal claims” (381).

Here we confront the normative commitments that subtend Gregory’s narrative and account for its internal difficulties. In tracing the roots of modern ills back to the events of the sixteenth century—and in some cases even earlier—Gregory frames his account as a rejoinder to “supersessionist” models of historical change “conceived as a sequential series of epochal blocks” (9). Identifying this as the dominant paradigm of contemporary historical scholarship, Gregory is keen to combat the strong rupture it presupposes between the premodern past and the present, as well as the sense of quasi-inevitability it imposes on contingent events. And yet Gregory also wishes to demonstrate unequivocally that, judged on its own terms, “Western modernity is failing” (365). This, of course, presupposes that “modernity” is a coherent entity or project with a clear set of aims that are distinct from those of earlier historical formations, and against which it can be judged wanting. Beyond the obvious elisions that such a model requires and the

artificial coherence it imposes on a much more complicated historical reality, it also comes perilously close to precisely the supersessionist logic that Gregory wishes to avoid. For “modernity” can be judged a failure only if it represents a relatively distinct, coherent unit whose internal contradictions can be revealed.

This brings us to a second problem, which concerns the nature of this purported failure. The contention that “modernity” is a coherent project that can either fail or succeed coexists somewhat uneasily with the charge that “hyperpluralism” and incoherence are its main flaws. Even as we are told that the modern West suffers from a chronic shortage of shared values, that even a minimal Rawlsian “overlapping consensus” remains elusive—in short, that we inhabit the “Kingdom of Whatever”—the portrait of “modernity” that emerges from the book is one with a coherent metaphysics, epistemology, political form, economic system, rights-based ethics, and model for knowledge production. Gregory’s narrative therefore tacks between quite different critiques of the modern project. At times, it is the absence of shared values, the subjectivization of morality, and the proliferation of competing truth claims that are to blame for the failures of “modernity.” Yet, at other moments in the book, it is precisely the coercive, hegemonic status of certain modern discourses—most notably its univocal metaphysics, secular understanding of knowledge, and capitalist ideology—that are to blame. I believe that Gregory has here put his finger on something very significant about the way in which certain purportedly liberal ideologies function precisely by masking their coercive operations under the veneer of free choice. But an opportunity to unpack this paradoxical feature of modern liberal discourse is foreclosed by his exclusive concern with demonstrating the bankruptcy of “modernity” writ large. Gregory does make a passing note of the paradoxical “combination of hegemonic and hyperpluralistic realities” at the heart of modern life, but what ultimately unites these competing tendencies in his narrative is their shared hostility to robust religious commitments (377).

Here we arrive at the crux of the book. For Gregory is ultimately concerned to salvage the possibility that religion might deliver the best antidote to the ills of the modern world:

But the failure of modern philosophy to provide a convincing rational substitute for religion with respect to the Life Questions suggests that there is no reason to believe modern claims about the supersessionist triumph of secular reason over religion per se . . . perhaps some religious truth claims really are true, and maybe their rejection helps to explain both why Western history has unfolded as it has in the past half millennium and why modernity is now failing. (383)

Gregory’s commitment to this possibility explains why his narrative at once relies upon a certain kind of supersessionism and disavows it. On one count, modernity is said to have failed because it has discarded the unified religious world view

that structured premodern life. But if religion is to remain a live possibility for us and continue to supply answers to the great “Life Questions,” then it must be more than just the obsolete vestige of a distant past. In other words, religion is accorded a transhistorical status that is denied to other historical formations—in particular, social and political ones—and this allows Gregory to maintain that the “baby of religion” can be salvaged from the “bathwater of its past political perversions and social failures” (383–4). All this, of course, presumes that medieval Christendom was in fact a fundamentally integrated and pious society, united around a shared Christian world view, and that its violence is attributable to a failed execution of its basic principles rather than to a fundamental inability to accommodate otherness. As in many critical accounts of modernity, premodernity here functions as something of a foil or a regulative fiction, eliding its historical complexity, heterogeneity, and violence.⁹

Nevertheless, I am sympathetic to Gregory’s frustration with the unacknowledged work that ideological secularism performs as the framework for much academic scholarship. In response to his critics, and echoing the concluding pages of *The Unintended Reformation*, Gregory has called for the academy to “unsecularize itself based on its own principles of academic freedom and open inquiry.” This does not mean that academic life need reconsecrate, he argues, but it does imply “recognizing the non-neutrality of secular beliefs in a manner that would widen the range of intellectually responsible academic discourse.”¹⁰ While this is in many respects a worthy goal, I fear that Gregory has not provided us with the most effective road map for how to achieve it. Rather than arguing for the failure of “modernity” *tout court*, it might prove more effective to articulate a more limited, immanent critique of particular modern discourses. Rather than treating religion as a transhistorical constant, we might instead turn our attention to the ways in which certain secular categories of analysis tend to foreclose a robustly historical understanding of religious phenomena.

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Brenna Moore’s *Sacred Dread: Raïssa Maritain, the Allure of Suffering, and the French Catholic Revival (1905–1944)* furnishes a number of useful resources

⁹ Historians have long argued, for instance, that the Middle Ages were far from an unambiguous “age of faith.” This was a key claim of Jean Delumeau’s classic *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire: A New View of the Counter-Reformation* (London, 1977); see also Rodney Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.,” *Sociology of Religion*, 60/3 (1999), 249–73; John H. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (London, 2005).

¹⁰ See Brad Gregory’s response to the forum on *The Unintended Reformation* in *Catholic Historical Review*, 98/3 (July 2012), 503–16, at 516.

for just such a critical endeavor. This elegant account of Raïssa Maritain's contribution to the twentieth-century French Catholic revival helps to correct the imbalance in scholarly attention that has disproportionately favored her husband, often ignoring Raïssa or treating her work as a mere extension of Jacques's project.¹¹ Moore instead repositions Raïssa as a central voice in the turn-of-the-century revival that saw an unprecedented wave of French intellectuals convert to Catholicism at the very moment when the Republic was systematically dismantling the Church's legal privileges.¹² For these intellectuals, the Catholic Church came to represent a "*countercultural* force against secular, bourgeois republicanism" (197, emphasis in original). Turning away from the regnant ideology of secular positivism and progress, these intellectuals were drawn to a graphic and sometimes violent Catholic discourse that valorized suffering and abjection. Women and Jews held a privileged place in this discourse because, "like Catholicism itself, both women and Jewish particularity were seen as 'other' to the rational, secular, masculine sphere of *laïcité*" (200). Moore foregrounds Raïssa Maritain's status as both a woman and a Jewish convert to Catholicism in order to probe the political ambivalence of the revival's discourse on suffering, especially as it ran up against the very real pain of the Holocaust. Ultimately, Moore is concerned to distinguish the vision of suffering that informed the Catholic revival from the more easily abused theology of "vicarious suffering" so central to the French counterrevolutionary tradition, which held that the tribulations of certain individuals or groups could vicariously expiate the sins of the community as a whole.

This is significant because Moore wishes to argue for the political indeterminacy and flexibility of the Catholic revival's fascination with the suffering of women and Jews. She demonstrates how the movement's leading lights, such as Charles Péguy and Léon Bloy, articulated an early philo-Semitic discourse that both was extraordinarily progressive in relation to mainstream Catholic teaching on Judaism at the time, and also relied on an essentialized vision of Jewish abjection, albeit interpreted as a sign of holiness. Raïssa Maritain both extended and transformed this discourse in her own writings on Judaism, working to combat anti-Semitism even as she located Jewish redemption squarely within the framework of conversion to Christianity. For Maritain, conversion preserved Jewish particularity within the higher universalism of the Church, and consequently she always referred to herself as a *juive-chrétienne*. Moore

¹¹ A notable exception to this trend is Stephen Schloesser's *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris (1919–1933)* (Toronto, 2005), which highlights Raïssa's significant contributions to Catholic aesthetic theory.

¹² The best account of this wave of conversions remains Frédéric Gugelot's *La conversion des intellectuels au catholicisme en France (1885–1935)* (Paris, 1998).

indicates how this ambivalence towards Judaism informed Maritain's response to the Holocaust, which conveyed at once "deep solidarity with persecuted Jews, hopes for the eradication of their suffering, and, simultaneously, advocacy for their conversion because French Catholicism, so saturated with suffering, could accommodate and recognize them" (166).

The same ambivalence, Moore argues, is evident in the way Maritain engaged with long-standing Catholic tropes of suffering femininity. Her constant battles with illness made her an ideal screen upon which such symbols could be projected, both in the imagination of the men around her and in the religious significance she herself ascribed to her own illness. But Moore also points to the ways in which Raïssa's theology of suffering resisted the gendered bifurcation of intellect and affect so central to the Catholic tradition, recovering the affective dimension of the intellect in Thomist theology and bringing it into dialogue with the seventeenth-century French mystical tradition. In this way, Maritain's work both "deepened and extended the long-standing association between women, suffering, and holiness," but also disrupted and transformed these gendered discourses from within (95). In order to recognize this, Moore argues, we must dispense with "the primary binary that tends to drive some feminist studies of Christian women, in which women either reproduce their own oppression or resist and subvert it" (14–15).

By refusing the agency/resistance binary, Moore draws our attention to the irreducibly ambiguous ways in which religious discourses operate historically, at once constraining and enabling their subjects. Recovering the polysemous quality of religious utterances allows Moore to articulate a powerful critique of the implicitly secular, masculine definition of the political that informs much historical scholarship.¹³ It is this understanding of politics that has allowed scholars to dismiss Raïssa Maritain as "Jacques's apolitical partner," because her interest in aesthetics and mysticism contrasts sharply with her husband's more straightforwardly juridical and political concerns (125). Moore resists this reading, arguing that Raïssa's poetry and spiritual practices "do not evade the political but access it from another angle" (17). Based on a Thomist theory of aesthetics, Raïssa believed that her spiritual discipline of suffering-centered piety allowed her to access the suffering of others from within and render it objectively into poetry. As she herself explained, her words had to emerge from "the sufferings of a soul . . . in order to become one day, elsewhere perhaps, luminous truths capable of serving men."¹⁴ Raïssa's poetic reflections on the Holocaust thus "rendered her interior life public and communicative," so that what "had previously seemed

¹³ In this respect, Moore's work echoes Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, 2004).

¹⁴ Raïssa Maritain, *Journal de Raïssa* (1963), quoted in Moore, *Sacred Dread*, 132.

interior and personal, crossed the threshold into the public events in history” (146).

The political import of Maritain’s poetry, in other words, depends upon a fluid relationship between interiority and exteriority that is unthinkable in terms of a secular political discourse founded upon the distinction between the private and public spheres. Taking Maritain’s political engagement seriously therefore requires a critique of the mutually reinforcing relationship between the ideology of secularism and a gendered distinction between public and private. This relationship is constitutive of a particular, historically specific definition of the political coded in masculine, secular terms. And yet the differential treatment accorded to Jacques’s and Raïssa’s work suggests that scholars have all too readily adopted it as their own. Moore’s work persuasively demonstrates that taking the actor’s categories of religious individuals seriously can prompt much-needed critical reflection on the secular presuppositions that inform much historiography. Not only do they tend to distort or inhibit our understanding of religious phenomena, they can also perform powerful, if unacknowledged, ideological work.

Recognizing the political implications of Raïssa Maritain’s spiritual practices and artistic work does not, of course, imply that these are mere extensions of her political commitments, but rather that they occupy a space alongside, without always intersecting with, political concerns. Recovering this indeterminacy allows Moore to develop an alternative to the twin forms of reductionism that might otherwise seem the only avenues available to historians of religious phenomena. Quoting Michel de Certeau, Moore warns against the impulse to treat religious utterances such as Maritain’s as if they were mere reflections of social or political forces, “precious only insofar as, through their transparency, they shed light on what instigated them.”¹⁵ Such an approach voids the specificity of religious experiences by translating them into something else. And although Maritain’s work clearly bears the imprint of certain power relations, the trauma of war, and many other contextual factors, “they do not capture everything. The religious experiences themselves in all their specificity did act in history, were interventionist in a real sense . . . and enabled her to bring something new into existing conversations” (147). At moments such as these, I fear that Moore comes perilously close to reifying religious experience as an unmediated space that exists prior to the historical discourses by which individuals make sense of it. This is a perpetual risk that all scholarship attentive to the historical agency and specificity of religious phenomena encounters, and it highlights the challenge

¹⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (1988), quoted in Moore, *Sacred Dread*, 147.

of balancing the conflicting imperatives to at once acknowledge the power of religious experience and historicize it.

Moore ultimately chooses to foreground this tension rather than artificially defuse it. In doing so, she resists the impulse to explain away, flatten, or otherwise master the inconsistencies in Maritain's politico-theological vision. In her account of Raïssa's wartime writings, Moore highlights the disjuncture between the redemptive vision of suffering that animates her memoirs and the much darker tone of her contemporaneous poetry, which consistently refuses to deploy this theology of suffering in order to make sense of the Holocaust. To illustrate this, Moore cites the example of "Deus excelsus terribilis," a poem that Maritain composed in between the two volumes of her memoirs, in 1943. It frames the violence of the Holocaust as something entirely distinct from the suffering of the past, something inassimilable to the logic of redemption:

It is Your lineage, Lord, which is exterminated!
 Israel was led to the butchery,
 Flock without shepherd without fold,
 They were tracked down like game,
 In the streets of towns and villages,
 The Gardens of France
 Women with their children they would not give up
 Hurled themselves from the windows.

...

It is because You Yourself, our God,
 You have forsaken us.
 And the Angel of Truth keeps silent—
 The mirror of Your indifference—
 Because You have abandoned us to ourselves.¹⁶

Here we have a stark image of divine indifference before the plight of Europe's Jews—one that stands in marked contrast to the tone of Maritain's contemporaneous memoirs, which continued to cleave to a redemptive vision of Jewish suffering. Moore notes a number of possible explanations for this discrepancy, but ultimately refuses to choose amongst them and impose what Quentin Skinner once called "the mythology of coherence" on Maritain's heterogeneous work.¹⁷ Indeed, Moore uses this indeterminacy to convey an important insight about the heterogeneity of the political more broadly. Quoting Dipesh Chakrabarty, she treats this moment of opacity in Maritain's work as

¹⁶ Raïssa Maritain, "Deus excelsus terribilis," quoted in Moore, *Sacred Dread*, 175–6.

¹⁷ Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory*, 8/1 (1969), 3–53, at 16–22.

evidence of “the possibility that the field of the political is constitutively not singular.”¹⁸ Religious utterances such as Maritain’s wartime writings, which “refuse to convey only one understanding of the theological or the political,” thus resist the historian’s impulse to impose a single explanatory narrative on the available historical evidence (187). This is yet another way that the irreducible ambivalence of religious phenomena pushes back against the disciplinary (and disciplining) imperatives of historical analysis.

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Works like *Sacred Dread* show up the false binary between Tocquevillean and Marxian approaches to religion. The commitment to enter into and understand religious worlds of meaning need not entail elevating religion to the status of a transhistorical constant; nor does it imply that the tools of historical inquiry can or should be turned to apologetic aims—a possibility that Gregory wishes to hold open. Instead, such a project demands an appreciation of the way in which religious discourses interact with, but are not exhausted by, the political, social, and cultural contexts of their production. In some cases, these utterances may reinforce existing power relations, but in other cases they may resist or transform them, and indeed they can do both at the same time. This transformative power arises from the fact that religious discourses emerge in conversation both with the particular historical context of their production, and with the manifold internal resources of a much longer religious tradition. It is the conjunction of these two contextual forces that lends religious phenomena their irreducible ambivalence and renders them excessive to the particular historical moment in which they are uttered. It is also what places them squarely within the remit of the intellectual historian, who is particularly well placed to appreciate the intricate play between a historically extensive textual tradition and the historically intensive forces of social, cultural, or political context.

The temporal hybridity that religious utterances often exhibit poses both a challenge and an opportunity for historians who, as Chakrabarty reminds us, invariably approach these discourses from the perspective of “empty, secular, and homogeneous time.”¹⁹ Chappel concludes his essay by quoting Chakrabarty on the need to translate enchanted worlds into disenchanted time. But he neglects to mention that, for Chakrabarty, the very condition of possibility for disenchanted scholarship is the fact that “the times of gods and spirits . . . are never completely

¹⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity* (2002), quoted in Moore, *Sacred Dread*, 187.

¹⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000), 113.

alien,” that “we inhabit their fragments even when we classify ourselves as modern and secular.”²⁰ As a result, these non-secular temporalities challenge the “imperious instincts” of the historical discipline from within, providing it with “a glimpse of its own finitude.”²¹ I agree with Chakrabarty that historical scholarship presupposes a certain procedural secularism. At the very least, it implies a secular model of time that precludes the agency of supernatural entities, and it therefore cannot serve as an instrument for the affirmation of religious truth claims. But the historical study of religious phenomena nevertheless retains a certain critical, disruptive function in relation to the ideological secularism that so often underwrites the categories of historical analysis. Indeed, it does so precisely because the gulf that separates the historian from the assumptions and values of the religious actors he or she studies throws into relief the historian’s own positionality.

This is the guiding principle of Robert Orsi’s “third way” to approach the study of religion, which eschews the excesses of both confessional and “radically secular” scholarship.²² Orsi’s concern is to avoid either identifying uncritically with the religious world under study, or approaching it as something irreducibly other. Instead, the goal is to “set one’s own world, one’s own particular reality, now understood as one world among many possible other worlds, in relation to this other reality and to learn how to view the two in relation to each other.”²³ Elizabeth Pritchard has accused Orsi of covertly reinstating the very secular, liberal assumptions he purports to displace, by suggesting that it is even possible for the scholar to relativize his or her own commitments in this way.²⁴ But recognizing the contingent, situated status of one’s own world view is not the same thing as positing the possibility of a “view from nowhere.” Instead, scholarship like Orsi’s and like Brenna Moore’s refuses the choice between the commitment to take seriously the ideational worlds of religious actors and the procedural secularism of the historical profession. In fact, inasmuch as their work resists the temptation to consistently translate religious actor’s categories into more familiar secular terms, these scholars come closer to the historicist ideals of the profession than do historians who either elevate religion into a transhistorical ideal or reduce it to an equally transhistorical category of “power.” But Moore and Orsi are also alive to the critical possibilities that the study of religious

²⁰ Ibid., 113, 112.

²¹ Ibid., 112, 93.

²² Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars who Study Them* (Princeton, 2005), 198.

²³ Ibid., 201.

²⁴ Elizabeth A. Pritchard, “Seriously, What Does ‘Taking Religion Seriously’ Mean?,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 78/4 (Dec. 2010), 1087–1111, at 1099–1102.

phenomena makes available to historians. Rather than announcing the wholesale failure of secular modernity, as Brad Gregory does, they approach the historical study of religion as an opportunity to enact a strategic, partial, immanent critique of particular secular ideologies. By definition, such an immanent critique does not simply refuse the presumptive secularism of the historical profession, but instead submits it to its own critical tools.²⁵ This is what the most promising contemporary historical scholarship on religion manages, or at least strives, to achieve.

²⁵ On the purportedly secular nature of critique, see Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley, 2009).