

## Critique of Metaphysical Violence

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*ABSTRACT: This study bridges secular philosophical perspectives and Christian theological perspectives by showing how the critique of metaphysical violence is common to certain representatives of both parties. By examining specifically metaphysical, and therefore epistemologically significant, ways of critiquing violence, this study seeks to show that, just as violence cuts across the sacred-secular divide and spans the distance between abstraction and action, so too does the critique of violence.*

*RÉSUMÉ: Cette étude rapproche les perspectives philosophiques laïques et les perspectives théologiques chrétiennes en montrant comment la critique de la violence métaphysique est commune à certains représentants des deux parties. En examinant spécifiquement les méthodes métaphysiques et, par conséquent, épistémologiquement significatives permettant de critiquer la violence, cette étude cherche à montrer que, tout comme la violence traverse le fossé sacré-laïque et couvre la distance entre l'abstraction et l'action, il en va de même de la critique de la violence.*

### Introduction

This study draws upon sources from the disciplines of philosophy, Christian theology, religious studies, and to a certain extent critical theory and the philosophy of history. Interdisciplinarity is not a value that I defend here at the beginning, for its value will hopefully be demonstrated by its enactment in the text. Amidst the traditions just listed—each of which are not discrete but continuous and overlapping—I focus on political theology, Christian theology, and continental philosophy in an attempt to speak into the present postsecular context in which the certainties of secular modernity have been found lacking and questionable. ‘Postsecular’ is a term that I will use throughout to refer to the present instability of the distinction between religion and the secular (simply put, that the categories of secularity and religion are not strictly separate but owe each other many incalculable debts). At times I will affirm this division while at other times I will seek to move outside of it. I both affirm and reject the distinction between religion and secularity contextually within the text, with the broader goal of demonstrating how the distinction both *does* and *does not* serve to describe and prescribe present ways of thinking and acting. Although I am concerned broadly with religion and epistemology, below I focus on the tradition of Christian theology, understanding that this limitation is both a symptom of the untenable equivocation of religion with Christianity, but also with the hope that the critique of violence dealt with herein can contribute to the dismantling of that equivocation from within.

In this context, I assume some knowledge of three aspects of *secularity* (the epistemic category of the *secular*, the descriptive historical thesis of *secularization*, and the prescriptive political doctrine of *secularism*), and each of their corresponding

postsecular critiques.<sup>1</sup> When I refer to the ‘postsecular context,’ I am referring to both these three interlocking concepts and to their critiques. This threefold distinction is a helpful way of teasing apart the very different yet interrelated attitudes toward the relationship between religion and the secular in the contemporary academic and public discourses that address these issues. Talal Asad makes this threefold distinction a structural part of his book *Formations of the Secular*, arguing that the epistemic form of the category of the secular underpins the normative political pursuits of secularism and that, like religion, the secular is questionable from an anthropological standpoint for it is not a neutral posture toward the world capable of maintaining a view from nowhere, but rather it is a representation and form of life that brings along its own epistemological predispositions.<sup>2</sup> Asking how the political doctrine of secularism is related to the epistemology and ontology that undergird it, Asad suggests that “the secular is neither singular in origin nor stable in its historical identity, although it works through a series of particular oppositions.”<sup>3</sup> One such opposition for Asad is the sacred and the secular and, amidst his critique of the liberal imposition of the secular, he suggests a departure from the “idea that the secular is a mask for religion, that secular political practices often simulate religious ones.”<sup>4</sup> Although the present study takes the postsecular situation as its context and seeks to critique its oppositions, counter to Asad’s suggestion, much of the argument that follows will seek to acknowledge the secular debt to the religious and the Christian, although not in the triumphant or imperialistic manner that Asad is likely concerned about.<sup>5</sup>

Like Asad, I also seek to challenge the narrative of religion and the secular that has long dominated both public life and academic discourse, and many spaces in between. Asad writes later in the book that “[t]he secularization thesis in its entirety has always been at once descriptive and normative,” and I take this to entail that the historical description of the secularization thesis both motivated the prescriptive political doctrine of secularism, and legitimated the epistemic concept of the secular and its claims to neutrality.<sup>6</sup> Although conventional wisdom dictates that religion has been decreasing in influence and significance in North America, social patterns suggest otherwise, and religion appears to be ‘returning’ (did it ever leave?). Nonetheless, in some quarters it still seems that popular consciousness has appropriated the initial secularization thesis of Peter Berger and others that predicted the decline of religion with the advance of industrial society, and made that part of the narrative and cultural habitus of North American society. Against the secularization thesis stand both sociologists who reject the empirical claim that religious observance is declining, and philosophers who reject the idea that the term ‘secularization’ refers solely to the simple and linear decline of religion in the face of the progress of Western Civilization. Indeed, for many thinkers, the idea that society and history are ‘progressing’ at all is indebted to Jewish messianism and Christian eschatology.<sup>7</sup> To cite but one example, in his

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Casanova, “The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms”; Habermas, “Notes on Post-Secular Society”; and Latré, van Herck, and Vanheeswijk (Eds.) *Radical Secularization?*.

<sup>2</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 16-17. Cf. Anidjar, “Secularism.”

<sup>3</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, i-18.

<sup>6</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 181.

<sup>7</sup> Compare Löwith, *Meaning in History* with Blumenburg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.

introduction to philosophy, titled *A Philosophy of the Future*, the great utopian thinker Ernst Bloch critiques the naturalization of progress and notes both its complicity in colonial violence and its roots in eschatology.<sup>8</sup>

To begin with the sociological complication of the secularization thesis, in his career-long desingularization of the concept of secularization, David Martin first argued in 1969 that the continuities and discontinuities of secularization are partly indebted to a Christian understanding of history as progressing by stages, while also arguing that this debt was converted into a secular form that suggests a similar directional convergence.<sup>9</sup> This secular syncretism in which all cultures are thought to tend towards the common standard of Western liberal democracy is further described and critiqued in Martin's 2005 book *On Secularization*, in which he suggests that secularization is not a singular movement sweeping across the globe and history, but rather a series of "successive Christianizations followed or accompanied by recoils" in which certain aspects of Christianity are secularized by collapsing their concepts into nature.<sup>10</sup> These secularizations and recoils reveal a world in which the role of the Christian religion in the public and private spheres remains contested but important. Although the social differentiations of religion into the economic, social, political, and cultural spheres have not occurred with uniformity or predictability, it is indeed the case that religion in general remains a vital site in contemporary life that plays host to many contemporary struggles of and for subjectivity. Within these advancing and regressing terms of secularity and religion, this study seeks to show resonances between particular Christian and secular sources in a way that initially affirms the distinctions between Christianity, religion, and the secular only in order to show how these distinctions cannot bear the weight of what they purport to name.

Framed by these disciplines, drawing texts from these traditions and sources, and speaking to this context, the topic of this essay is *metaphysical violence*, which necessarily requires further inquiry into the relationship between epistemology, ontology, and violence. More broadly put, the guiding question of this study is: in what sense can we say that certain metaphysical perspectives and positions, and their accompanying epistemologies and ontologies, are violent, or contribute to violence? What are these violences and how should they be critiqued, avoided, or resisted not only in practice, but in theory as well?

I assume on the part of the reader an ethical position that is opposed to violence in the broadest sense, not assuming (given the postsecular context just mentioned) that this opposition to violence takes particular forms or rests upon wholly 'Christian,' 'religious,' or 'secular' terms. Descriptively, it is important to acknowledge that not all opposition to violence takes the form of the total prohibition of violence, for indeed many traditions seek to oppose violence by means of violence. This particular form of redemptive violence may arise, for example, in a principled defence of *just war* or in an implicit affirmation of scapegoating and sacrifice. While I will explore manifestations of redemptive violence below, at this stage, I assume that the reader is at least charitable to the moral imperative to reduce the suffering of the world, whether by religious or secular means, or both, or neither. To cite an example of how the legitimization of the

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<sup>8</sup> Bloch, *A Philosophy of the Future*, 138, and 143-144.

<sup>9</sup> Martin, *The Religious and the Secular*, 24-25.

<sup>10</sup> Martin, *On Secularization*, 3.

critique of violence can span and reject the distinction between Christianity and the secular, one could look to German radical feminist theologian Dorothee Sölle, who appeals to both Marx and the gospels throughout her work, writing that “the only humanly conceivable goal is the abolition of circumstances under which people are forced to suffer, whether through poverty or tyranny.”<sup>11</sup> Like Sölle, I take this position to be axiomatic. And so this investigation will address the link between principles and axioms of this kind, and the social and material violences of the world, by means of secular philosophical thinkers, Christian theologians, and indeed thinkers who are uncategorizable by this often artificial boundary.

In light of both this postsecular context and the concern for metaphysical violence, I begin by examining the concept of religion in broad terms through a brief tour of the etymological root of the term in the Latin *‘religio,’* and then I explore the work of several Continental philosophers and Christian theologians on the critique of violence, searching for ways in which the critique of metaphysical forms of violence might both resonate across the boundary between secularity and religion (Christianity in particular) and critique the naturalization of this boundary.

## Religion and the Regulation of the Subject

I understand religion herein, not as a code word for Christianity, nor as a category that effectively or exhaustively unites all religious traditions under its banner,<sup>12</sup> homogenizing the many spiritual and transcendental discourses of the world under the guise of unity, or bringing together East and West or Abrahamic and otherwise.<sup>13</sup> Instead, I find it instructive to examine how the contemporary idea of religion can be untranslated in such a way that considers the origins of the Latin *religio* and the Greek *thrēskeia*, following the pioneering work of Daniel Boyarin and Carlin Barton in their recent book *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities*.

Given the anachronism of translating the terms *‘religio’* and *‘thrēskeia’* as ‘religion’ when they are encountered in ancient texts, Boyarin and Barton resist the sacralization of abstraction and the reification of technical terms by examining particular uses of each term in the context of Ancient Rome.<sup>14</sup> Focusing on Tertullian and Josephus, Boyarin and Barton value specificity over generality in a way that resists easy summary but does not necessarily prohibit it. In general, Boyarin and Barton claim that the Ancient Romans had no religion, at least not in the sense in which we think of it today. Ancient societies did not stratify their experience by dividing religion from private life or labour. The terms *‘religio’* and *‘thrēskeia’* do not refer to concepts that can be abstracted or separated from the lived experience of “eating, sleeping, defecating, having sexual intercourse, making revolts and wars, cursing, blessing, exalting, degrading, judging, punishing, buying, selling, raiding, revolting, building bridges, collecting rents and taxes.”<sup>15</sup> Boyarin and Barton discover in the Latin *‘religio’* a philological treasure trove of meaning hitherto concealed by its simplistic translation as

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<sup>11</sup> Sölle, *Suffering*, 2. Cf. Sölle, *Death by Bread Alone*, 3-6.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious.”

<sup>14</sup> On the related terms *‘sacer’* and *‘augustus,’* see Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*. Vol. 1, 129-130.

<sup>15</sup> Boyarin and Barton, *Imagine No Religion*, 4.

'religion' by modern scholars. Ancient Roman citizens were motivated by a sense of *religio* that focused their attention and consisted in part of "a homeostatic system of reciprocities moving back and forth across a boundary or bond—an emotional economy closely related to and reflecting the self-regulating 'government of shame' of cultures without powerful centralized institutions and means to enforce their claims to authority and legitimacy."<sup>16</sup> *Religio* is a kind of bond or being-bound, a sense of "doubt, hesitation, constraint, scrupulousness, carefulness, anxiety, awe, fear, and dread" that makes one pause or decide on a different course of action.<sup>17</sup> Both positive and negative, and inhering in people, cities, gods, and holy places, *religio* in Ancient Rome was not imposed hierarchically or even necessarily chosen out of freedom. Instead, "*religio*, like an unpaid debt, hung over one like a curse, binding one and causing one anxiety."<sup>18</sup>

And so we can ask—while not expecting this etymological exploration to bear the weight of this inquiry, but instead expecting that Boyarin and Barton's exploration can evoke a fresh thought—what of the contemporary anxiety that hangs over us like a cloud here in late modern capitalist society, consisting of precarities that are at once existential, financial, and political? For example, in her book *State of Insecurity* Isabell Lorey furthers the Foucauldian notion of 'governmentality,' a term that names the ways in which modern individuals are governed on the level of selfhood, by state or cultural power in both repressive ways and through certain emancipatory modes of self-governance (she describes an "ambivalence between subjugation and self-empowerment").<sup>19</sup> Although Lorey is concerned with labour and the financial precarity engendered by present modes of capitalist production, she also identifies that the precariousness of the modern subject on the social level also has an existential aspect. Later in her book she writes,

In the current dynamic of governmental precarization, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between an abstract anxiety over existential precariousness (anxiety that a body, because it is mortal, cannot be made invulnerable) and a concrete fear of politically and economically induced precarization (fear of unemployment or of not being able to pay the rent or health-care bills even when employed); both of these negative cares overlap.<sup>20</sup>

Not entirely unlike the overhanging anxiety that motivated the Ancient Roman *religio*, today we experience our own sense of anxiety that motivates our restraint and causes our constant self-regulation and self-checking. We might ask: what are the contemporary sensibilities that bind us back, or give us pause, encouraging our self-regulation and self-governance, and governing our self-understanding? While not attempting a return to some pristine origin of religious spirit in the Ancient Roman *religio*, and not attempting to draw too strong a parallel over the historical divide between the ancient world and the present, it is refreshing to encounter the strangeness

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

<sup>19</sup> Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 3-4, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 88.

of the Ancient Roman *religio* as an entryway into contemporary reflection on the meaning of religion and the secular, for in some ways it does not truly seem so strange. We do indeed have our own distinct type of *religio*, a sense in which we must construct and regulate and project a modern self between the religious and secular influences of our world.

From Boyarin and Barton to Lorey, the idea of a *religio* as that which binds and restrains the self plainly shows us the historicity of our concepts and the debt we incur in our use of them, particularly the present use of the term ‘religion.’ If we truly live in a secular society emancipated from the supposedly hierarchical and institutional control of religion, then by what principles do we restrain ourselves and form our ethics? Instead of the secular dream of value-neutrality and the fading of religious illusion, it seems that in some way it is impossible to separate religion and secularity, for secularization runs in both directions between religion and secularity. On one hand, religious concepts become ‘evacuated’ into secular shells (religion-becoming-secular); but, on the other hand, secular concepts take on an almost ‘religious’ meaning in the way that they are adhered to and ritually observed (secular-becoming-religious).<sup>21</sup> This chiasm is difficult to tease apart, for it shows that the secular and the religious are intertwined and indebted to each other, and it is the contention of this essay that the debt must be mutually paid, and not just through recognition from afar, but rather by sustained translation work that mobilizes both secular-philosophical and theological or religious self-understanding to work toward a world with less suffering and violence. In order to move toward a postsecular critique of violence, we must first understand this relationship of conceptual indebtedness between religion and secularity.

## Political Theology

The discourse called ‘political theology’ has sought to address this problematic debt.<sup>22</sup> Symptomatic of the regulatory norms of the discourse, I now mention that Carl Schmitt, the Nazi philosopher of jurisprudence, is a founding voice in political theology, for it was he who wrote that “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development ... but also because of their systematic structure.”<sup>23</sup> For Schmitt, the sovereign leader is the one who decides on the state of exception, and “[t]he exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology”—not only analogous but secularized.<sup>24</sup> That the miracle is secularized into the exception is one thing, but that God (the giver of miracles in exception to nature) is secularized into the sovereign leader (the decider on exceptions to state law) is quite another. With this discursive beginning signalled, I will

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<sup>21</sup> One example of this evacuation is the constitution of the self by means of confession. Cf. Foucault, “Christianity and Confession” and Taylor, *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault*.

<sup>22</sup> Political theology ranges from the theological reflection on the political nature of theology itself, to philosophical reflection on the theological nature of secular modernity, to theological self-critique in light of modernity, and includes many ambiguous spaces in between. For one landmark collection, see Davis, Milbank, and Žižek (Eds.) *Theology and the Political*. For radical Christian theological expressions, see: Sölle, *Political Theology* and her clarifications in “Theology and Liberation,” 114; Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, esp. 24-30; and Metz, *Theology of the World*, esp. 17-20.

<sup>23</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

leave the evaluation of Schmitt to others while noting that the discourse on the secularization of concepts often marks his work as a beginning point.<sup>25</sup>

In his book, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Giorgio Agamben traces the theological lineage of *oikonomia* back to the Trinity and the location of political power in glory.<sup>26</sup> Radicalizing Schmitt's thesis, Agamben argues that Schmitt's statement quoted above "should be supplemented in a way that would extend its validity well beyond the boundaries of public law, extending up to the fundamental concepts of the economy and the very idea of the reproductive life of human societies."<sup>27</sup> Surveying the works of Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, and the 'signatures' of Paracelsus and Boehme, Agamben suggests that "secularization operates in the conceptual system of modernity as a signature that refers it back to theology."<sup>28</sup> This signature of secularization serves to remind us that theological concepts often underpin what we think are secular ways of thinking and knowing. One significant thinker who addresses this debt in a way that is both (and neither) secular and religious is the German literary critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin. According to Michael Löwy, Benjamin's essay "On the Concept of History" (unpublished in his lifetime) "constitutes one of the most important philosophical and political texts of the twentieth century."<sup>29</sup> Like Bloch, Benjamin's critique of progress rests on his understanding of messianism, which he sees as a core concept of the philosophy of history and (like Jacob Taubes) an alarming call for a more emancipatory concept of history.<sup>30</sup>

Even a brief look at Benjamin's text yields insights that complement the above critiques of the secular in Schmitt and Agamben.<sup>31</sup> For Benjamin, "The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption" and this redemptive aspect of the past becomes a part of our present as we are "endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim."<sup>32</sup> For Benjamin, the historical materialist must recognize that the claim that the past has on the present "cannot be settled cheaply."<sup>33</sup> In the search to settle that debt (which I suggest is partly the debt of the secular to the religious), Benjamin emphasizes that the recognition of the past does not come to us with certainty, nor all at once. Instead of conditioning our vision of the past with a kind of

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<sup>25</sup> In the words of Kenneth Reinhard, Schmitt's insight is that "the political order is sustained by theological concepts that it cannot completely assimilate." Reinhard's criticism, in part, is that the friend-enemy distinction is a symptom of the political rejection and repression of the presence of theology in its midst. See Reinhard, "Toward a Political Theology of the Neighbor," 11. For recent critical work on Schmitt and violence, see Kyle Gingerich Hiebert, *The Architectonics of Hope*.

<sup>26</sup> Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, xi-xiii.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 26-31.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Haverkamp, "Anagrammatics of Violence," 135-144.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," II/390. See also the similar emphasis on redemption and messianism in Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 153. His statement begins: "The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from self contact with its objects—this alone is the task of thought."

<sup>33</sup> Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," II/390.

realism that desires to ascertain 'what actually happened,' Benjamin says that we must begin by "appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger."<sup>34</sup> Dangerous memory is something that names the risk that the historical materialist takes when remembering and inheriting a tradition, specifically the risk that our image of the past will serve the dominant ruling class.<sup>35</sup> The messianic coming of history is not just redemptive for Benjamin, but emancipatory. He writes that "[t]he subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class itself" and that history is not made up of "empty time, but time filled with now-time [*Jetztzeit*]."<sup>36</sup> Instead of "homogenous empty time" Benjamin seeks a universal history that shocks and crystallizes in the "messianic arrest of happening" or "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past."<sup>37</sup>

And so the critique of the secular suggested by Schmitt and Agamben above accords with Benjamin on this point, and is deepened by his language of debt and emancipation. Our reading of history is not neutral, and our reading of history is not enacted except in moments that are punctuating interruptions in the rolling hills of what Benjamin calls "homogenous empty time." Instead of understanding our historical reflection as a mere exercise in rear-faced empirical vision, Benjamin enjoins us to cultivate an historical consciousness that moves beyond descriptive observation and spectatorship to the active and prescriptive search for the forgotten or erased aspects of history in need of remembering, and the ways in which these hidden histories can serve to emancipate the oppressed today. One way in which to proceed along the lines of this emancipatory history is to recognize, with Benjamin, that the debt we owe to the past requires *both* the critique of the secular and the admission of religious influence, *and* the reverse payment in which religions face their complex complicity in the violences and oppressions of the world.

## The Critique of the Secular

Understanding that, for better *and* for worse, the contemporary secular position works unsuccessfully to conceal its historical debt to Christianity, and understanding that many (but not all!) political and social concepts are secularized Christian theological concepts, we are then witness to varying responses. One major response to this critique of the secular reasserts Christian superiority following the recognition of the secular debt to Christianity, and another effaces Christianity altogether by using that same inheritance to blame Christianity for the violence of the world.<sup>38</sup> Neither of these two (albeit simplified and caricatured) options will do, for neither the assertion of Christian superiority nor the scapegoating of Christianity have sufficiently accounted for the complex relationship between religion and violence.

On one hand, schools of thought that respond to the secular debt to Christianity by triumphantly asserting Christianity as the true bearer of history and truth forget the complicity and culpability of Christianity with the violence of the world. On the other

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., VI/391.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 200-204. Cf. Metz, "Productive Noncontemporaneity," 169-177.

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," XIII/394 and XIV/395.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., XVI-XVII/396.

<sup>38</sup> For a more nuanced picture of this difference, compare the edited collections Smith, and Whistler (Eds.) *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern* with Blond *Post-Secular Philosophy*. See also the excellent introduction to the postsecular in Smith, "Post-Secularism."

hand, schools of thought that respond to the secular inheritance of Christian concepts by rejecting Christianity outright or putting Christianity on trial for all violence forget that violence cannot solely be blamed on Christianity, or religion for that matter, for that would require an impossibly clean distinction between religion, culture, and politics, each of which contribute to the propagation of violence in an inextricable interrelation.

In his book, *Theopolitical Imagination*, William Cavanaugh argues that the secular political imagination “is really theology in disguise,” and provocatively suggests that “the modern state is built upon a soteriology of rescue from violence.”<sup>39</sup> Cavanaugh argues that, while the modern secular state presents a vision of salvation from religious violence, it fails to truly save anyone from violence and instead allows the state to justify its own ‘secular’ violence.<sup>40</sup> This claim sets the stage for Cavanaugh’s larger study *The Myth of Religious Violence* in which he sets out to systematically disprove the idea that religion necessarily entails violence, albeit in a nuanced and easily misunderstood way. Cavanaugh understands the myth of religious violence to be the “idea that religion is a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life, essentially distinct from ‘secular’ features such as politics and economics, which has a peculiarly dangerous inclination to promote violence.”<sup>41</sup> Just as Boyarin and Barton show that the Ancient Roman *religio* admits no distinction between religion and social life, we can ask whether this indistinction also applies to modern life. Doubtless for different reasons, but in a similar spirit of critique, Cavanaugh argues that religion is *not* something separable from the culture in which it is found, or the political systems that both oppose and propagate its structures, or the economic systems that intertwine with it (for example, the kinship relationship between Christianity and capitalism). Because it is impossible to extricate religion from its embeddedness in social and political life, it is therefore impossible to blame religion solely for the violences of the world by pointing to a religious group that acts violently and stating with certainty that it is *religion* that is the cause of its violence and not other economic, cultural, or social factors. This is not to say that religions are absolved of their complicity with violence, nor is it the reassertion of the Christian master narrative, but rather it is simply to say (with Cavanaugh) that religion is not the decisive factor in what makes some individual, institution, state, or group violent.<sup>42</sup>

### **The Critique of Violence as a Postsecular Opportunity**

If both ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’ are terms that attempt to unify what cannot be unified—for they both name interiorly diverse groups, some of whom act violently and some of whom do not—then it stands to reason that this ambiguity in the representational relationship between the One (the name) and the Many (what is named) not only entails the *negative thesis* that religion and violence cannot be straightforwardly identified with each other, but could *also* entail the *positive thesis* that the *critique of violence* evades simple associations either with religion or the secular. While Cavanaugh argues that religion cannot bear the sole blame for the violence of the world, in reverse form, I argue that the critique of violence cannot be restricted either to

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<sup>39</sup> Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 2.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>41</sup> Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 3.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-7. See also Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 33-51.

the 'reasonable' secular person who resists fanaticism and extremism, nor the 'faithful' Christian person who resists violent secular power. This naturalized division is artificial and does not serve the interests of the critique of violence. Like the violences of war and terrorism, the critique of violence also knows no bounds, cutting across religion, secularity, culture, and politics, being motivated by both piety and greed, devotion and the desire for power, faithfulness and the fear of difference (none of which can be purely separated from the other in practice).

And so, perhaps the critique of violence is a postsecular opportunity relevant in a transdisciplinary way to philosophers, Christian theologians, and scholars of religion. Such is the wager of this study. That said, there are surely exceptions to this nonviolent possibility present in the work of postsecular thinkers. The French philosopher Georges Bataille, for example, evades categorization as a religious or secular thinker, but bases much of this evasion on a distinction between human and animal that is in no way opposed to violence. Instead, it is the limit-experiences of suffering and sexual violence upon which much of his transgressive work hinges. In his *Theory of Religion*, Bataille describes the difference between humanity and animality by ascribing transcendence to the former and radical immanence to the latter.<sup>43</sup> The abstract human can adjudicate based on overdetermining laws and norms, but the animal knows no violence because it has no standard by which to judge what is violated. Through the mediations of tool-use and the distinction between sacred and profane, humanity can identify and police violence and profanation. But, without these abstracting and transcending structures and boundary discourses, there is no violence to speak of—only the plane of immanence in which one animal simply eats another.<sup>44</sup> In Bataille we see that not all thinkers who defy the boundary between religion and secularity bring with them a critique of violence, but this does not foreclose the potential of a postsecular critique of metaphysical violence, but rather may even deepens it in ways that will soon become apparent.

## Theory and Practice

With the postsecular context established, I now move to the critique of violence. The critique of violence with which I am concerned in this essay proceeds from a particular vision of the relationship between theory and practice, or thought and action—a vision that sees attitudes and ways of knowing (epistemologies) as complex precursors to actions that themselves undergird habits and practices from the individual level to the political and social level. However, the relationship between violent ways of knowing and arranging the abstract objects of that knowledge in metaphysical terms, and the actions of human beings is not one of simply continuity, nor one of discontinuity. Instead of expecting that violent ways of thinking to reliably result in violent acts, it is better to proceed to the negative thesis that the critique of violent epistemologies and the metaphysical perspectives they underpin is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the reduction of social violences.

Some thinkers negotiate the relationship between theory and practice by pursuing a theoretical orientation that acknowledges the historical determination of

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<sup>43</sup> Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, Ch. 1.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

practices. For example, in the introduction to his *Theory and Practice*, Jürgen Habermas suggests a way of theorizing that encompasses theory and practice under the auspices of *praxis*. In this ideal scenario, theory is oriented toward action and becomes self-critique by reflecting on its own origins and history.<sup>45</sup> Here Habermas inherits the distinction between traditional and critical theory made by Max Horkheimer,<sup>46</sup> and relies upon the critique of abstraction as that which sacrifices particularity for universality. In this way, the discourse of critical theory during and after the time of the Frankfurt School attempts to keep theory sufficiently close to practice so that the abstraction of theory does not prevent it from assisting in the practical emancipation of the oppressed, but instead works toward it.

The present study seeks a similar ideal, aiming to provide a theoretical and abstract backing force for contemporary political and social struggles against material violences. Because violent epistemologies underpin violent actions—for we would not have the social violences of racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. without (often implicit) epistemologies and ontologies of personhood, discourse, and sociality that permit and encourage dehumanization and prejudice—the critique of violence must therefore attend to the issue of epistemological violence, lest it bypass theory in the name of practice and attack a symptom and not its potential causes. Another thinker (already mentioned) who embodies the postsecular spirit that the present study seeks to name is Sölle, who quotes Lenin’s statement “there is no such thing as abstract truth; truth is always concrete” as a support to her simultaneously Christian and Marxist goals of emancipation.<sup>47</sup> In light of this concreteness, which is similar in its goals to Habermas’ *praxis*, Sölle argues from her Christian position that “Christianity sees the truth as concrete, historical and partisan” both changing with the situation at hand (contextual) and changing the situation at hand (revolutionary).<sup>48</sup> Not asserting the truth of Christianity in a way that seeks to lord it over others in power, but instead asserting that the truth of Christianity is a kind of love that rejects the abuse of power, Sölle resists the abstract resignation of Pilate’s question to Jesus, “What is truth?”<sup>49</sup>

## René Girard and Walter Wink

Rather than swear off the positive resourcing of Christian thinkers like Sölle for fear that secular sensibilities will be offended—while conscious of the often honourable motivations of those sensibilities—I now turn to the works of René Girard and Walter Wink for further resources in pursuit of a critique of violence that can live up to the standards of both theoretical precision and concrete *praxis*. In his pamphlet, *Time for Outrage*, Stéphane Hessel posits that “the future belongs to nonviolence and the reconciliation of clashing cultures,” arguing that “nonviolence is a more reliable method to end violence.”<sup>50</sup> Although Hessel’s assertion is a suggestive comment in a pamphlet meant to inspire a popular audience, the wager of the present text is that his inclination

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<sup>45</sup> Habermas, “Some Difficulties in the Attempt to Link Theory and Praxis,” 2.

<sup>46</sup> Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory.”

<sup>47</sup> Sölle, *The Truth is Concrete*, 7.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. Cf. Sölle, *Political Theology*, 74-77.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 14, 40.

<sup>50</sup> Hessel, *Time for Outrage / Indignez-vous!*, 23.

is correct: violence cannot be undone by means of further violence. Many have arrived at this conclusion without religious or Christian commitments, but those who have do so in such a way that challenges the caricature of Christianity as a violent religion.

Girard's work provides a diagnosis of the problem of violence through analyses of mimetic desire and the phenomenon of scapegoating.<sup>51</sup> Understanding human desire to be fundamentally mimetic, Girard sets forth a theory of the transcultural mechanisms behind violence. Beginning with the idea that our desires are imitative, therefore originating from social sources outside of the self, Girard suggests that mimetic desire produces social violence, most often the violences of vengeance, scapegoating, and sacrifice. The imitation of others leads to the substitution of the desire of the other for the desired thing, and the resentment of the crowd becomes focused on an individual onto whom is heaped the entirety of the rivalry between persons (a rivalry that itself has its source in the mimetic nature of desire). For Girard, the scandal in which the contradictions of desire are manifest cannot be sustained forever, and eventually reaches a breaking point with the outbreak of violence. Through the confusion of the desired object with the desire of the other, and through competitive and antagonistic social relations, the scapegoating mechanism unites those who were previously divided by the rivalry of mimetic desire.<sup>52</sup> Girard argues that "human culture is predisposed to the permanent concealment of its origins in collective violence."<sup>53</sup> In short, for Girard, the history of mob persecution hides a history of scapegoating and mimetic violence in both mythology and religion, manifest in the death of Socrates, the death of Christ, and in great works of literature.

Like Girard, the Christian theologian Walter Wink describes a similar genealogy of violence at the core of which is not the mimetic cycle, but what he calls "the myth of redemptive violence."<sup>54</sup> The myth of redemptive violence, mentioned at the beginning of this essay and challenged by Hessel and Girard, is the thought that violence, suffering, and evil can be eliminated or reduced by way of further violence—a violence that is often thought to be restrained, state-sanctioned, and reasonable, but is too often just as horrific as the violence that it attempts to eliminate. Wink asks: "How can we oppose evil without creating new evils and being made evil ourselves?"<sup>55</sup> Constructing a Christian social ethic that opposes the spiritual-social evils of earthly "powers and principalities," Wink identifies violence as "the ethos of our times" with deep roots in ancient myth and religion.<sup>56</sup> He attributes the success of the myth of redemptive violence to its seemingly natural status. Much like the critique of the secular outlined above, for Wink, violence naturalizes itself and masquerades as the normal state of the world, and furthermore the act of meeting violence with violence is understood to be unavoidable. Drawing upon the Babylonian creation myth described in the *Enuma Elish*, Wink observes violence at the beginning of human culture, and suggests that a way beyond it can be found in the renunciation of the myth of redemptive violence. Identifying the myth of redemptive violence not just in the ancient world, but also in contemporary popular

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 100-111.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Hamerton-Kelly, "The Generative Mimetic Scapegoating Mechanism."

<sup>53</sup> Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 100.

<sup>54</sup> Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 13-50, 175-193.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. (For a secular correlate, see Balibar, *Violence and Civility*, 1-17.)

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

culture and American militarism, Wink provides a critique of violence that acknowledges the reality of violence, while challenging the supposed 'realism' that restricts movement beyond or away from violence.<sup>57</sup>

Against the naturalization of the "domination system," Wink suggests that a third way beyond passivity and redemptive violence can be found in "nonviolent direct action," which is exemplified by the life of Jesus Christ.<sup>58</sup> Through an analysis of Christ's command to turn the other cheek to one's aggressor, Wink exposes the subversive potential of such an act by appealing to the cultural context in which such a striking act would occur. Suggesting that turning the other cheek forces the aggressor to strike the individual with the back of the hand, and therefore as an equal, rather than just the open hand (as an oppressor), Wink shows how turning the other cheek is but one non-cooperative act that undercuts the dominance of the aggressor, and therefore resists the naturalizing logic of the myth of redemptive violence.<sup>59</sup>

### **The Critique of Metaphysical Violence**

The critique of metaphysical violence disrupts the naturalization of violence that occurs in the movement from the descriptive fact that we live in a violent world toward the prescription that violence must be part of the solution to the problem of violence. If we take the argument of the myth of redemptive violence seriously, whether from a secular or Christian standpoint (or neither), then we must consider the possibility that not only does it apply to material violences like murder or war but also to any metaphysics that is propped up by a dominating, controlling, reductive, or essentialist epistemology. The critique of metaphysical violence also involves the acknowledgment that violence can be done in the very establishment and identification of violence. Decisions about what constitutes the boundaries that are violated and the occasions of their violation are always both metaphysical and political. It is too simple to divide epistemology (a category concerned with our habits of thinking, knowing, and conducting ourselves in discourse) from ontology (a category concerned with the structure of the relationship between thought and being) with the expectation that the latter can be insulated from all prescription. The slippage of prescription and description runs through the aforementioned distinction, meaning that both epistemologies and ontologies contain within them explicit descriptions and implicit prescriptions. An *is* is rarely found without a presumed *ought* and an *ought* usually bears within itself certain assumptions about what *is*. Amidst the ambiguous (but not unknowable) relationship between description and prescription, the problem of violence endures in visible ways as material phenomena, but also conceals itself in ideology.

In light of this concern for metaphysics and violence in the postsecular context, below I survey the works of Grace Jantzen, Miranda Fricker and Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Jacques Derrida, and John Milbank, precisely because each of these thinkers in some way walks the line between religion and secularity and inhabits an in-between space that takes seriously the critiques of both secular reason and violence outlined above.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 33-37.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence*, 1-28.

## Grace Jantzen

One underappreciated thinker who investigates violence in an epistemological context is Grace Jantzen, whose unfinished multi-volume work *Death and the Displacement of Beauty* opposes the desire for death and the emphasis on mortality with a life-affirming philosophy of beauty and natality. In the first volume of this project, called *Foundations of Violence*, Jantzen writes of the “dissonance between beauty and violence” and the love of death in the cultural habitus of the West, while searching for the “potential for a new beginning” that could critique this necrophilia on both material and discursive fronts.<sup>60</sup> Much of *Foundations of Violence* examines the roots of violence in ancient cultures, but given that our concern is contemporary I will focus on the framing questions and conclusions that Jantzen derives from her deep textual investigation of Platonic and Homeric writings. Against the violent “thought patterns” of modernity, particularly the preoccupation with death, Jantzen critiques our social and cultural habitus (Pierre Bourdieu) by opposing the violence present when those in power dominate others through both physical means (e.g., war, force) and symbolic means (e.g., anxiety, desire for control).<sup>61</sup> Proceeding from a critique of the fear of death and the love of conflict, Jantzen identifies a discursive kind of violence in the language that governs much of our contemporary conversations and exchanges. Targeting discursive habits of the Anglo-American analytic philosophical tradition, Jantzen writes: “Metaphors of violence abound. Positions are advanced, attacked, defended, embattled, or shot down in flames, as though philosophy consisted of intellectual warfare.”<sup>62</sup> Rather than suggesting that these hostile and aggressive ways of speaking simply cause social violences, Jantzen suggests that the reverse is also true, namely that “the language of violence whether at academic or popular levels, is indicative of structures of a symbolic within which violence and death are unthinkingly chosen as apt metaphors for a vast range of causes and activities.”<sup>63</sup> The mutually reinforcing relationship between violent epistemologies and the material violences of the world is further complicated by Jantzen’s foundational feminist argument that “it was predominantly men who structured the symbolic” and its concern for death, and men who have wielded violence and used it to subjugate women in both corporeal and symbolic ways from Ancient Rome, through Christendom, to the present day.<sup>64</sup>

This means for the present inquiry, that any discussion of violence undertaken in these pages must be conditioned by feminist critique if it is to have any integrity as a critique of the real social violence that women and others who find themselves in positions of oppression suffer. Following Jantzen (and Wink), I suggest that rather than allowing the assumption that violence is ‘natural’ to naturalize our violence,<sup>65</sup> any critique of violence must call into question the very basic structures of human experience that permit or encourage the system of power that maintains the violent relationship between privilege and oppression.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, vii.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-11.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-25.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

## Miranda Fricker and Judith Butler

In her book, *Epistemic Injustice*, feminist philosopher Miranda Fricker develops the notion of epistemic injustice, defined as “a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower.”<sup>67</sup> She then divides epistemic injustice into cases of “testimonial injustice” and “hermeneutical injustice.”<sup>68</sup> On one hand, in cases of testimonial injustice, epistemic injustice is done when prejudices prevent a hearer from hearing the testimony of another as legitimate or credible. On the other hand, in cases of hermeneutical injustice, epistemic injustice is done when the lack of critical concepts disadvantages individuals by preventing them from naming and understanding their social circumstances and experiences. Resisting what she identifies as the reductive tendency of postmodernism, Fricker proceeds with an analytical precision that risks the kind of epistemic violence that Jantzen describes as characteristic of analytic philosophy, but does so with the express purpose of critiquing the abuse of epistemic power. Understanding testimonial injustice to proceed (partially) from a kind of “identity prejudice,” Fricker argues that “any epistemic injustice wrongs someone in their capacity as a subject of knowledge, and thus in a capacity essential to human value.”<sup>69</sup> In a certain way, Fricker’s investigation concerns itself with the dignity of human identity, considering epistemic injustice to be that which stands in the way of people being who they are and becoming who they will be. In the later chapters of *Epistemic Injustice* in particular, Fricker examines feminist arguments against objectification and develops the concept of hermeneutical injustice, using the example of women who suffered from sexual harassment before the concept of sexual harassment was available.<sup>70</sup>

The concept of epistemic injustice, or epistemological violence, is developed by other feminist philosophers, sometimes with concerns for methodology,<sup>71</sup> and sometimes in ways that examine the continuities and discontinuities between theory and practice. In her book, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, Judith Butler asks fundamental questions about the nature of violence and calls for a leftist resistance to both military violence and the underlying social violences of racism, sexism, and classism. Developing a concept of precarity to which Lorey is indebted, and connecting precarity with violence, Butler writes that “the normative production of ontology thus produces the epistemological problem of apprehending a life, and this in turn gives rise to the ethical problem of what it is to acknowledge or, indeed, to guard against injury and violence.”<sup>72</sup> Critiquing the violent framing of war and the problems of secular sensibilities, Butler argues that we must avoid distraction from the critique of violence and attend to the ways in which both secular and religious perspectives offer critiques of state violence.<sup>73</sup> In the final chapter of *Frames of War*, “The Claim of Non-Violence,” Butler critiques the principle of nonviolence, noting that nonviolence is always an “address” and an “appeal” that cannot be policed or enforced as law, but serves instead as a reminder that violence is within us, and so often used to frame our experiences in

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<sup>67</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 1.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-175.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Ramazanoğlu and Holland, *Feminist Methodology*.

<sup>72</sup> Butler, *Frames of War*, 2-3.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 41, 104, 134-135.

an epistemologically significant way.<sup>74</sup> Unlike Wink and others who reject counter-violence, Butler defends the possibility of redemptive violence.<sup>75</sup> Being open to the necessity of counter-violence in the reversal of patriarchal power rather than the levelling of power relations, Butler speaks of counter-violence as a possibility (even a necessity) for democratic politics.<sup>76</sup>

Returning to Fricker, we can ask similar questions about the concept of epistemic injustice: is the use of epistemic power and coercive rhetorical force sometimes ethically defensible in the name of democracy or free speech, or is it a capitulation to the myth of redemptive violence? The connection between power and knowledge means that we find ourselves in epistemic environments in which truths are legitimated and delegitimated by means of persuasion and varieties of reason that are so often male. In her essay, “Violence Against Violence Against Women,” Dianne Chisholm suggests that it is symbolic counter-violence that must be waged by feminists against the established power of male violence.<sup>77</sup> For Chisholm, (drawing on Bourdieu, like Jantzen) the establishment of symbolic violence by the legitimating and delegitimizing forces of taste and judgement result in a habitus in which unspoken male rules govern women through shame, silence, and judgement. The sexual oppression that legitimates male power in the eyes of women constitutes a symbolic violence that is very similar to Fricker’s epistemic injustice. For Chisholm, the continuity between epistemic violence and violence against women is clear: “Symbolic violence produces and sanctions actual, sexual violence ...,”<sup>78</sup> which is to say that the stakes could not be higher, for if the epistemological violence that permits social violence goes unchallenged, then it will endure.

## Michel Foucault

Fricker, Butler, and Chisholm are each indebted to Foucault in their analysis of power (with Fricker critiquing his statement that “power exists only when it is put into action” and Chisholm employing his critique of the humanist subject<sup>79</sup>), and each work with his idea that women and other groups subject to oppression are playing a game in which the rules keep changing at the hands of those with power. In an interview titled “Truth and Power” Foucault speaks to these “interweaving of effects of power and knowledge” in the context of the social regulation within discursive regimes.<sup>80</sup> For Foucault, it is “a question of what *governs* statements, and the way in which they *govern* each other so as to constitute a set of propositions which are scientifically acceptable.”<sup>81</sup> Where in this passage Foucault is concerned with the history of knowledge, the same concept of epistemological power and its governance—one could even call it a kind of ‘*religio*’—occurs later in the same interview when Foucault speaks of war. Moving beyond an understanding of power as mere repression, Foucault examines the “productive aspect

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 165-166.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Chisholm, “Violence Against Violence Against Women,” 35.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>79</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 10; Chisholm, “Violence Against Violence Against Women,” 32.

<sup>80</sup> Foucault, “Truth and Power,” 109.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 112.

of power” that is not just the repressive no-saying of the prohibiting law, but is found in the insidious ways in which power “traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse ... [as] a productive network which runs through the whole social body ...”<sup>82</sup> This economy of power is founded on sovereign law (Foucault notes that “political theory has never ceased to be obsessed with the person of the sovereign”<sup>83</sup>) which prompts his question: “isn’t power simply a form of warlike domination? Shouldn’t one therefore conceive all problems of power in terms of relations of war? Isn’t power a sort of generalized war which assumes at particular moments the forms of peace and the State? Peace would then be a form of war, and the State a means of waging it.”<sup>84</sup> In this way, Foucault shares in a certain critique of the state as saviour from violence, much like Cavanaugh. In Foucault’s words, the task of the intellectual is to search out “a new politics of truth” that works at “detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time.”<sup>85</sup> This politics of truth links together power, knowledge, and law in a way that critiques the violent ways in which we are governed by epistemological powers of repression and discursive production. In this way, following Wink, Jantzen, and Fricker, we can see that, like violence, knowledge is a kind of power that perpetuates itself through habituated discursive norms masquerading as natural laws.

## Walter Benjamin

In his essay, “Critique of Violence [Zur Kritik der Gewalt],” Walter Benjamin also understands violence in close relation to law. For Benjamin, any discussion of violence is a discussion of ethics and the relationship between means and ends. He writes that “violence can first be sought only in the realm of means, not of ends.”<sup>86</sup> Distinguishing between the justification of potentially violent means by justified ends in *natural law*, and the justification of potentially violent ends by justified means in *positive law*, Benjamin identifies the blindness of positive law to “the absoluteness of ends” and the blindness of natural law to “the contingency of means.”<sup>87</sup> Benjamin notes that positive law rests on a “distinction between historically acknowledged, so-called sanctioned violence, and unsanctioned violence.”<sup>88</sup> This distinction then prompts his question: “what light is thrown on the nature of violence by the fact that such a criterion or distinction can be applied to it at all ...?”<sup>89</sup> Benjamin’s insight, in part, is that violence requires a boundary-discourse, like law and its sanctioning effects, or education and its formative effects. Benjamin writes that “law sees violence in the hands of individuals as a danger undermining the legal system,” meaning that in this legal context the limitation of violence advanced by the state is a means of preserving the law.<sup>90</sup> However, by

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>86</sup> Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” 277.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 278-279.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 280.

contrast, the critique of violence coming from workers in the form of strike action (a kind of inaction) is an “escape from violence” imposed on the worker by the employer, and a kind of “withdrawal.”<sup>91</sup> But the right to strike is still granted by the state and still occurs under its conditions. The revolutionary general strike, on the other hand, is a “crisis” that “confronts” the “objective contradiction in the legal situation.”<sup>92</sup> Benjamin praises the general strike for its ability to confront the contradictions of both the state and labour by nonviolent means, and calls the violence of war “predatory.”<sup>93</sup> For Benjamin, military violence is “paradigmatic of all violence used for natural ends, there is inherent in all such violence a lawmaking character.”<sup>94</sup> The law-making and law-preserving characteristics of violence both result in Benjamin’s “critique of all legal violence” which asks “are [there] no other than violent means for regulating conflicting human interests?”<sup>95</sup> Where law and contract alike depend upon the real threat of violence should their lines be crossed, Benjamin suggests that there is hope for nonviolent action and conflict resolution, but they require “courtesy, sympathy, peaceableness, [and] trust.”<sup>96</sup> Benjamin’s critique of violence does not just point out the lack of these principles, however, but it is a critique of legal violence, and of the fact that the state does violence legally, whether in the name of social regulation and national security or internationally oriented imperialism and militarism. Similar to the thinkers outlined above, Benjamin sees the law-making and law-preserving functions of violence as the exertion of epistemological power by erecting laws and treaties with “lines that may not be crossed.”<sup>97</sup>

We can ask then, without law, what does violence violate? And here we should note that, in our postsecular context, any political or moral law that we encounter is inevitably a mix of religious and secular influences. There is no violence without a boundary to be violated, and those boundaries are set by the state in such a way that establishes one side of the line as sensible legal action, and the other side of the line as violent and barbaric activity. But Benjamin is not done, for he introduces two further kinds of violence: the law-making *mythical* violence, and the law-destroying *divine* violence: “if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood.”<sup>98</sup> Divine violence disrupts and destroys the structure of legal violence that is so concerned with means and ends, and instead asserts a different kind of sovereignty, and not one that decides on the state of exception (for that would be law-making and law-preserving) but one that constitutes a critique of violence and its establishment through powered knowledge.<sup>99</sup> The constitutive critique of legal violence established by divine violence is a critique because it destroys the categories that hold legal violence in

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 281.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 284 and 287.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 295-296.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 299-300.

place, revealing that violence *is* only as violence is *identified* within a structure of boundaries and lines that cannot be crossed without penalty.

Benjamin's critique of violence reveals yet again that there is something epistemological about violence because we only know violence when some sacred boundary has been transgressed or some revered icon profaned. But this is not yet the question of violence in the epistemological register—a violence done simply by knowing or identifying—for it is still the epistemological critique of a kind of violence that is happening in a material situation like a strike or a war. To understand epistemological violence, we need to delve further into ontological violence, precisely because the boundaries that are violated when violence is done are ontological boundaries, insofar as our ontologies are tied together with our epistemologies in an eternal struggle between mind and world, thought and being, and the further struggle to move apart from these distinctions.

### Theodor Adorno

In his *Negative Dialectics*, Theodor Adorno undertakes a different sort of critique of violence by rejecting the “identitarian” thinking that fixes upon identities too determinately and subjects the principle identity to a positive status that restricts its capacity to be otherwise.<sup>100</sup> Adorno seeks to free dialectics from its need to achieve something positive by way of something negative (citing both Plato's dialectics and Hegel's negation of negation), and by unbinding it from positivity Adorno hopes that the dialectic will paradoxically retain its determinacy.<sup>101</sup> Through a critique of Hegel's dialectic and its “unsuccessful attempt to use philosophical concepts to cope with all that is heterogeneous to those concepts,” Adorno articulates his own negative dialectic that seeks to account for “the consistent sense of non-identity” present within identity itself.<sup>102</sup> Elsewhere, in his *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (written with Horkheimer), he also expresses this identity critique, stating that “language expresses the contradiction that something is itself and at one and at the same time something other than itself, identical and not identical.”<sup>103</sup> Both of these extracts from Adorno's work illustrate his concern for metaphysical views of identity that attempt to erase exceptions and eliminate interior contradictions within identities, in the name of consistency and the popular logical principles of identity ( $A=A$ ), non-contradiction (not both  $A$  and not- $A$ ), and excluded middle (either  $A$  or not- $A$ ).<sup>104</sup> These restrictive ways of understanding identity constitute a refusal of the contradictions that so plainly inhere in both things and our identification of things, as well as a refusal to admit to the ambiguities and limitations of language when applied to human experience. Adorno's critique, then, suggests that these logical ways of understanding identity bring with them a kind of violence that violates the interior depth of identities. His critique suggests that “Identity and contradiction are welded together ... [and] Total contradiction is nothing but the manifested untruth of

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<sup>100</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 149.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>103</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 15.

<sup>104</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.

total identification.”<sup>105</sup> Against the aporetic and agonistic overdeterminations of dialectical thinking in Hegel, Adorno wants to do away with dialectics as a dogmatic principle, even understanding the contradictory nature of identity as something regrettable and certainly not utopian.<sup>106</sup> For Adorno, thinking itself is a kind of negation of the world that resists “that which is forced upon it” from the outside.<sup>107</sup> In this way, thinking goes beyond the given world, for even when it is “doing violence to the object of its synthesis, our thinking heeds a potential that waits in the object, and it unconsciously obeys the idea of making amends to the pieces for what it has done.”<sup>108</sup> The interplay of the desire for reconciliation and the irreconcilability of our thinking about identities with those identities themselves, is part of the violence that Adorno is addressing on the borderline between epistemology and ontology. Simply put, Adorno’s negative dialectics and critique of identitarian thinking are concerned with how we know identities (epistemology), but it is also about the nature of those identities in themselves (ontology), insofar as they can be known and named (and it is this extent that is in many ways at issue, despite how it reaffirms the problematic divide between thought and being, or subject and object). Conscious of the violence at the heart of identity and the dialectical process that purports to describe and prescribe it, Adorno’s critique serves as a further reminder that boundary-discourse holds identity in place as a singularity by means of a law-like policing of consistency.

## Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida also writes of the relationship between violence, epistemology, and ontology in his essay on Levinas called “Violence and Metaphysics” in *Writing and Difference*. Moving through the question of philosophy, Derrida addresses the work of Levinas and argues that we must depart from the reception of the Greek *logos* in our present understanding of identity.<sup>109</sup> For Derrida, Levinas opposes a certain inheritance of Greek metaphysics by raising up another kind of metaphysics that “calls upon the ethical relationship—a nonviolent relationship to the infinite as infinitely other, to the Other—as the only one capable of opening the space of transcendence and of liberating metaphysics.”<sup>110</sup> This opening of metaphysics to the critique of its own violence runs throughout Derrida’s essay, culminating in his statement, “Predication is the first violence.”<sup>111</sup> I take this to mean that for Derrida the predication of one thing upon the other in the joining of subject and predicate is a violation of the identities involved, for they are irreducible to one another and possess a certain sanctity. To say one thing of another is to violate both things, and here the measure of violation is the boundary that sets one thing apart from another (and whether this boundary is inherent or imposed is yet another question). For Derrida, it seems that the imposition of predication is a kind of violent force, comparable in some ways to Foucault’s suggestion that all power is a kind of war.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 82-83.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 147.

Here Derrida is not interested in pure nonviolence because, like pure violence, pure nonviolence is a contradiction.<sup>112</sup> Rather than harbour the fantasy that violence can be removed from the world, Derrida's critique contains a certain kind of realism, given that it does not deny the fact that violence endures. The violence that Derrida identifies through Levinas is ontological because it concerns being and the copula. He writes that "according to Levinas, nonviolent language would be a language which would do without the verb *to be*, that is, without predication."<sup>113</sup> Although Derrida's essay, like his other work, is wide ranging and rich in reference, I draw this point out to show a further approach to the question of ontological violence. For Derrida, violence is at the heart of things, both ontologically and epistemologically, and evident in disjunctive ways of thinking and the force of law.<sup>114</sup> However, other thinkers take issue with Derrida's suggestion that violence is originary and primordial. One such thinker is the Christian theologian John Milbank, the main proponent of Radical Orthodoxy, a theological perspective that rejects the burden of answering the charges of secular liberalism and asserts the truth of Christianity against the postmodern genealogy of nihilism.

### **John Milbank**

In his book, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, and in another work called *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*, Milbank critiques the certainties of the secular project in a way that is broadly similar to Asad's critique outlined above. Both thinkers argue that the secular is not the bedrock underneath the illusory accretion of religion, and both suggest that the secular struggles with a legacy of disenchantment and unsupportable claims to neutrality, neither of which it can avoid. However, Milbank's project takes a step beyond critiquing the secular, for it follows its critical work (to which the present text is indebted) with the problematic assertion of Christian truth that seeks to compete and win against the secular on the new terms of the postsecular debate. In terms of the present concern for violence and metaphysics, a part of Milbank's project involves an ontology of peace that is directly opposed to Derrida's ontology of violence.

Challenging the neoliberal order with the claims of a particular kind of Christian theology, Milbank critiques the genealogy of nihilism of both the May 1968 thinkers and their roots in Nietzsche and Heidegger. Against the postmodern, in both its historicist genealogy and its ontological difference, Milbank opposes nihilism on the grounds that it "requires an ontology of violence."<sup>115</sup> Drawing a line from the postmodern, through the privileging of history and difference, to nihilism, Milbank's reading of the thinkers of this tradition is suspect from the start because it gathers the works of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Deleuze, Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida under one banner, self-avowedly effacing the differences between them in order to see them as "elaborations of a single nihilistic philosophy."<sup>116</sup> Setting this criticism aside (for it may be concerned with difference in exactly the way that Milbank rejects), we can observe that Milbank's critique of nihilism does not proceed from 'secular' sensibilities. In this way his critique is refreshing and

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 146-147.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>114</sup> Derrida, "Force of Law," 231-235, 247.

<sup>115</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 278-279.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

illuminating, for it does not answer contemporary questions, but holds itself to truth-conditions outside of the secular and liberal epistemological spheres. However controversial this may be, it remains up to Milbank's readers and critics to then sort out what of secular reason deserves this kind of radical critique and what of secular reason should be valued. Although he considers his work to be the opening of "the most radical imaginable modern pluralism," he nonetheless positions his vision of plurality in relation with the Christian vision of the Good and the True in such a way that refuses the very real differences between Christian ways of knowing and understanding and those of 'other' religious traditions.<sup>117</sup> Although he refreshingly moves beyond the "mere liberal agreement to disagree" he does so while "regarding Catholic Christianity as fulfilling the best pagan impulses."<sup>118</sup> While his critique of liberal agree-to-disagree 'pluralism' is helpful, it permits Milbank to repeat the same sort of problematic positioning of Christianity as the fulfilment of all other ('pagan') perspectives that permits colonial and imperialistic violence against those who do not share a Christian conception of the Good and the True. Milbank's critique is refreshing and helpful in some ways, but cannot appear as anything but supremacist and violent if we accept the idea that positioning one's own discourse as the fulfilment of all others is a bad thing to do. Milbank justifies this positioning on theological terms in part by appealing to the persuasiveness of the "Christian *logos* itself, not the apologetic mediation of a supposedly neutral human reason."<sup>119</sup> But are these the only two options—the persuasive assertion of Christianity as the fulfilment of all other perspectives or the apologetic mediations of liberal discourse—or is there room for a perspective that does not capitulate to the discontents of either? The stakes are high for Milbank, given that he understands Christian truth to be radically compromised when it "surrenders its claim to be a metadiscourse" and exhibits a "false humility."<sup>120</sup>

However, we must consider the possibility that Christianity that might refuse to position itself as a metadiscourse on the grounds that this positioning is a kind of violence radically contrary to Christ's critique of violence (as suggested by Wink and others). Milbank writes that "only Christian theology now offers a discourse able to position and overcome nihilism itself. This is why it is so important to reassert theology as a master discourse; theology, alone, remains the discourse of non-mastery."<sup>121</sup> But this assertion is problematic, for nihilism cannot be overcome by the force of assertion (meaninglessness remains, regardless), and we know that theology is never alone, for it always has others, and these others (the friend, the enemy, the neighbour, and the stranger) never make demands of theology on its own terms, but do so on their terms. Are we to believe that the other must come to Christianity or be abandoned to the jaws of nihilism? Is Milbank really suggesting that his formulation of Christianity is not a discourse of mastery, when the surrounding sentences suggest that Christianity betrays itself if it does not assert mastery?

In order to understand the problems and prospects of Milbank's theology more deeply, I now turn to his work on violence and ontological peace. When Milbank writes

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., xvi and xiv.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 6.

of the “tragic dimension” of Christianity, he critiques a certain kind of violence, but later he permits another kind of coercive and regulatory violence.<sup>122</sup> Sorting out what Milbank means by ‘violence’ is an easier task when reading *Being Reconciled*, a text in which he explicitly addresses the problems of evil, violence, and theodicy. Proceeding from the ‘gift’ as a central figure for Christian theology, Milbank sees the gift in creation, grace, and the Incarnation of Christ, while also suggesting that “evil and violence are the refusal of gift” while “atonement is the renewed and hyperbolic gift that is forgiveness.”<sup>123</sup> Aligning with his critique of secular reason, Milbank understands the gift to be at the ground of things, stating that “for theology there are no ‘givens’ only ‘gifts,’” meaning that, while the secular position may see the things of the world to be assumed givens, Christianity insists that all things are gifts from God the giver.<sup>124</sup>

For Milbank, the contradiction between the givenness of things and the presence of evil and violence in the world is reconciled in his rehabilitation of the ‘privation theory’ of evil. Milbank opposes the ‘radical evil’ school and its giving or acknowledgment of ontological positivity to evil.<sup>125</sup> Opposing the idea that the privation theory permits or even encourages radical evil, Milbank argues that “the modern, positive theory of evil *is* in a measure responsible for the modern actuality of evil.”<sup>126</sup> As a part of this larger argument, Milbank addresses the relationship between ontology and violence in a way that speaks to the critique of metaphysical violence. Concerned that “the theory of radical evil focuses *too much* upon violence” and does not adequately “discriminate amongst invasions” that are ubiquitous.<sup>127</sup> Here Milbank defines violence by stating that “violence is only violence when it ruins an essence (how something should be) or diverts from a goal (how something should develop).”<sup>128</sup> In this way, violence is evil, for ‘evil’ is only named as such when the positivity of the Good is ruined or diverted. In Milbank’s privation theory, evil is deficiency in both will and act, whereas for the radical evil school the act is violent but the will is not.<sup>129</sup> On this view, “evil and violence are convertible but not identical” and part of this distinction results from the fact that “violence is never simply *evident*, because we have to *judge* whether a substantive good has been impaired.”<sup>130</sup>

Here we can see how Milbank sits in relation to the critiques of violence offered by the voices surveyed above. For Milbank, violence is often concealed and requires certain structures in order to be identified. In this way, he also understands violence to require a boundary-discourse that requires a measure or method of adjudicating between what is and is not violent. For Milbank, violence is violence because it violates the essence of things and the purpose of things, effacing or misdirecting things on the level of their *esse* and *telos*. In this way, violence is ontological, and not just a material phenomenon. However, the standards that Milbank uses to judge whether something is violent come from the tradition of Christian theology. Milbank is confident that

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 6 and 424.

<sup>123</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, ix.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>125</sup> Cf. Flahault, *Malice*, vii-15 and 119-137.

<sup>126</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 4.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 28.

Christianity is the best way of discerning what is violent and what is not, and he believes that the violence of nihilism must be critiqued and replaced with an ontology of peace. But Derrida's rejoinder would doubtless be that the very mode of adjudication and the Christian confidence in predication that Milbank exhibits are a deeper violence, for they assume final and certain knowledge of the *esse* and *telos* of all things.

## Conclusion

I began this interdisciplinary study by setting the postsecular stage for the critique of metaphysical violence. Given that the boundary between the secular and the religious is a porous one, it follows that there will be situations in which the distinction between religion and secularity holds and situations in which it does not, and so a critical treatment of the subject should not seek to erase the boundary altogether but instead discern when and how the boundary should be used. Boundary discourse has been with us from the start. It conditions both our thinking about secularity and our thinking about violence in different ways, for the boundaries between identities are fundamental preconditions for thinking and speaking and acting. In the postsecular context, this boundary between religion and secularity is certainly constructed and imagined, which does not mean that it is illegitimate, but suggests that like all of our concepts it is flexible and can be critiqued and revised. Within the prescriptive and descriptive indeterminacy of secularity as a broad category I examined the *secular* as an abstract epistemic category that divides itself from religion (noting descriptively that in many cases, problematically, religion still remains the main point of reference), *secularism* as a political doctrine that seeks the elimination or reduction of the role of religion in the public and political spheres (noting that this political programme depends upon the secular as an epistemic category), and *secularization* as both a sociological thesis (proven and disproven in such a way that now acknowledges that religion has not declined but differentiated) and a philosophical perspective (which critiques naïve secularity for forgetting its debts to Christianity and Judaism). Within this threefold postsecularity, I find (with Martin) that Christianity has advanced and recoiled in ways that have led to the conflation of Christianity with religion, and more broadly to the naturalization of certain concepts as they become secularized concepts, moving away from their Christian roots and taking new forms in late capitalist society. For example, the discourse of political theology tells us that Jewish messianism and Christian eschatology have secularized, becoming the modern notion of social, economic, and political 'progress.' In this context a theological concept becomes emptied of its content but retains its form, moving from religion to secularity in a way that naturalizes or normalizes itself. And so today we speak of 'progress' without thinking of final judgement. Progress has become natural to us and we have forgotten that the idea that history moves forward teleologically has its roots in certain Christian and Jewish ideas about time and history. Surely this concept has changed and evolved into its present form in such a way that leaves it looking quite different from how it began (as all concepts do in time) but to forget its debt to religion only serves to obscure things. Better to deal with this debt to religious concepts constructively and without fear.

This observation led into the second half of this study in which I examined the metaphysics of violence in such a way that sought to avoid attributing violence solely to

religion or the secular, and in a way that advanced the possibility that, like violence itself, the critique of violence could also be found across the divide between religion and secularity. In the case of both violence and the critique of violence, the divide between religion and the secular does not function absolutely, but instead contextualizes the discussion, pushing us to ask what *kind* of violence is at hand without blaming or absolving either religion or secularity. Also like the boundary between secularity and religion, the boundaries that demarcate violence have also naturalized themselves, leading us to believe that violence is a normal part of our world, and leading in part to the subtle confusion of *is* and *ought* in which we assume that, because we live in a violent world, some kind of violence may indeed be a solution to another kind.

I have intentionally avoided defining ‘violence’ and ‘metaphysics’ singularly, instead allowing the various authors dealt with above to speak on their own terms. But now the weight of these question has become unbearable. What is violence? What is metaphysics? Let us address them now more directly here, in conclusion, but without the comfort of final definitions. Concerning violence, we see in Girard that violence sits at the heart of culture in the rivalry of desires and the sacrifice of a scapegoat. Similarly, in Wink, we see violence as something that is also at the origins of ‘civilization’ in the contrast between destructive Babylonian creation myth and the creative Christian story. For both Girard and Wink, violence is something foundational, but Wink provides a critical view that points beyond this descriptive point. The critique of redemptive violence proceeds from an ethical basis that I consider to be both postsecular and applicable to metaphysics. Jantzen and Sölle both advance their feminist critiques of redemptive violence by appealing to both ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ sources, thereby challenging this division and moving beyond it. Jantzen in particular provides many critical resources for rethinking the role of violence in contemporary discourse, arguing that our conflict-ridden epistemologies are indeed symptoms of a deeply held love of violence and death.

Jantzen’s work can also assist us in understanding the metaphysical critiques of violence found in Fricker, Butler, Foucault, Benjamin, Adorno, and Derrida—and indeed Milbank as well. Like Foucault, Jantzen critiques the symbolic and discursive violences that form the modern self, and like Benjamin she identifies a divine violence that shatters our human measures of violence. As well, like Adorno, Jantzen is wary of singularizing identity, and like Derrida she is sensitive to the violence of predication. However, in the second volume of her trilogy, Jantzen advances a further critique that puts the conclusions of the thinkers listed above into question. In her *Violence to Eternity*, Jantzen addresses religion explicitly, noting the comingling of beauty and violence in religion.<sup>131</sup> Understanding this ambiguous relationship between creativity and violence occupies much of Jantzen’s time in the first chapter of the book in which she addresses both the claim that violence was present at the beginning and the assumptions in which this claim often results. Incompatible with Wink’s favourable interpretation of the Christian creation narrative in the book of Genesis, Jantzen takes Christianity to task for its naturalization of violence.<sup>132</sup> Also making reference to the Babylonian creation narrative (like Wink), Jantzen puts Genesis and the *Enuma Elish* on the same violent level, identifying the divine violence of the God of Israel in the flood

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<sup>131</sup> Jantzen, *Violence to Eternity*, 1.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

story in Genesis 7, and condemning the sanitized Christian readings of that same story that emphasize God's mercy and love but miss God's brutality and genocidal actions.<sup>133</sup> By merely switching our frame of reference and identifying with those outside of God's favour, Jantzen shows how this story also embodies the ambiguities of destruction and creation, beauty and violence. This ambiguity, however, does not rest in ambiguity for Jantzen, but instead it is an "undecidable tension" that often gives way to the displacement of beauty by violence.<sup>134</sup> In true postsecular fashion, Jantzen writes that,

The biblical writings and the history of early Christendom can indeed be read as a struggle between violence and beauty, but not in simplistic terms of divine beauty and creativity against sinful human destructiveness. The task, rather, is to discern *both* how Christendom from its foundational texts has legitimated and valorized violence *and* how it provides resources for creativity and peace.<sup>135</sup>

Here we find a similar encouragement to the one I outlined above, namely that both violence and the critique of violence cannot be divided by the boundary between the secular and the religious (or the secular and the Christian). By going back to the Greek and Judaeo-Christian roots of Western thought, Jantzen proceeds in a postsecular manner, and (like Cavanaugh) rejects the idea that religion is inherently violent.<sup>136</sup> Critiquing the patriarchal production of knowledge, and the "preoccupation with death which characterizes modernity," Jantzen is then in a position to question the definition of 'violence' itself.<sup>137</sup>

Against the Derridean idea that all things, all predication, all force and power, are violent, Jantzen calls into question the definition of violence held by Derrida and others. Questioning Hent de Vries' equivocation of religion and violence, and Regina Schwartz's equivocation of violence and identity, Jantzen states that "[i]f we say that *every* exertion of force is violent, then the effect is to evacuate the term 'violence' of all specific meaning" and therefore do another kind of violence by conflating the force of a bomb with the force of a predication.<sup>138</sup> For Jantzen, the definition of violence cannot be so broad that our ability to critique violence is eliminated. Instead, Jantzen defines violence as "not when difference is *defined* but when difference is perceived as *dangerous*, so that hierarchies are imposed and force is exerted to keep the hierarchies in place."<sup>139</sup> Critiquing Levinas and Derrida, Jantzen rejects the idea that all predication is violence and that all discourse is war, and says "if *all* predication is violent ... there is nothing to distinguish ethical from unethical response."<sup>140</sup> Jantzen continues her critique, suggesting that Levinas' reliance on the master-slave dialectic is somewhat symptomatic of his male-centric philosophy, and critiquing Girard for his seeming abandonment of humanity to the 'reality' of violence. Jantzen also holds to some variation of Milbank's assertion that "violence is never simply *evident*, because we have

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 16-18.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 24.

to *judge* whether a substantive good has been impaired,” but she does so in a way that is far more sceptical about the possibility of making that judgement using terms set by Christianity.<sup>141</sup> Where Milbank understands violence to be done when the essence and *telos* of a thing are disrupted, Jantzen inquires further into the implicit epistemology of identity that would decide the boundaries of that essence or the trajectory of that *telos*.

In light of this dispute over who decides what an identity is and where it should go, the issue of metaphysical violence remains. Some argue that the abstraction that constitutes metaphysical reflection is itself a kind of violence, but in light of Jantzen’s critique of Derrida I am inclined to say that it is not a question of whether one abstracts into metaphysical territory, but *how* one abstracts. Jantzen gives us some vital resources for the continued exercise of metaphysical reflection in her emphasis on creativity and beauty over destruction and the ugliness of violence, but she stops short of the sustained metaphysical reflection that is required if we are to sort out the relationship between violence and metaphysics, and the reciprocal relationship between the violences of the world and the violences of our thinking and speaking.

This tension between violence and metaphysics is in some ways a microcosm of the one between the secular (often represented by philosophy) and the religious (too often represented by Christian theology)—the former often claiming that religions impose an order on a disordered world and deal in illusions and fantasies that cannot be empirically substantiated, and the latter often claiming that the secular is merely deluding itself when it says it is not nihilism because it has nothing transcendental on which to base its ethical or metaphysical positions. If these are the horns of the debate, then there is little to be done but admit irreducibility. Despite these aporias, the wager of this investigation remains that, given the (qualified) secular debt to Christianity and the (qualified) Christian culpability in the violence of the world, we have before us an opportunity to turn the ambivalence and ambiguity of violence (it being neither strictly attributable to religion or the secular but both and neither) away from the ubiquity of violence (whether the secular use of military violence which is also a kind of ‘religious’ fervour, or the religious use of violence which often serves a ‘secular’ greed) and toward the critique of violence—but not just the critique of material violence, but also a critique of the precursor-violences at the heart of our epistemologies and ontologies. This critique of violence suggests that any metaphysics that will see the world as a violent place (descriptively) requiring regulation by violent means (prescriptively) must be challenged by a counter-narrative that can critique existing epistemological violences (reduction, essentialism, anachronism, orientalism, etc.) in order to remove the ideological conditions of possibility of social violences. The critique of metaphysical violence, in its epistemological and ontological manifestations, must awaken to the postsecular reality in which both self-identified ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ individuals can integrate a similar critique of violence into their *religio*, allowing it to condition their thinking, speaking, and acting, in order that the violences of the world might be reduced in the inevitable but complex movement from thinking to action.

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<sup>141</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 28.

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