# Desire and the political theology of the international

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CHAPTER 13

# Desire and the Political Theology of the International

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Once common narratives regarding the purportedly marginal place of religion vis-à-vis modern international politics have come under significant challenge by International Relations scholars who have flagged the extent to which religious actors shape and reshape the contemporary international realm (Petito and Hatzopolous 2003, Fox and Sandler 2004, Thomas 2005, Hurd 2008). Under the banner of political theology, another group of scholars has more recently mounted a further challenge to standard secularization narratives by drawing attention to the manner in which modern international political thought is shot through with theological motifs (Rengger 2013; Molloy 2017; Bain 2020; Paipais 2020b). Vassilios Paipais (2020a, 4–7) characterizes political theology as a deliberate shift from a focus on religion to a focus on theology out of the recognition that the modern reduction of religion to a socio-political object of study has been closely intertwined with an effort to purge modern political thought of theological contours deemed obscurantist. Yet, Paipais notes, the turn away from theology has actually involved a turn toward theologically inflected political concepts of other sorts which continue to exert their influence and must thus be made explicit.

The political theological move raises important questions about the supposed break between the religious and the international. Drawing attention to the manner by which modern political thought has taken up and refashioned theological notions further complicates standard secularization

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narratives regarding international politics by implying that the very plane upon which religious actors ostensibly intrude is itself a plane constituted by theologically infused understandings. However, there exists a certain danger in the existing attempt to bring to light the political theology of the international. The danger is that of reducing the political theological move to the level of what Charles Taylor (1995, 173) calls intellectualism—an assumption that human understanding rests merely within thoughts and representations. Explorations of the political theology of the international would benefit from attention to theology understood not simply as a mode of thinking, as a cognitive affair, but as an embodied form of understanding, as a way of life—to borrow the phrase made famous by Pierre Hadot (1995)—that entrains and transforms a manner of being in the world. In particular, explorations would benefit from attention to the way in which desire—understood as both impetus and lack, and as transcending the dualities of mind and body, the voluntary and the involuntary (Ricoeur 1966, 101–104, 263–267)—shapes the understanding of and action within the world of international politics and by extension reveals a more blurred line between the religious and the international.

The first section of this chapter details the intellectualist danger in two prominent, recent interjections—those of Seán Molloy and William Bain—regarding the political theology of the international. The second section flags how two key critics of the political theological move—Mark Lilla and Hans Blumenberg—actually recognize the centrality of desire in human thought and action, while also highlighting the inadequacies of their accounts. The third section explores the work of Charles Taylor and Talal Asad, which might inspire an investigation into the political theology of the international that avoids the intellectualist danger by giving appropriate attention to desire.

## Intellectualism and the Political Theology of the International

### *The Transposition of Belief Rather Than Desire*

Democratic peace theorists and cosmopolitans who claim a Kantian heritage, suggests Seán Molloy (2017), fail to adequately engage Immanuel Kant's appeals to nature, providence and God, as well as his sustained efforts to justify recourse to belief in them when reflecting upon the possibilities for international peace (17–18). Far from being the destroyer of metaphysics as claimed by Moses Mendelssohn (142/215n17), Kant effects a restoration of theological metaphysics in what he sees as more acceptable terms. Kant's thought, asserts Molloy, represents not a stripping away of theological content, but rather a transposition or metamorphosis of theology (25–26, 121, 136).

Molloy argues that Kant's abasement of human beings, which flows from his notion of radical evil, represents a modification of the theological notion of original sin. It also necessitates a hope in an inexplicable divine grace that

might affect a moral transformation of the human disposition toward evil. Belief in God in this respect is not merely a theological issue, but a pressing ethical and political issue (21–22, 106, 122–124, 150–152). However much the moral law is apodictically certain, on Kant' view, it still requires a broader horizon of meaning within which to make rational sense. To adhere to the moral law without the prospect that virtue—the worthiness for happiness—might be met with happiness, an outcome which Kant denies that humans can achieve, is to run contrary to the very rational structure of action. If moral actions are continually overcome by what Kant calls the purposeless chaos of matter (162), a condition for action is missing. At issue here is not reward or punishment (135). Without belief in a God that ensures that adherence to duty is met in the end with happiness, with nothing more than a feeble endeavour toward an empty goal, the very rational structure of adherence to the moral law collapses into what Allen Wood, on whom Molloy draws, calls an *absurdum practicum*. Belief in God is thus no optional extra; as Molloy asserts, "God is hugely important to the operation of Kant's system, as God is embedded in the very grammar of his project" (137).

Now, Molloy claims that Kant transfigures theological motifs because the prospect of meaninglessness from the perspective of morality so distresses Kant that he seeks comfort in a faith beyond the limits of human understanding (18). Kant's appeals to theology, suggests Molloy, "are evasions rather than solutions, a shadow play about mankind projected on a screen at the edge of the abyss that Kant has glimpsed but refuses to confront" (164). Having challenged metaphysical dogmatism, Kant helplessly attempts to fend off the threat of scepticism and the prospect of what Kant calls an "'aimlessly playing nature and hopeless chance'" (26, 42, 140–147). The practical interest of reason, which for Kant justifies recourse to the postulates of God and immortality even after the critique of dogmatic metaphysics, is, according to Molloy, no more than "a practical interest born of fear" (42).

This rendering is problematic, however, both because it fails to fully account for Kant's concerns and because it fails to adequately capture the presence of the theological within Kant's thought. Molloy speaks as though Kant operates from a stance in which the meaninglessness of nature is a given and from which only clever intellectual gymnastics can weasel a way out. It is for this reason that Molloy interprets the famous Kantian phrase about denying knowledge to make room for faith as the sacrifice of a self-evident knowledge of the cyclical repetition of nature gained through experience for a faith in an end that runs counter to what experience suggests (136, 138–139). But, to so characterize Kant is to assume that Kant starts from the same "conditions of belief"—to appeal to Charles Taylor's (2007) apt phrase—as that of Molloy's (2017) Nietzschean-inspired position (22, 164).

Kant's concern with meaninglessness starts from a very different lived experience, and it is one structured by desire. As Mark Lilla (1998) notes, significant about Kant's thought is "his restoration and modification of the classical understanding of reason's desires" (405). While criticizing Plato's

doctrine of Ideas, Kant defends Plato's characterization of reason as "a hunger, an active yearning for wholeness" (405). Reason's desire for the unconditioned totality of all conditions is not merely bound to the speculative plane; reason at the practical level also desires the totality that might order and unify the various ends sought by the will. At the practical level, this desire for totality entails the desire for the complete object of pure practical reason—the highest good—which comprises the unity of virtue and happiness (408–410).

There is thus a twofold operation of desire at play in Kant's practical philosophy that must be recognized. First, there is Kant's (2015) recognition that happiness "is necessarily the demand of every rational but *finite* being" (23; emphasis added). This is the case because happiness is not something originally possessed, but rather "a problem imposed upon him by his finite nature itself, because he is needy" (23). Second, however much Kant seeks to purify morality of any vestige of desire, and, leaving aside the problems of this purification of desire, it is important, as Paul Ricoeur (1986) notes, to "put the emphasis on the demand of reason that shows virtue alone to be unequal to that 'entire object' of reason, rather than on the moral coloring of happiness by the virtue that merits it" (67). To place the emphasis in this respect is to highlight the degree to which Kant acknowledges that practical reason itself demands the redemption of happiness out of the recognition that virtue is not sufficient on its own. States Ricoeur: "Whether virtue *merits* happiness is less important than the fact that reason demands the joining of happiness to virtue for the good to be complete and perfect" (67; emphasis in original). Ricoeur points out that Kant (2015) himself states that, "to need happiness, to be also worthy of it, and yet not to participate in it cannot be consistent with the perfect volition of a rational being that would at the same time have all power, even if we think of such a being only for the sake of the experiment" (89–90). Thus, Kantian experience is marked both by a desire for happiness and by reason's desire for the totality which itself includes a purified desire for happiness. And, it is this desire for the complete object of the will which, for Kant, gestures toward a larger meaning. This desire for totality, states Kant, provides "a view into a higher, immutable order of things in which we already are and in which we can henceforth be directed, by determinate precepts, to carry on our existence in accordance with the highest vocation of reason" (87).

Recognizing the place of desire in Kant's framework is important for it recasts the character of reason's practical interest. This practical interest is not one driven by the fear of hopeless chance as though reality was, by default, understood as meaningless and thus to be fought in a vain rear-guard action. Rather, the concern with meaninglessness is a concern with a construal of reality which fails to capture an order experienced as already there. The threat is one of flatness, a reduction of reality from what it truly is, just as the loss of a loved one entails a flatness because reality is less vibrant and complete than it was in their presence. Recognizing the place of desire in Kant's thought enables new ways of situating the transposition of the theological in Kant's international thought. That place is deeper than the level of belief; it is at the

very level of desire that characterizes the Kantian subject and the sense of a meaningful order onto which, on Kant's view, desire opens.

### *Presupposing Belief Rather Than Desire*

William Bain (2020) argues that contemporary theories of international order are positive visions which, moreover, actively conceal the medieval theological inheritance from which they draw. Theological motifs continue to exert a logic even within a context marked by the purported death of God. "Human beings may have taken the place of God," he asserts, "but they remain enclosed in patterns of thought that disclose this logic" (6). To perceive the persistence of a theological inheritance, argues Bain, it is necessary to recognize the systematic structure of political conceptions, namely that they are couched within much larger metaphysical images of the world. Drawing from R. G. Collingwood, Bain identifies those larger metaphysical images as mental universes or worldviews constituted by a system of presuppositions. These systems of presuppositions exert a logical efficacy such that they "privilege certain ways of thinking and speaking about the world: they fix boundaries, define possibilities, and qualify what counts as a legitimate answer" (17). Accordingly, such presuppositions are identifiable with certain uses of language and the absence of others. Analogies and metaphors, far from being mere flourishes, serve to symbolize the very logical efficacy of a system of presuppositions for they reveal what can and cannot be said through language (19–20).

This understanding of presuppositions, Bain argues, reveals that modern conceptions of international order are embedded within broader theories of order—that of immanent order and of imposed order—which derive from a thirteenth-century dispute between realists and nominalists concerning the nature of God. The dispute hinged on whether God created the universe according to ideas present within the divine mind that represent a rationally intelligible, eternal pattern of order—immanent order—or whether God created out of pure force of will—imposed order—free of any extant, rational pattern (6–7). In so much as modern theories of international order still move within the slipstream of these rival theories of order, a theological inheritance remains in the form of rival theological renderings of God. The implication, Bain furthermore insists, is as follows: "Remove God from this system of presuppositions and the corresponding pattern of thought collapses into confusion" (18). Political theology, as Bain understands it, entails tracing such theological presuppositions underpinning modern international political thought (4).

Now, it is important to note that Bain's rendering of political theology rests upon a tripartite distinction that he makes between political theology, theology and religion. Political theology, in so much as it interrogates presuppositions, is concerned with ideas and concepts (15). Accordingly, political theology is concerned with theology rather than with religion, from which theology must be distinguished. Religion, states Bain, "relates human beings

to one another and it negotiates their relationship with God in terms of certain beliefs.… Thus, religion centres on the act of believing—that is, subscribing to a system of beliefs" (3–4). Theology, rather, "involves the systematic study of the concepts and categories in terms of which these beliefs are intelligible.… theology investigates a system of beliefs to which the believer subscribes" (3–4).

Yet, this delineation of theology is problematic to the extent that it divorces theology from social practice and from desire. On Bain's view, it should be noted, religion is a species of belief; while religion might also entail the act of believing, this dimension of practice amounts merely to a manifestation of what are internally held propositions. Lacking is a sense that the very practice itself gives rise to the understanding, and this not merely in the sense of belief, but more broadly as a pre-cognitive disposition oriented by desire. In turn, theology amounts to the investigation of this system of beliefs as propositions, an intellectualist endeavour severed from the context of practices from which it emerges as well as from the performative effect that it has upon the transformation of desire. Theology is a theoretical endeavour that seeks to sharpen the mind's sure assent, rather than a reflective activity bound to participation in community and serving as a spiritual pedagogy or formation of desire (Ward 2016, 112–124). But, such a characterization of theology as a second-order commentary on first-order beliefs is a particular theological understanding, one contested by certain present-day theologians. Stanley Hauerwas (2001), for example, insists that the very truthfulness of theological claims—knowledge about the nature of God—cannot be separated from truthful witness, that is, from the manifestation of God in and through the Church faithfully living out its calling (16–17). The truthfulness of theological claims arises from the fruit of ecclesial practice, when such practice makes manifest the alternative world that it proclaims (231). Similarly, John Milbank (2006) asserts that the objects of Christian faith arise from a particular practice, meaning that theology amounts to the explication of that practice (383–384). Therefore, theology's endeavour to give content to the notion of God, he suggests, necessitates "making an historical difference in the world" (6).

Beyond delineating religion and theology, Bain insists equally on distinguishing political theology from theology. Political theology from the standpoint of history, he insists, is distinct from political theology from the standpoint of faith. "Investigating theological presuppositions of international order," Bain (2020) says, "requires no profession of faith or adherence to doctrine. It involves the recognition that political vocabulary has a history that includes theological antecedents. Therefore, one can explore theological questions without professing faith. The atheist is equipped, all else being equal, to investigate such questions—that is, to be a political theologian" (4). Bain's characterization of political theology here draws heavily from Michael Oakeshott's notion of modes of experience and in particular his characterization of philosophy. Accordingly, theology operates within the confines of a set of presuppositions, a set of articles of faith, which it does not call

into question. It represents a theoretical inquiry into faith which does not rise to the unconditional level of theorizing indicative of philosophy, which interrogates presuppositions. Theology is not itself practice, but neither is it a true questioning of presuppositions (Bain 2020, 4; Nardin 2001, 69). Political theology, for Bain, explores presuppositions while itself not resting upon a set of presuppositions. That this is the case is most notable in Bain's (2020) insistence that political theology is divorced from concerns of a practical nature, that is, concerns with purposive use or the satisfaction of human desires (15–16).

However, this rendering of political theology gives rise to a curious anomaly in that political thought in the real world is framed by systems of presuppositions while the operation of political theology is not. But, Bain's political theological perspective is, counter to its own presuppositions, still an experience that is lived; it flows from the experience of a disengaged theorist who encounters the world as a set of ideas-qua-objects for intellectual study. This living at a distance, moreover, is itself the historical result of a set of practices and of an orientation of desire marked by autonomy and the delight resulting from its pursuit (Taylor 2007, 286). An account of the theological inheritance of modern political thought framed by another set of presuppositions would entail an alternative account, one more attuned to the interrelation between understanding and practice and to the place of desire within that understanding.

## Desire and the Critics of Political Theology

### *Modernity and the "Theotropic" Desire*

Notwithstanding his criticism of the political theological endeavour, Mark Lilla (2008) highlights the importance of attention to desire in modern political thought. The problem with standard secularization narratives is that they "speak of 'modernity' or the 'modern age' in quasi-eschatological language, describing it as a rip in time that opened an unprecedented and irreversible epoch in human experience" (305). Lilla insists that the option of political theology—understood as political thinking according to a divine nexus between God, humanity, and world (21)—remains a live, perennial alternative in the modern era (8, 307, 317). The implication, he infers, is that the modern age is a fragile one (6). "Time and again," he asserts, "we must remind ourselves that we are living an experiment, that *we* are the exceptions" (308; emphasis in original). The current revival of theological politics on the global stage is, for Lilla (2007), a humbling story because political theology is not a way of thinking that belongs solely to the past, but is rather an "age-old habit of mind that can be reacquired by anyone who begins looking to the divine nexus of God, man and world to reveal the legitimate political order" (n.p.). The recognition of the fragility of modern political thought and the institutions it has founded is a reminder that "we are heirs to the Great Separation

only if we wish to be, if we make a conscious effort to separate basic principles of political legitimacy from divine revelation" (n.p.). Only by acknowledging this reality, argues Lilla (2008), can the present be lived soberly in a manner that fends off the dangers of intellectual and practical complacency that arise from narratives of inevitable or irreversible secularization (4).

Modern political thought, according to Lilla's chastened secularization narrative, rests upon "the Great Separation" that Hobbes effects between political thought and political theology. Hobbes puts an end to political theology, and he does so, says Lilla, "by doing something ingenious: he changed the subject" (75). Hobbes shifts thought from theological reflection on God and his nature to humanity and its religious nature (78); he provides an account of religious man. Humans, according to Hobbes, are riveted by passions of desire and revulsion, by the pursuit of pleasure, and the aversion to pain. At the same time, humans are ignorant and thus fearful creatures. Humans desire without the knowledge of how to fulfil that desire, and humans see that nature thwarts their desires without holding the knowledge of how to prevent it. The gods arise out of fear by providing a certain sense of security against the forces of nature that stymies human passion; and, this consolation breeds further fear as not only nature but also the gods become the source of trepidation. Likewise, fear of other humans as passionate beings arises in light of the inability to know their intentions. It is knowledge of the characteristics of passion, ignorance, and fear that is necessary therefore to tackle the question of political conduct, for they underpin all human conduct, both religious and political (78–83). By changing the subject in this manner, claims Lilla, Hobbes makes "the most important art for living in a liberal-democratic order: the art of intellectual separation" (89). He opens the possibility of thought regarding human conduct not derived from divine revelation or cosmic speculation.

Nonetheless, states Lilla, the problem with Hobbes's account is that it assumes that political theology will disappear once the issue of fear is addressed and humans manage to control their political affairs (90, 317). Rousseau thus provides a more holistic perspective on religion in suggesting that religion is a manifestation of the nobler passions and traits characteristic of human being: conscience, charity, solidarity, virtue, and wonder. It is this moral quality and innate goodness of humanity that comes to expression in religion (114–115). Problematic about the turn from theology to anthropology in Hobbes's thought is that it threatens to make humanity less human; without attending to what is most noble in humans, Hobbes's thought fosters what is most base (112). On Rousseau's view, then, there is still room for political theological reflection within modern political thought, not that based on divine revelation, but rather on facts about humanity as a religious animal that seeks noble, moral ends (221).

In its embrace of "the Great Separation," asserts Lilla, modern political thought has failed to reckon with Rousseau's stance on religion and thus has been blind to the perennial nature of the political theological problem. States

Lilla (2007): "Rousseau was on to something: we seem to be theotropic creatures, yearning to connect our mundane lives, in some way, to the beyond. That urge can be suppressed, new habits learned, but the challenge of political theology will never fully disappear so long as the urge to connect survives" (n.p.). Yet, the danger of a Rousseauian posture, for Lilla (2008), is that of a continual backsliding into a political theology based on the divine nexus once again (300). The modern era is a contingent one, and only recognition of this fact can guard against the threat that political theology poses to "the Great Separation." "If our experiment is to work," he underscores, "we must rely on our own lucidity" (309).

However, the fundamental nature of the "theotropic" desire that Lilla acknowledges opens major questions about the purported lucidity of "the Great Separation" to which he calls fellow moderns. Counter to Lilla's claim that Hobbes leaves political theology behind, it would seem that Hobbes is actually drawn by a vision of pacification won by absolute control (Pfau 2014). As such, he too is oriented by an aura that, as the Cambridge Platonist Benjamin Whichcote remarks, enticed the theological nominalists who certain scholars now argue provided the framework within which Hobbes ostensibly "changed the subject" (Schmitt 2005, 47; Bain 2020), namely the beauty of divine power, will and sovereignty (Taylor 1989, 250). Furthermore, this beautiful vision moves him to persuade others of his new science. As Shaftesbury notes, "'Love of such great Truths and sovereign Maxims as he imagin'd these to be, made him the most laborious of all Men in composing Systems of this kind for our Use; and forc'd him, notwhithstanding his natural Fear, to run continually the highest risk of being a Martyr for our Deliverance'" (cited in Patapan and Sikkenga 2008, 821). Attentiveness to the place of desire thus raises questions about the plausibility of "the Great Separation" and commends an alternative account of the theological and modern political thought.

### *Modernity and Its Residually Needful Desire*

Hans Blumenberg, another staunch critic of the political theological endeavour, also notes the place of desire in any appropriate account of the theological vis-à-vis modernity. Counter to what Blumenberg (1983) calls the "historical substantialism" of those like Carl Schmitt and Karl Löwith (29, 112–114), he advances a "reoccupation" thesis regarding the emergence of modernity. In a reworked version of that account, Blumenberg underscores that an understanding of this reoccupation must not be limited merely to the rational, cognitive level; for, it also entails a non-rational level of "residual needs" (65). It was an intellectualist prejudice of the Enlightenment, he asserts, to dismiss religion as arising merely from the trickery of religious authorities playing upon juvenile critical capacities of a credulous populous. Such a claim places the accent upon the rational, cognitive level, and fails to recognize the dimension of non-rational needs in human understanding (64).

Important to note, though, is that Blumenberg's discussion of needs subdivides into two distinct levels that align with the distinction he makes between an overextended notion of human self-foundation and inevitable progress on the one hand, and an authentically rational notion of self-assertion and possible progress on the other (49). The residual need linked with self-foundation and inevitable progress is, according to Blumenberg, a need that arises as a carry-over from medieval Christianity. This need entails a felt obligation to adequately respond to the challenge presented by Christianity (65); modernity, as he notes, "found it impossible to decline to answer questions about the totality of history" (48). It is this felt need that gives rise to a modernity that was "bound to miscarry" (60). Furthermore, this residual need explains what those like Löwith mistake for secularization of theological content. States Blumenberg: "The reoccupation that is the reality underlying the appearance of secularization is driven by the neediness of a consciousness that has been overextended and then disappointed in regard to the great questions and great hopes" (89).

As Robert Wallace (1983) notes, Blumenberg wishes to distinguish this residual need, which for Blumenberg is a need that is irrational, from another residual need (*xxvi*, *xxvi/xxxin**n*). This other need arises from the purported collapse of the nominalist conception of God and the lack of Greek *ataraxia* as a live alternative. The collapse of the medieval Christian and ancient Greek positions, suggests Blumenberg, creates something that is more than a theoretical or cognitive imperative for an alternative; it creates a residual need or felt obligation to which self-assertion and the idea of possible progress respond. This need is neither inevitable nor universal in that it emerges contingently due to the disintegration of the medieval system. But, it is also a need that cannot simply be ignored or done away with, as Blumenberg (1983) accuses Nietzsche of assuming in adhering to a misguided and overextended notion of autonomy (142–143). However historically contingent it may supposedly be, this need is an objective, and thus rational, one. As Wallace (1983) notes, this residual need "at least seems to involve no necessary 'false consciousness'" (*xxvi*).

Yet, to couch this legitimate need at the level of objectivity opens Blumenberg to the very historicist critique of which he is otherwise very much aware. As Laurence Dickey (1987a) notes, to claim that the medieval synthesis and Greek *ataraxia* have collapsed and that self-assertion remains the only viable option rests on an underlying assumption of what is convincing and thus still possible according to a felt sense of the broad sweep of history (160). What Blumenberg misses is that however much particular standpoints might collapse, there remain live possibilities amidst the rubble (Gillespie 2008, 12). Indeed, a carry-over of live possibilities is present in Blumenberg's very notion of a legitimate residual need. While largely implicit, Blumenberg's notion of needs draws from Kant. This is most evident when Blumenberg (1983) quotes Kant, who says: "'Reason does not feel; it understands its lack and produces through the cognitive drive the feeling of need. Here the matter stands as it

does with moral feeling, which no moral law brings about (for the moral laws arise entirely from reason) but which is nevertheless caused and produced by moral laws, and consequently by reason, since the active and yet free will needs definite reasons'" (432–433). The desire for the moral law, the only desire which for Kant is a pure desire, is precisely the model for Blumenberg's notion of need underpinning self-assertion. It is a need that purportedly arises from reason alone, just as, according to Blumenberg, the need for self-assertion arises from the ostensibly objective circumstance that the possibilities of the medieval Christian and ancient Greek systems are no longer live alternatives.

As Pauline Kleingeld (1998) suggests, however, Kant's claim that the feeling of the "needs of reason" should be understood, in a manner analogous to moral feeling, as "needs caused by reason" rather than as "needs of reason as such" is problematic (84–87). First, it fails to account for the function of the cognitive drive and to specify whether or not this drive pertains to reason itself. Accordingly, Kant merely displaces the question regarding the genesis of the feeling of need. Second, Kant's claim undercuts his very critical project, and in particular his claim "with regard to the need of pure practical reason, that this need can be ascribed to *every finite rational being in the* world" (86; emphasis in original). To introduce anthropological factors into an account of the origin of the feeling of need, as does Kant's account of moral feeling, is to shift the account of the needs of reason from the level of the structures of finite rationality to that of the needs of human beings.

The need of practical reason, which for Kant entails that virtue be met with happiness, might better be understood to arise, as Yiramahu Yovel (1980) suggests, from an extraneous sense of justice historically derivative from the biblical tradition (63, 63n42). Yovel also notes that this need for the highest good at the individual level translates especially in Kant's later work into a need for the reality of possible progress toward the realization of the highest good in the world (72–75). In turn, this link between the need for the realization of the highest good in history, and the sense of justice derivative from the biblical tradition upon which it rests, suggests that Blumenberg's notion of the residual need for self-assertion and for possible progress is itself a theologically inflected need. The precise nature of this theological mediation is evident in Dickey's (1987b) account of how Kant's attention to the realization of the highest good in history arises from his interest in eighteenth-century Lutheran Pietism (171/395n341), more specifically the "down-to-earth" Pietism that differed significantly from the inner-directed Pietism of which Kant is critical (170/394n324). Down-to-earth Pietism focuses on ethical and civil activism, on a *praxis pietatis*, out of a theologically-optimistic anthropology that assumes humanity's capacity for virtue as a divine gift, humanity's responsibility to actually realize that capacity, and an eschatology that envisions continual approximation to and fulfilment of the Kingdom of God on earth (1–32). Down-to-earth Pietism thus places great emphasis on human effort. This requires a certain sense of moral worth and courage that, Dickey

notes, Kant locates in Christianity rather than in paganism (170). Blumenberg attempts to distinguish Kant from this strand of Lutheran Pietism while connecting Lessing to it (Dickey 1987a, 164–165); but, the links which Dickey elucidates would suggest an alternative account whereby the residual need for possible progress is theologically mediated rather than representative of a wholly new epoch.

## Resituating Desire in Modernity

### *The Trajectory of the Desire for Reform*

Charles Taylor (2007) offers the political theological endeavour a distinct narrative by challenging "subtraction stories" that depict the overcoming of particular understandings—assumed to be illusory—as the unveiling of features of human experience purported to have been there all along (22). Taylor rather argues that the process of secularization has entailed an alteration "in the whole context in which we experience and search for fullness" (14). By fullness, Taylor means a form of life that is higher, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, admirable, genuine, or authentic (2007, 5, 607/838n9; 2010, 315). Central to this experience of fullness, Taylor notes, is a sense of awe and wonder, a sense of being moved. Fullness orients the moral and spiritual world; it is a place of power that serves as a sort of "motivating intensity" spurring aspirations and energies (2007, 5–6, 6/780n8, 606; 2010, 315). The experience of fullness, Taylor (2007) adds, can also entail a sense of incompleteness, absence, or lack. For this reason, the experience of fullness is closely linked with a sense of ethical predicament, with a sense not only of what motivates humans but also of what serves as a barrier to fullness (5–6, 604).

The experience of fullness is thus an experience of desire that motivates action, and it necessitates much more than a revisionist "intellectual deviation" account of modernity that still remains at the level of belief. Attention to fullness requires attending to the variety of "conditions of belief" along this historical trajectory in which fullness as experience is lived; that is, it requires attending to social practices and to the "social imaginary" that flows from and gives rise to them in turn (4–5, 295, 773–776). To fail to do so is to miss important facets of the historical transition, as well as to miss how the contemporary era is itself a lived experience rooted in a set of practices and a social imaginary that result from historically contingent shifts in the experience of fullness.

One such facet to which Taylor draws attention is the manner by which a shift in religious piety played into the rise of nominalism. Following Louis Dupré, Taylor insists that nominalism holds significance as a turning point because it "was more than a mere intellectual shift, reflected in the invention of new unpronounceable scholastic terms. It was primarily a revolution in devotion, in the focus of prayer and love" (94). Franciscanism, the tradition to which the great nominalist thinkers belonged, directed greater attention to

the incarnate, suffering Christ than to the Christ Pantocrator, the Christ of Judgment that had dominated Latin Christendom. This emphasis spurred the push to bring this Christ to the suffering masses, to emphasize the notion of the incarnate Christ as a brother and neighbour. It also motivated a focus on the world as well as on people in their individuality. It was this revolution in the life of devotion, suggests Taylor, that slowly worked itself out at the intellectual level so as to give "a new status to the particular, as something more than a mere instantiation of the universal" (94).

Another facet is Taylor's insistence that modernity was not merely a reaction against nominalism's destruction of the cosmic order. While the nominalist conception of divine omnipotence played a crucial role in the dissolution of cosmic order, this new conception of nature as a product of divine will could only translate into a mode of self-assertion when yoked with a certain reconstructive stance toward the world already in emergence. Self-assertion was not, as Blumenberg implies, a mere natural reading of the new experiences of theory-driven method and of the relation between the moderns over the ancients. Renaissance figures like Marsilio Ficino, Leonardo, and Michelangelo worked with a Platonic-realist conception of the world shaped by Form, but they combined this with a sense of the artist needing to co-operate with that Form by poetically bringing it to completion (114). This sensibility linked up with the nominalist conception of nature to bring about modernity.

The most central facet to Taylor's account is the trajectory of "Reform." Reform is a pushback against the unstable equilibrium of pre- and post-Axial characteristics within medieval Christianity understood, on the one hand, as a concern with human flourishing in everyday life as evident in Jesus's healing miracles, and, on the other hand, as a concern with transformation that transcends the demands of everyday human flourishing. The medieval Church sought to inhabit this tension by way of complementary functions (5, 43–46, 61–62). Reform overturns this equilibrium by identifying greater intensity of personal devotion as the most appropriate response to fullness, and it does so by seeking to make society in its entirety conform to the higher standards of dedication and commitment exemplified by the renunciative vocations (61, 85/786n92, 265–266).

Reform gains momentum in the late-medieval era, continues through the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and carries over into the modern era via the Renaissance notion of "civility" (61, 63). Taylor locates the roots of Reform in the Hildebrandine reforms of the eleventh century (85/786n92, 242–243, 265), but identifies as key the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 that both requires that all individuals undergo one-on-one confession at least once a year and initiates a concerted effort to train priests and to compile manuals such that the clergy could more effectively shape the devotion of the masses (64, 68, 242–243, 265). This call for regular confession represents a shift from devotion manifest in public ritualistic practices—on what one does—widely prevalent among the masses. It turns toward a more elite devotional practice which has a more developed doctrinal dimension and which focuses more on

inner prayer and meditative practices (63, 71). The Reformation spurs Reform by abolishing the higher vocations while insisting that all vocations are to be equally demanding without a reduction in standards. But, as this expansion of the realm of renunciation runs the danger of a burden too weighty to bear, the wholesale remaking of society becomes necessary to control against the vices of some infecting the moral standards of others (80–82). Reform continues in the Renaissance with the application of "civility" by civil authority to the whole population (63, 88, 101–104). Poor laws in the fifteenth century distinguish between deserving and undeserving recipients of charity such that the latter might be rehabilitated and instrumentally used to produce goods needed by society (108–109). Ideals of orderliness and refinement increasingly separate the elites from the masses and result in a crackdown in the sixteenth century on aspects of popular culture like Carnival in which all strata of society had previously participated (87, 103, 109–110). In the seventeenth century the absolutist state increasingly employs disciplinary methods to shape the citizenry toward economic and military success as well as toward individual moral improvement (110–111).

One key outcome of Reform as a certain desiring after fullness, according to Taylor, is a process of "excarnation." The turn toward a more intense personal piety and to civility entails a turn away from the bodily modes of the festive as evident in Carnival—eating, drinking, sexual jest and mock violence—that disconnects the body from a link with a higher good (87, 554). Additionally, a society founded on a network of personal relations of charity is replaced by a categorial society in which all are situated on the same "speed" but whose relations are inflected through norms of civility and right order (82, 281–282).

The problem with this excarnation is that it gives rise to a disengaged stance to the world that misses its embeddedness in a set of practices and a social imaginary. The modern disengaged stance is in fact a new way of inhabiting the world (746), one oriented by the aura of certain values that include those of the subject as free and unconstrained by authority as well as of power and control (286). As modernity emerges, a certain prestige and awe become associated with the instrumental stance because of its shear success in remaking society according to higher standards of piety and civility (121, 125), as well as success in modern science and technology (113). These successes breed a confidence in the ability of humanity to penetrate the supposed mysteries of existence (548), and they create a sense that such powers are worthy of respect and a sign of human dignity. An ethic, a set of virtues and standards of excellence, thus prioritizes self-control and self-responsibility which drive the disengaged stance to the world (559–560). To fail to recognize how the modern is thus driven by its own experience of fullness, and the desires and disciplines that accompany it, is to rest upon an intellectualist account of human being in the world that misses the historically mediated transformation of practices and imaginaries entailed in the trajectory of Reform that underpins the shift to modernity.

### *Embodied Tradition and the Shaping of Desire*

Talal Asad also provides an alternative narrative by emphasizing the importance of attention to the level of embodied sensibilities in any attempt to account for transformations in the understandings of religion in the modern world (2012, 53). This necessitates attention also to the practices which serve as the context within which such sensibilities arise (2003, 191n13). For, asserts Asad, embodied practices make possible certain forms of experience rather than others (2003, 252). Moreover, he notes, sensibilities are charged with desire, which spurs forms of practice in turn and accords them legitimacy (Scott 2006, 302).

Asad undoubtedly emphasizes the differential context of practices and sensibilities rather than tracing the uptake of particular religious forms within secular modern practices. Counter to accounts claiming the origins of the secular modern as essentially Christian, Asad adamantly asserts that "continuities are not as continuous as they might seem to be" (Scott 2006, 284). Asad thus stresses the disjuncture between Christian and modern liberal myths of redemption as well as between their respective notions of equality (2003, 61–62; 2011, 671; 2018, 16–17). The secular modern, Asad insists, is a contingent amalgam of a variety of sources that includes also Renaissance humanism, the Enlightenment concept of nature, Hegel's doctrine of history, and the detached self of Romanticism (2003, 13–14, 192; 2018, 75). Nonetheless, Asad does also stress that "sharp distinctions are not as sharp as they might seem to be" (Scott 2006, 284). There is both rupture and continuity between the religious and the secular modern (Asad 2003, 25; Ahmad 2015, 261). While Christianity is not the essential origin of the secular modern, Asad notes that it is undoubtedly wrapped up in the character of the modern state and modern nationalism (2003, 194; 2011, 672).

In emphasizing both rupture and continuity, Asad turns to the notion of tradition to reject those accounts that portray secular modernity as a coherent whole based solely on reason. Modernity is marked rather by a desire for coherence that drives action in the world. It exhibits distinct textures due to differing interpretations of various sources and of the successes and failures of various modes of behaviour that serve as anticipations of the coherence toward which the tradition aspires. As a tradition, modernity comprises a constellation of different speeds and temporalities that result from the various combinations, ruptures, and re-combinations of anticipations and expectations (Asad 1986, 14–17; 2003, 13; Iqbal 2017, 200). Modernity is thus not necessarily the lived experience of rupture, of the continual arrival of the new and unexpected that shatters any possible continuity of the space of experience (2003, 223n39).

Modernity is also not a coherent whole based upon reason because it rests on the more fundamental visceral level of embodied tradition (Ahmad 2015, 262; Asad 2003, 191n13). The very persuasiveness of the legitimations that modernity furnishes flow from the desires that underpin it. States Asad: "The investment people have in particular arguments is not simply a matter of

abstract, timeless logic. It relates to the kind of persons one has become, and wants to continue to be" (2003, 184). The very parameters of rationality are "constituted by sensibilities—memories and aspirations, fears and hopes—of speakers and listeners" (2003, 185). They are, moreover, delineated by conventions of bodily comportment that determine the nature of rational dialogue and equal respect (2018, 44–45). These bodily comportments of embodied tradition, importantly, reveal that tradition is not a static phenomenon, a mere inheritance and repetition of an unchanging historical substance through linear time from the past to the present (Asad 2003, 222; Ahmad 2015, 268). Embodied tradition is about apt performance, about engagement in social practices that cultivate aptness of behaviour, sensibility, and attitude. Tradition entails the formation of capacities, a docile body that is equipped with a certain know-how through which to engage the world and to address the situations and challenges that confront it. It is not to succumb in a blind and rote manner to authority, but to form potentialities for action in the world (2012, 42). Tradition as the cultivation of aptitudes is to be understood "as sound and visual imagery, as language uttered and inscribed (on paper, wood, stone, or film) or recorded in electronic media.… as ways in which the body learns to paint and see, to sing and hear, and to dance and observe; as masters who can teach pupils how to do these things well; and as practitioners who can excel in what they have been taught (or fail to do so)" (2001, 216). Tradition entails competence, a knowledge of what one is up to such that all one's movements are well-coordinated toward a goal (1997, 47–48; 2003, 251–252). The very cultivation of the apt performance also necessitates originality of application, in new circumstances, of standards understood as excellent in the past (1986, 14–15; 2012, 42).

Attention to embodied tradition brings to light secular modernity's uptake of certain Christian sensibilities and practices. Drawing from Lori Branch, Asad notes that the Reformation's attack on superstition gave rise to new forms of liturgy and ritual that prized spontaneity in the outpouring of emotional sincerity and in free prayer. This sense of the true self-serving as a passionate vessel for divine grace also entailed the sense of a capacity to act disinterestedly in receiving transcendence. This abstraction from practices and interests in turn made possible the disposition of neutrality so prized in modernity both for the pursuit of scientific knowledge and for the occupation of public office (2018, 90–91, 110–111). Asad points also to Philip Gorski's account of the central influence of Calvinist disciplines on the rise of the early modern state (2018, 25/166n20). Furthermore, Asad notes that, in fusing together the idea of Jesus dying to redeem humanity with the political project of changing the world for him, Christian missionary activity created the conditions from which sprang the modern push toward universal emancipation in the face of a world of injustice and suffering (2003, 62).

From this perspective, the process of secularization is best understood as a process of rearranging and refashioning, most specifically of dispositions and embodied practices (2003, 25; 2011, 672). The uptake, where it exists,

amounts to a formative practice—an exercise (Asad 2018, 74–75; Ahmad 2015, 265; Iqbal 2017, 207)—that advances apt modes of inhabiting the world, certain "practical knowledges and powers … subjective behaviors, sensibilities, needs, and expectations" (2001, 221). There is a certain continuity in cultivation of aptitudes that form docile—that is, teachable—bodies equipped with potentialities and powers (Scott 2006, 287; Asad 2015, 176). So too is the uptake visible at the level of desire which both shapes and arises from the cultivation of practical aptitudes. Embodied tradition instils certain feelings that are charged with emotions that make certain objects and the reforms necessary to achieve them desirable (Scott 2006, 302). The secular modern takes up and refashions desires in its process of transforming existing practices and sensibilities into new possibilities (Scott 2006, 293; Asad 2012, 42).

## Toward a Political Theology of the International Attuned to Desire

Explorations into the political theology of the international represent an important challenge to standard secularization narratives which imply that modern understandings of the international are void of theological motifs. Yet, this investigation runs the risk of reducing itself to the intellectualist level. Molloy and Bain, for example, focus on the dimension of belief, and in so doing limit their investigation to human understanding as thought and representation rather than as inextricably linked with the conditions of belief. Interestingly, critics of political theology such as Lilla and Blumenberg recognize the importance of attention to desire as a condition of belief, even while they miss how attention to desire might imply an alternative narrative regarding the theological and the secular modern. It is precisely a certain intertwining of the theological and the secular modern that Taylor and Asad bring into relief with their emphasis on desire and on the practices and disciplines that sustain it. The upshot of their accounts is a recasting of the political theological problematic. From this perspective, the theological is best understood as what Hadot famously calls a way of life; theology is an exercise in living rather than a theoretical activity. It is a *paideia*, a pedagogy, that forms and reforms appropriate desire (Leclercq 1996, 67–68; Ward 2016, 7, 28–29). Drawing on the work of Jean Leclercq, Hadot notes that it was this very notion of theology that shaped the Patristic era, and which gave a distinct flair to the monastic life in the medieval era of Latin Christendom in contrast to a certain medieval scholastic tendency that veered into a more speculative, abstract activity severed from everyday life (Hadot 1995, 107–108, 269–271; Leclercq 1996, 101).

Political theological explorations of the international would, therefore, benefit from attention to the structures of desire and to the formative practices sustaining them. Doing so would bring to light new understandings of the blurred line between the religious and the international. Doing so would, moreover, join up in interesting and fruitful ways with already existing lines

of inquiry into the nature of the international. One such point of intersection would be with Hans Morgenthau's (1947, 1972, 2004) attention to the trajectories of desire that give shape to political engagement at the international level, including his characterization of typological figures each representative of distinct trajectories of desire—Don Juan and the desire for love, Faust and the desire for knowledge, the mystic and the desire for union with the divine, and Cecil Rhodes and the desire for power—as well as his particular interest in exploring the dynamics of the desire for justice and of the desire for power. These emphases gesture toward the importance of attentiveness to the structure of modern desire, and of its theologically mediated history, for any effort to wrestle with the contours of the international.

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