

19. ‘Fictional Reality’: The Case of Religious Texts in a Secular Context

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Abstract: I argue here that religious texts may be fruitfully recast for a secular culture through the frame of “fictional reality.” For John Dominic Crossan, the religious tradition confronts the “normalcy” of civilization, referring to compulsive, non-participative ways of being together that override the norms of intelligence and reasonableness in interpreting human society. The default subject–object divide disallows this approach (religious belief being thought of as “simply subjective,” thus putting aside its claim to authoritativeness). But this divide is no longer plausible. In contemporary secular culture, identity is “made up,” not given, and such constructions may be inauthentic, compulsive, and in need of a critical response. Hence the need to engage self-consciously with the text. And while the texts are written in the prescientific mode of “compact consciousness,” which merges metaphor and literal, myth and history, today’s differentiation of consciousness speaks to the interior need for responsible appropriation of the text. This recapitulation of the text addresses the shortcomings of the foundation of community, and of its authoritativeness, in liberal secular culture.

Keywords: Religious text; secular culture; fictional reality; Crossan; Lonergan; Kojève; differentiation of consciousness

Fictional Reality: The Case of Religious Texts in a Secular Culture

1. The General Idea

The intention of this paper is to show that the narrative framework termed “fictional reality” can be an authentic vehicle for the continuation of the religious tradition. I take this narrative style as replacing the theoretical standpoint of modernity, with its dogmatic subject–object divide between the facts “out there” and the subjective viewpoint. This mistaken approach would not accept religious texts, taken as narrative

inventions, as reaching the standard of objective truth associated with the tradition. But science—the default standard of objectivity—is today no longer seen as describing reality but rather as applying to reality, as judged by normative standards of reasonableness—that is to say, our “subjective” capacity for reasonableness. In other words, this objection is out of date.¹ There has been a shift from the default framing of our knowledge in terms of theory to a more nuanced differentiation. The theoretical framework had in turn replaced the “compact consciousness” of a prescientific mentality, characterized by narratives—for our purposes, the foundational texts of the religions—that do not distinguish between metaphor and fact, history and myth.

Michel Onfray argues in his book on “the theory of Jesus”² that the gospel narratives are illuminating fiction. Why did Jesus not eat cous-cous, he asks, a typical dish of that time? His point is that the meals described all have immediately accessible symbolic meaning—fish, meat, bread, wine. The narratives are written to speak to us at the level of our deepest longings, including the desire to see meaning in a life that will be cut short by death. Wine, for example: at the start of the narrative of the writer named John, Jesus is depicted as transforming water into wine. “The wine has run out,” he is told (John 2:2–3). He is going to make even better wine—the drink that symbolizes our flourishing in common—out of the most ordinary thing, water. The old dispensation, the covenant with Moses that constitutes Judaism, is coming to an end; its time has run out. The new covenant speaks to all persons, to the Gentiles, in their ordinary (rather than special) lifeworld. This is how the writer John sees it, and this incident frames the whole narrative going forward. The narratives of Jesus are gospels, not simply history—narratives of good news for us, answering our questioning.

Much contemporary biblical scholarship would, in part, agree with Onfray. The title of J. D. Crossan’s research, *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian*³, is revealing. Others—the majority of religious people—take refuge in fundamentalisms of various kinds. The text, in a culture that is self-consciously plural and framed by scientific thinking

¹ Cf my discussion: Patrick Giddy, “Objectivity and subjectivity: rethinking the philosophy syllabus” *South African journal of philosophy* 28 (2009):359-376.

² Michal Onfray, *Théorie de Jésus: Biographie d’une idée* (Bouquins, 2023).

³ John Dominic Crossan, *How to read the Bible and still be a Christian. Struggling with divine violence from Genesis through Revelation* (HarperOne, 2015).

and democratic values, is seen by believers as giving an identity that is under threat in the contemporary context. The meaning of a secular age, as Charles Taylor argues⁴, is that identity is forged, not simply given. It follows that the identity thus constructed may be inauthentic, compulsive, unhelpful to human flourishing, “fictional” in a bad sense—one’s identity as an Aryan, for example, which was so destructive of human society in the mid-twentieth century. Clearly, however, there is a basic human need for belonging—alongside the perhaps two other existential needs for autonomy and for meaning—an understanding argued for by Mary Clark over a number of chapters in her book *In Search of Human Nature*.⁵ This need is going to find expression, one way or another. It is important, then, to sort out the wrong kind of belonging from the authentic appropriation of the religious tradition. The key to this lies in the contemporary sense of fictional reality. This kind of writing can be an authentic continuation of the religious tradition, facing down what Crossan terms the “normalcy” of civilization, what the Norwegian writer Knausgaard calls “the social world”—“the world as it wants to be,” a world of pretense.⁶ These terms refer to compulsive ways of being together that involve non-participatory belonging or, as Crossan argues, structures of (supposedly justified) violence.

It is important, then, not to confuse the creative aspect of human explanatory narratives with skepticism about any objectivity at all in the matter of religious texts. There is a normativity to fictional accounts of our life together that points to the possibility of storytelling elucidating or reflecting our human reality to our benefit, drawing us into a deeper self-understanding. This is the well-developed thesis of Christopher Booker’s *The Seven Basic Plots*⁷, an overview of fictional narratives that point to the perennial human task of moving from egocentricity to the achievement of the authentic and generous self. In these narratives—from Homer and then Cervantes through to Jane Austen—there is a surface story depicting success in conventional terms (“above the line”),

⁴ Charles Taylor, *A secular age* (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap, 2007).

⁵ Mary Clark, *In search of human nature* (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁶ Karl-Ove Knausgaard, *The end. My struggle: Book 6*. Trans. M. Aiken and D. Barlett (London: Vintage, 2019): 360-1.

⁷ Christopher Booker, *The seven basic plots. Why we tell stories* (London: Continuum, 2003).

accompanied by a “below the line” story of a personal journey.⁸

The issue can be seen as important not just for religious believers. “Authority” names the condition for the realization of a community constituted by common beliefs about common values. A basic theme in the religious texts is the possibility of a true community, one of justice and peace. For this reason, those traditions would be misleadingly understood as what is left behind in modernity, defined by its abandonment of previous authority. The key idea in modernity’s self-understanding is that of individual autonomy. Secular authority is constituted, it is thought, by the process of election. Yet, as will be argued below—and dissenting from the standard liberal picture of society—the election does not constitute authority but presupposes it. This is not to suggest reverting to a premodern version of authority. Yet only by unpacking the idea of authority in the changed circumstances of contemporary culture can one arrive at an understanding of how a community is to be constructed and affirmed.

To understand the thesis put forward in this discussion, it is useful to draw on Bernard Lonergan’s notion of the differentiation of consciousness.⁹ This notion allows one to track how cultures develop toward a more nuanced understanding of the world—and of the nature of our understanding. A framework of thinking characteristic of premodern cultures is that of compact consciousness. There is no difference between metaphor and fact, legend and history, alchemy and chemistry. The religious texts are, for the most part, written within this frame of thinking.

In the following section, I will broaden the scope of the basic idea in this presentation to include what is arguably a blind spot in contemporary secular culture. Section 3 clarifies the idea of secular culture. Thereafter, I sketch the key idea of the differentiation of consciousness that points, in the contemporary mindset, to the idea of fictional reality. Section 5 then unpacks some of the examples given in Crossan’s deconstruction of the religious text, confronting the sacred text in a way that allows believers an authentic but intelligent appropriation of the text and indeed of the faith—and, importantly, to have a fruitful dialogue with atheists such as Onfray.

⁸ Cf my discussion: Patrick Giddy, “Jack and the beanstalk: The human plot in the narrative traditions and contemporary global culture” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 39 (2020): 361-370.

⁹ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in theology*, 2nd Ed. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972).

2. The Broader Implications for Contemporary Secular Culture

By “secular context” I refer to a culture in which religious belief is one option among others. This means that the authority attaching to the religious tradition cannot be taken for granted; it has to be justified. This applies to the authority of the religious community’s leader or that of the religious text—the Torah, the Bible, the Qur’an, and so on. In fact, the question cannot be avoided—as religion is pushed to re-express itself in changed social conditions—as to what constitutes the authentic tradition. For a century or two, historical biblical criticism—to take one example—has uncovered the narrative intentions of the writers of the Scriptural texts, and these intentions were not primarily a concern with historically verified facts. I am going to suggest that framing these texts in terms of narrative truth or “fictional reality”—clearly a category not available to the writers at the time—will (perhaps surprisingly) bring us closer to the authentic tradition of the religion.

This discussion, I hope to show, is of interest beyond ecclesial circles, to liberal secular culture in general. Torbjörn Gustafsson Chorell (2021) quotes Swedish philosopher Jayne Svenungsson: “to analyse our current political reality without a knowledge of religion” is now almost impossible.¹⁰ “Secular” is a disputed term: in particular, scholars take it either as a complete setting aside of pre-secular religious tradition or else as a transformation of that tradition in line with the developments in culture that we know as “modern.” But there is a problem with the former approach, namely that beginning from the supposedly unencumbered autonomous individual obscures the idea and foundational value of freedom. Liberal culture, understood in this way, overlooks the question of whether the ideal of freedom is facilitated to grow into actual freedom. This is the difference between a good intention (say, to be a good father) and the actual set of habits of thought and action that bring this intention to fulfillment. To the extent that the culture fails to facilitate this kind of growth, the authority of its leaders may be judged unauthentic—or, in fact, illegitimate. We are speaking here of a lack of formation for life in common, for *Sittlichkeit*, a lack well brought out, in

¹⁰ Cited in Gustafsson Chorell, “Unsecularizing history and politics: Jayne Svenungsson and Karl Löwith on meaning in history,” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, 82 (2021): 176-192, DOI: 10.1080/21692327.2021.1923558 183.

the case of liberal societies, by Alasdair MacIntyre.¹¹ The ideal of freedom can mask the problem that actual freedom has to be achieved, and this is the task of every individual. There is, then, something not self-evident about human freedom, raising questions that were expressed differently in premodern times but remain central, indeed existential, in secular culture. To bring these questions to the fore—to ask about something more than the abstract idea of freedom—the religious text can help, if interrogated in a way that is intelligible to the contemporary mind. In making this point, I am asking for a measure of suspended belief on matters of religion, which I hope will bear fruit on the part of the secular reader.

What is inevitable in a secular, historically conscious culture is the deconstruction of the religious text. Euripides (438 BCE, some four hundred years before the writers recounted the story of Jesus as they saw it) wrote of *Alcestis*. Alcestis is the wife of a king. For reasons having to do with the laws of the cosmos, the king will die unless someone voluntarily undertakes to die in his place. Alcestis takes this on, and the king lives. At this time, the god Hercules is visiting the court. On hearing of this tragedy, he undertakes to take part in—and win—a contest with Death. The prize is a life, and he chooses Alcestis. She does indeed rise from the underworld—after three days (another cosmic rule, as it were). “Her voice may not be heard / Ere to the Lords of Them Below she pay / Due cleansing, and awake on the third day.”¹²

Some of these elements sound familiar to present-day readers. There are, of course, references within the earlier biblical writings to the “three days,” for example, Hosea 6:1–2: “After two days He will revive us; On the third day He will raise us up, that we may live in His sight.” And Jonah was vomited up from the belly of the whale after three days. The point is simply that the text is largely a narrative composition, written to convey meaning. The allusions to Greek literature widen the net and allow us to see the foundational religious texts in a broader context of the human struggle to make sense of life.

The Graeco-Roman world and its culture formed the wider milieu of the writers of the accounts of Jesus. They drew on material with which they were familiar. Many examples of borrowing are uncovered

¹¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), esp. Ch 1.

¹² Euripedes, *The Alcestis*. Trans. Gilbert Murray (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1915): vv. 1146ff.

in the text I will draw on, namely John Dominic Crossan's already mentioned *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian*. Crossan takes the Bible not so much as a definitive text furnishing the standard for interpreting life in general—particularly for the believer—but as a text accompanying a people of faith, and shot through with expressions that run counter to the central message of the religion. He shifts the idea of its authoritativeness. The text calls for responsible engagement—not blind faith—on the part of the reader. I am encouraged in this by a parallel account of the authoritative status of the foundational Islamic text in Mustafa Akyol's *Reopening Muslim Minds*.¹³ I mention just one example of Akyol's approach by way of illustration. Akyol argues that if the situation in Mecca had been less hostile to the new religion of the worship of Allah, the founder of the religion would not have needed to flee to Medina and take up arms. "And in that case the Qur'an we have in our hands would not speak about war and military conquest."¹⁴ It could have been different.

Both Crossan and Akyol take issue with violence when it is portrayed in the religious texts in a positive way. Violence sets aside or overrides questions of legitimate power—that is, of authentic authority. The issue concerns not so much premodern men and women (one is not attempting to read back into history concerns that were not within the thought-framework of that time) as the contemporary person. Once we understand that the religious text is written in a style that does not distinguish between metaphorical and philosophical language, we are compelled to take a stance on references to violence. This shifts contemporary consciousness toward a new view of the authoritative nature of the tradition, whether expressed in the person of the Pope or in Scripture. A new dimension of responsibility comes into play. In a sense, the reader must become, more self-consciously, something of a co-creator of the tradition. The reader must engage with the text in a way very similar to that called for in reading fiction.

There is a tension here between this approach to the text and its role in evoking faith. This is made clear in Crossan's reflections on how one should read Scripture without losing faith. It is also evident in Akyol's subtitle: "Return to reason, freedom and tolerance." We must

¹³ Mustafa Akyol, *Reopening Muslim minds. A return to reason, freedom and tolerance* (Forum, 2022).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

remember that authority gives expression to the common good and that its legitimacy lies there. This legitimacy is affirmed through persons growing in their capacities for attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, and finally responsibility.

Here Bernard Lonergan's notion of the "dialectic" attaching to any authority is critical.¹⁵ Authority, or legitimate power, is always fragile and dynamic by its nature. Power is legitimate (i.e., authoritative) to the extent that it represents the common understanding of common unifying values of the group in question. But that commonality itself will be authentic only if it arises out of the members' appropriation of their powers of intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility—and similarly in the case of those in authority. The legitimacy of authorities is then freely recognized by subjects, without coercion or the threat of coercion. Through the exercise of their powers of intelligence and responsibility, members of the group reach toward the objective good, and this good is represented by authority in terms of the social good.

It is important to see that this approach does not suggest that everyone has their own purely subjective view of the social nexus. Modern thinking is plagued by this problem because of the idea that subjectivity is opposed to objective truth or value. This unhelpful idea is perpetuated in standard introductory philosophy texts. Thomas Nagel's classic *What Does It All Mean?*¹⁶ is a good example—he poses as basic philosophical questions the following: How do we know anything? How do we know other minds? What is the relation between mind and body? These are questions based on the subject-object divide: how do we get from "in here" to "out there"? But this framing is mistaken. Subjective experience is not a kind of knowledge; it is data to be attended to, interpreted, and judged—true, or more probably only partially true. Understanding the objective good is the fruit of the actualization of one's subjective powers of understanding. This point is crucial if we are to appreciate religious texts through the category of "fictional reality." Any fictional narrative works through the reader's powers of intelligent imagination.

A forced commonality is unauthentic, in every case blocking the flourishing of these powers. Unreasonable and unintelligent ways forward are lauded, and their opposites disfavored. The group becomes

¹⁵ Bernard Lonergan, *Dialectic of authority*. Unpublished paper. (11 pages) Available at: bernardlonergan.com/archive/23650dte070.

¹⁶ Thomas Nagel, *What does it all mean?* (Oxford University Press, 1976).

fragmented. “Dialectic” refers to linked but opposing ways forward, and here it points to the possibility of recapturing authentic commonality—which will imply opposing unauthentic claims to authority.

The reversal of disorder alerts one to a largely unrecognized problem in modern secular democracies. In a liberal democracy, secular power is seen as legitimated by virtue of a supposed social contract (Rousseau, Locke), with free rational individuals contracting into governing principles for their life in common. But this overlooks the question of whether the resultant social bond is authentic or unauthentic. It overlooks the difference between abstract freedom and actualized freedom. It is thought that a liberal government “should refrain from promoting or taking a stand on what a flourishing human life should be.”¹⁷ But this leaves authority without a foundation sufficient to justify its legitimacy. We cannot assume, as liberal secular thought often seems to, that freedom is already actualized. As Molinski notes, we must keep in mind “the real freedom of man which has to integrate the laws of nature into his personality, by autonomous decisions which are not always basically correct.”¹⁸ Actualization depends on beneficial interpersonal conditions that enable individuals to grow in freedom, converting it from an abstract capacity into a real habitual power. Solidarity is key to this. It is striking that a recent biblical theologian has suggested that religious faith (*pistis*) should be understood in terms of trust. Trust is “the willingness to put something in someone else’s hands,” involving a judgment of trustworthiness.¹⁹ Trust can be unpacked in terms of the given possibility of giving one’s trust and the psychological impasse that one needs to be trusted in order to develop the breadth of willingness to give trust. It is this problem at the heart of the contemporary social nexus that gives rise to the suggestion that the premodern tradition, reformulated, may have something of value to offer. This motivates the present discussion and calls for the suspension of disbelief mentioned above. The legal provisions implied in the social contract are founded on a common purpose that precedes them. There remains, largely overlooked in secular society, the basic

¹⁷ Rooney, J.D. and Zoll, P. “Introduction”. In Rooney and Zoll (eds) *Beyond classical liberalism: Freedom and the good*. London: Routledge, 2024): 1-11, at p.2.

¹⁸ Molinski, W., “Authority”. In: Rahner, K. (ed) *Encyclopedia of theology. A concise Sacramentum Mundi*. London: Burns and Oates, 1975): 60-65, at p.65.

¹⁹ Teresa Morgan, *The New Testament and the theology of trust* (Oxford University Press, 2022): 22; cited in Holtzen, W. Review of Teresa Morgan, *The New Testament and the theology of trust*. *Philosophy in Review* 43 (2023):25-27, at p.25.

human need for solidarity. The Marxist philosopher Alexandre Kojève points out that an election (expressive of the social contract) “confirms rather than engenders authority.”²⁰

3. A Secular Age

A secular culture is one in which religious faith is recognized as one option among others, a point made by Charles Taylor.²¹ One opts to identify oneself with a tradition as expressed in a particular institutionalized community of believers; at the same time, other possibilities present themselves in the public sphere. When T. S. Eliot converted to Anglo-Catholicism (he was brought up in the North American Unitarian tradition but had long cast that off), his very good friend, the writer Virginia Woolf, reacted to her “shameful and distressing interview with dear Tom Eliot.” “I mean,” she commented in a letter to her sister, “there’s something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God.”²² He was not going to convince his peers of his choice. Faith is one option among others.

Secularization has to be distinguished from secularism, that is to say, a worldview that excludes God and, it can be argued, excludes any human transcendence. Since the writings of Hegel, it has been suggested that the Christian religion itself transforms into a secular worldview (for example, in Marcel Gauchet).²³ A secular culture, in other words, may be seen as bringing out the best of the religious tradition, even if this is not explicitly recognized by members of secular society. Albert Keller, in his article “Secularization” in the *Encyclopedia of Theology*, points to Bonhoeffer as a key figure here. He quotes H. Zahrnt, describing a “true secularity” as resulting “directly and authentically from the kernel of

²⁰ Alexandre Kojève, *The notion of authority. (A brief presentation)*. Trans. H. Weslati (London: Verso, 2020): 35.

²¹ Op.cit., 3.

²² Letter to Vanessa Bell, cited in Robert Crawford, *Eliot. After The Waste Land* (Vintage, 2024): 112.

²³ Marcel Gauchet, *The disenchantment of the world. A political history of religion*. Trans. O. Burge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). See my discussion, Patrick Giddy, “Three secularisation theorists – Voegelin, Gauchet, Taylor – and the implications for secular public policy”. In: Bark, A. et al (eds) *Eric Voegelin studies yearbook IV*. (Brill, 2025): 219-238. DOI: 10.30965.9783846769607_010.

Christian revelation itself.”²⁴ The basic idea of secularity is that “there is nothing in the world which is too ‘holy’ to be accessible to a worldly approach and must be reserved for religion... There is no mystery in the world from which science is barred, on the ground that it can be explained only on ‘religious’ terms.”²⁵

4. Shifts in Consciousness

Scripture is, by and large, written in a narrative form that speaks through metaphor (“my God is a rock”), parable, legend, and so on. We have called this the framework of a “compact consciousness.” There is no differentiation between legend and history, myth and fact, alchemy and chemistry. In this framework of thinking, it is not important (as it is for us) to distinguish an epistle written by Paul from one simply bearing the name of Paul.

At the same time, under the influence of the Graeco-Roman cultural “discovery of mind,” documented in Plato’s dialogues and in Aristotle’s *Logic*, there emerged a concern with internal coherence—defining the form or nature of something in order to posit one’s beliefs as of universal import. Seen in Hebrew and Palestinian culture as messiah, lord, saviour, the question of Jesus’ “nature” could also be asked—divine, or human, or half-divine and half-human? These debates issued, finally, in the dogmatic formulations of the councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon.

This framework of thinking is no longer ours. A further “differentiation of consciousness” (Lonergan’s term) has long been in the making, shifting the focus from theory to the way any theory is applied to a particular situation—to the structure of the actualization of a person’s powers of intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility. Lonergan calls this the framework of interiority. He is concerned to show that we no longer think about ourselves in the third person, as if surveying “man” from a point outside the universe. Rather, he says, we approach ourselves from within. In the introduction to his classic book on the appropriation of our powers of intelligence and reasonableness, *Insight*, he

²⁴ Cited in Keller, A. “Secularisation”. In: Rahner, K. (ed) *Encyclopedia of theology. A concise Sacramentum Mundi* (London: Burns and Oates, 1975): 1554-1561, at p.1560.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1560.

remarks that the subject matter is not to be thought of “as though it described some distant region of the globe, which the reader never visited, or some strange and mystical experience, which the reader never shared.”²⁶ In another context, he notes that asking about “the nature of man” does not issue in a “what” question but in a “who” question. “Who is to be a man? The answer is ‘I,’ ‘We’... What has to be a man is not just any instance of rational animal...”²⁷ He quotes the saying *L’homme s’est défini par une exigence*—we are defined by a demand—that we make something of ourselves. This fits very well with the project of seeing the religious text as “fictional reality.”

In the previous framework of thinking, the norm—human nature—would be something clearly objective, an individual being simply one instance of the category “man.” Normativity would come “from above,” in accordance with our nature—below the angels, above the beasts. Now normativity attaches to the demand to make something of oneself. For Lonergan, it takes the form of transcendental precepts: be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible. It is a normative journeying, a journey of self-discovery. It is not that the tradition and traditional formulations are being discarded in favour of subjectivism. Rather, it is the recognition that the norm cannot be spelled out in abstract terms and then simply applied. The norm is becoming oneself through oneself. The authoritative summons to faith is authoritative only to the extent that it recognizes the subject’s own discovery of such authoritativeness. If this authority is expressed in a way that bypasses the subject’s participation as responsible, it will be seen as power that is not legitimate.

If religion is to speak at the level of our times—if it is to be seen as a power that is legitimate (generating a call to assent to its authority)—it must adopt the latter frame of reference. As Lonergan says:

What is authentic for a lesser differentiation of consciousness will be found unauthentic by the standards of a greater differentiation. So there is the sin of backwardness, of cultures, authorities, and individuals that fail to live on the level of their time.²⁸

In parenthesis, this throws light on a problem about Islam raised by

²⁶ Bernard Lonergan, *Insight. A study of human understanding*. 3rd Ed. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1970): xix.

²⁷ Bernard Lonergan, *Topics in education. Collected works of Bernard Lonergan, vol 10*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993): 81.

²⁸ Bernard Lonergan, *Dialectic of authority*, op. cit.

Rémi Brague.²⁹ Brague has argued that such openness to ordinary human inquiry and judgment is largely excluded in Islam. Whereas the Bible is inspired by God—motivating those receiving the revelation while retaining their normal historical determinants—the Qur’an is dictated by Allah, through the intermediary of the angel Gabriel, to Mohammed, his envoy. Hence, no recourse to the particular historical circumstances of the writers is deemed appropriate.³⁰ But this viewpoint may overlook the fact that “authoritativeness” is part and parcel of a cultural framework and changes as that framework changes. An authentic summons to faith will therefore take a different form in a different cultural milieu. The way the foundational text was accorded authority at that time (“dictated by God”) may not be appropriate in our own very different culture. A writer like Akyol is clearly advocating a changed understanding of religious authority—one that encompasses the values of reason, freedom, and tolerance.

The idea of free individuals contracting into society is an outgrowth of this shift in how we see ourselves, recognizing individual responsibility as a key value. There is no doubt that religious bodies have often failed to keep up with these cultural changes. Authority, to return to this once more, speaks to “the recognition of the justification or necessity of the group in question, and then the recognition of the authority serving this organisation... real authority exists for the subjects in so far as they accept willingly the necessary social order.”³¹ But in the case of religious bodies, the understanding of this social order has changed with the rise of an educated middle class. The Roman Catholic Church can no longer assume unquestionable correctness in its dealings with ordinary members, as if it were “franchised” from above—the term is Mackey’s.³² J.-P. Gallez points out that the model for exercising authority derives from a world in which the Christian religion was taken for granted. But now, “in a democratised society which has left religion behind, the way authority is practised in the Church is felt as non-egalitarian.”³³

²⁹ Rémi Brague, *Sur la religion* (Paris: Flammarion, 2018).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 231-232.

³¹ Molinski, *op.cit.*, 62.

³² James Mackey, *Christianity and creation* (New York: Continuum, 2006): 20.

³³ Gallez, J.-P. “Refonder l’église: l’appel de J. Moingt à tous les baptisés.” Talk to CCBF (2017) [Online, my translation]. Available at: http://www.baptises.fr/sites/default/files/document/ccbf-21.10.17-jp_gallez.

5. Crossan: How to Still Be a Christian

Crossan begins by making a point—already canvassed in our discussion on the legitimacy of power—that there can be a “tension between being a faithful reader and being a faithful Christian.”³⁴ The central point of his approach is that the New Testament text must be understood against the background of the first-century Jewish homeland of Jesus, and in particular “its matrix of both violent and nonviolent resistance to Roman power and imperial oppression.”³⁵

The norm presupposed here is that of basic human freedom of self-determination. It is not clear, however, that the text we have always expresses this norm, bound up as it is with a social way forward that must be participatory rather than compelled by force or threats of force. For there are threats in the New Testament message: the Book of Revelation is steeped in visions of bloody vengeance for those who oppose the rule of God. What Crossan calls the “normalcy of civilisation” (the term “civilisation” being used sociologically rather than normatively) operates through threats of retribution; yet central passages in the Bible point to a justice of redistribution rather than retribution.

Crossan’s central examples show how the biblical text draws on its surrounding culture. Time and again, he suggests to the reader the extra-biblical origins of key expressions long thought to be unique to the revealed text. Crossan asks the reader to notice how contradictory approaches are suggested within the narrative and to bring into play our own sense of the authentic message.

I take as a first example the account in Isaiah of Israel’s confrontation with Assyria (700s BCE). Sennacherib is touted in the Assyrian texts as “King of the World, King of Assyria,” implicitly affirming Ashur not just as God of Assyria but as God of the world. Countering this, Isaiah insists that it is Yahweh, God of Israel, who is God of “the whole earth” (Isa. 10:14; 14:26).³⁶ Crossan’s point is that the social, cultural, and political milieu (“matrix”) will always impact the biblical account—and the reader should approach the text with due caution. Thus, the Assyrian approach to power is clearly not in keeping with the biblical tradition of a God of history and authority (a power that calls for

³⁴ Op.cit., 3.

³⁵ Op.cit., 7.

³⁶ Cited in Crossan, op.cit., 114.

faith). Rather, this is what we read in the Assyrian texts:

I filled the plains with the bodies of their warriors, like grass. Their testicles I cut off, and tore out their privates like the seeds of summer cucumbers.³⁷

Now Isaiah, speaking in the voice of the biblical God, affirms: “Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger—the club in their hands is my fury” (Isa. 10:5). Crossan comments: “Far too much of Assyrian imperial theology entered Israelite covenantal theology.”³⁸

In contrast, Crossan points to Psalm 82, where power is challenged to couple itself with justice:

How long will you judge unjustly
And show partiality to the wicked? (Ps. 82:2)

In many cases, the problem goes unrecognized by those in power: “they walk around in darkness” (Ps. 82:5). But instead of a “solution” of vengeance or retribution, these powers simply reap their own destruction. Their power is seemingly divinely sanctioned (they are seen as lesser gods in the divine council), yet:

Nevertheless, you shall die like mortals
and fall like any prince. (Ps. 82:6–7)

No violent intervention is needed or called upon.

A second example comes from the New Testament, discussed by Crossan in his chapter “Rome and the Challenge of Caesar.” The matrix here is the rule of the Roman Emperor Octavian, declared “Augustus” by the Senate in 27 BCE. His victory over Antony in 29 BCE brought about the end of civil war and issued in peace. The poet Horace sees this peace as redemptive; within a religious framework, fault underlying disorder in the state is corrected, and peace is thus redemptive. Octavian, Caesar Augustus, is declared the Redeemer.

The temple to the goddess Athena Polias in Turkey reveals further cultural context. Begun by Alexander the Great, the temple was originally dedicated to Athena Polias, but some three hundred years later, in 27 BCE, the new dedication includes: “To Emperor Caesar,

³⁷ King Sennacherib, cited in Crossan, *op.cit.*, 115.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Son of God, God Augustus.”³⁹

Augustus could be regarded as divine by virtue of four factors: ancestry, conception, adoption, and decree of the Senate. The first two are mythological; the third is historically true—Julius Caesar had adopted him in his will, revealed after his assassination in 44 BCE. He became *divi filius*, son of the divine Julius Caesar. At his death in 14 CE, the Senate declared his divinity. He was now “God from God.”

His divinity was fully entangled with his status as “Emperor,” that is, rightful ruler—through victorious conquest—over an empire; as Crossan puts it, the “All-conquering One.” Finally, the proconsul Paulus Fabius Maximus, governor of Asia Minor, proposed Caesar’s birthdate as the new calendar starting point, the New Year. Augustus’ life signaled a cosmic new creation, bringing redemption from chaos and disintegration. The League of Asian Cities supported the proposal. Caesar, they said, had by his epiphany outdone the benefactors of the past, “but also allowing no hope of greater benefactions in the future”—this was the date when “the God first brought to the world the good tidings residing in him.”⁴⁰

Replace Caesar or Augustus with Jesus or Christ, “and you can understand Pauline Christian theology as counterpoint to and confrontation with Roman imperial theology.”⁴¹

If we move forward to the reign of Nero (from 54 CE), the same themes recur. The poet Calpurnius Siculus writes of the new Golden Age, of “this youth... sent us from heaven” as “God in person,” and he prays that whether the Emperor is Jupiter himself in disguise or another power above “under an assumed mortal semblance,” he may rule the world forever.⁴²

To this, Paul, in his final testament—the Letter to the Romans—responds with what he sees as the Christian Judaic view of the world’s destiny. The key point is that Christians have been baptized into the death of Jesus, and as he was raised from the dead, so we “if we have been united with him in a death like his... will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom. 6:3–5). Crossan suggests we think of this passage in this way: “Rome had officially, publicly, and legally

³⁹ Cited in Crossan, op.cit., 191.

⁴⁰ Cited in Crossan, op.cit., 196.

⁴¹ Crossan, op.cit., 195.

⁴² Cited in Crossan, op.cit., 204.

executed Jesus, but God raised him from the dead. Jesus was therefore dead to Rome and alive to God.” And we too are dead to all that Rome represents and reborn to the values of God’s kingdom.

The narrative here follows the pattern of the European novel: the surface plot (“above the line”) is accompanied by a drama about growth as a human person (“below the line”). On the surface, a teacher and spiritual leader is executed as a common criminal. But his followers interpret the event differently. The scriptural authors frame this in terms that may not have purchase in secular culture, but that is not a reason to reject the premodern tradition in toto.

6. The Religious Text in a Secular Culture

What are the implications of this for understanding the authoritativeness of the religious text? It is this: our reading, as members of a secular culture, of the religion’s foundational text can summon us to trust in a spiritual power as the motor of authentic community. Through this trust, our powers of intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility are released. As Crossan shows, the terms in which this summons is issued reveal it as a counterpoint to the authority claimed by the “normalcy of civilisation.”

The values of Roman civilisation, for Crossan, are “patriarchy, slavery, hierarchy and victory—especially violent victory on which those other three values depend.”⁴³ In each case, the power structure excludes. This is most evident in victory through violence. Violence is therefore not justified as resistance to exclusionary values of this kind of civilisation. On the other hand, Paul’s addendum—that one should rather leave violence to God, “never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God” (Rom. 12:19)—subverts simplistic notions of divine retribution in Christian understanding.

Crossan’s analysis can be situated within a secularised society searching for a foundation of commonality. Here we may turn to Alexandre Kojève. Kojève is immersed in the secularization trajectory of modern European culture and is best known for his lectures on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.⁴⁴ In his introduction to Kojève’s text, François

⁴³ Ibid., 206.

⁴⁴ Alexandre Kojève. *Introduction to the reading of Hegel. Lectures on The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. J. Nichols (London: Cornell University Press, 1947/1980).

Terré remarks: “In a world driven by an anguished quest for its bearings, Kojève’s reflection marks a renewed return to reason.”⁴⁵

The bearings have been lost, as Hannah Arendt argues,⁴⁶ because the foundational blocks of European society—tradition, religion, and authority—have eroded. With the disappearance of tradition and the loss of religion, authority easily slips into authoritarianism.

Very briefly, Kojève categorizes authority into four types: the authority of the father, the master, the leader, and the judge.⁴⁷ In each case, there must be something “natural” about authority if it is to be accepted as legitimate. The father generates the subject. The master risks his life in the struggle for recognition (drawing on Hegel’s master–slave dialectic), particularly where mutual trust is absent. The leader projects the future. The judge has authority by virtue of the call of justice.

We must recall the basic idea of authority as residing in authentic co-operation among members animated by developed capacities for intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility. Kojève is speaking of persons representing the authoritativeness of the community. To the extent that his categories fail to capture the dynamism or dialectic inherent in authority, they will mirror the “normalcy of civilisation” described by Crossan.

Kojève’s categories correspond to the disvalues of the “normalcy of civilisation.” To patriarchy corresponds the authority of the father, now reframed by understanding God as transcendent creator. The father is wrongly taken as the absolute origin of the child. It is the incommensurability of God as Creator and world that undercuts identification of any natural cause with authority—patriarchy included. To slavery corresponds the authority of the master, now inverted by Paul. In the struggle for recognition, the endless master–slave dialectic is overturned by trust in the one who wins through defeat. To hierarchy corresponds the authority of the leader, now seen as first among equals, embodying shared aspirations—overcoming the idea of a “natural” hierarchy of Jew over pagan. It presupposes a community of colleagues sharing common beliefs and values. To victory corresponds the authority of the just judge, where “just” indicates authority not imposed through violence or its threat.

⁴⁵ Terre, F. Introduction to the French edition. In Kojève, *The notion of authority*, ix–xxxiv, at xxxiv.

⁴⁶ Cited in Terre, *ibid.*, xix.

⁴⁷ Kojève, *The notion of authority*, 14–30.

All this points toward authentic authority rather than power masked with legitimacy. This is what we seek in religious authority.

In each case, there is both an authentic and a degraded version. For Kojève, the authority of the father is unpacked in Christian thought in terms of God “causing” the being of the subject. The authority of the master is undercut by Christian resistance through non-violence; a new kind of mastery emerges. The authority of the leader includes rather than excludes—affirming that every person has the capacity for transcendence and flourishing as the image of the transcendent God.

Recognising the ambivalence within Scripture toward legitimate power makes us aware that the religious tradition nudges us toward secularity in the sense explained above. If the text portrays authority as tied to violence or threats of violence, representatives of the faithful community must push back. This is already happening. A simple example—not mentioned by Crossan—is Psalm 137. It begins, “By the rivers of Babylon / there we sat down and wept,” but what is usually omitted is the final verse: “A blessing on him who takes and dashes / your babies against the rock!”

The framework of interiority affirms history as the proper matrix for understanding faith, proceeding from within, from our experience as historical beings. Historical research is not merely academic; it reflects how we now inhabit the world. Whereas compact consciousness did not sharply distinguish between historical fact and metaphor, we do.

Thus, while agreeing with Crossan’s main thesis, one might suggest greater convergence among seemingly contradictory texts. Consider the differing images of a nonviolent Jesus entering Jerusalem on a mule and of “Christ the conqueror” (cf. Rev. 6:2) on the white horse of the Apocalypse. In light of varying “differentiations of consciousness,” we can see how, within compact consciousness, expressing the decisiveness of Jesus’ message required symbolic forms available at the time. Crossan notes that we are “dealing here with metaphors and symbols, of course,” but appreciating the vastly different expressive tools available to our culture compared with those available to the biblical authors is instructive. The readers of the text then were not to take it literally in our sense, because the literal–metaphorical distinction was undeveloped.

Reading the text in its context—rather than simply as a message from above—opens insight into an authentic religious vision appropriate to our time. We can recognize how the gospel counters the “normalcy of

civilisation”—Roman then, global now, with its structures of injustice. The vision is of building commonality that resists violence and retribution, especially where such approaches appear in the authorized canon. It is important to acknowledge that our secular culture has brought this aspect of religious faith to the fore.