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THE VERTIGO OF SECULARIZATION¹: THE INNOVATIVE NOTION OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY

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Globalization has challenged us to find new political definitions that can help us cope with the complexities and paradoxes of this new era. In the following paper, I wish to address some of these issues by focusing on the interrelationship between religion and politics and the renewed interest in defining political authority. I would like to show that our historical concepts of authority and their relationship to religion and politics were not simple processes of secularization. The loss of one world –the fully religious one– does not lead directly to the creation of another. There is, in between, a difficult task of historical understanding, of coping with the moral and political dilemmas, of rethinking the past, and of envisioning the need for new conceptual tools.

If we need to thematize secularization and the relationship between religion and politics, we must be aware of what Hans Blumenberg said, when referring to “the characterization of a relation [between religion and politics] as the historical dependence of an «alienated» formation on an «original» one is not enough to make it a case for the meaningful application of the term «secularization»” (Blumenberg, 1991, p. 10). Thus, in order to question our traditional views of secularization, I wish to focus on the secularization of politics, in terms of political authority, conceived of as processes of translation, of innovation, and of invention. The term “secularization” here should not be taken only as describing specific losses, but, rather, as a metaphor that best captures the very complex processes by which we humans cope with our “wordly” fear.

Again, as Blumenberg claims, “the patterns and schemas of the salvation story were to prove to be ciphers and projections of intrawordly problems, like a foreign language in which is expressed the absolutism of the world of man, of society, so that all unworldliness would be a metaphor that had to be retranslated into literal speech. The problem in such a case, quite logically, is not secularization but the detour that made it necessary in the first place” (Blumenberg, 1991, p. 6).

¹ The first part of the essay “The Vertigo of Secularization” deals with Western contemporary examples of such fears. It has been published by the journal *Hypatia* (Lara, 2003). Both parts of the article can be read as independent, for they deal with different things. I wish to thank for their intelligent commentaries and suggestions: Martin Saar, Ina Kerner, Massimo Rossati, Nora Rabotnikoff, and Nancy Fraser.

Second, with the introduction of the concept of “the vertigo of secularization”, I wish to describe the fearful reactions that we as humans –and cultures– undergo when confronted by “the loss of a certainty of a world to come”, to use Hannah Arendt’s phrase, while facing our need to articulate a political conception of authority. Our reactions stemming from fear emerge when cultures and societies are forced to relate to each other and to design their own political rules. We have become global subjects and our condition is to learn about other persons’ beliefs and to compare our ways of life. These forms of communication produce a second level of reflexivity towards our beliefs and other people’s beliefs. This second level of reflexivity is what MacIntyre calls the “second first language” because reflexivity is involved in learning a second language as if it was our first (MacIntyre, 1998, p. 374). When learning about others, our reactions of insecurity and fear are captured by the image of a person climbing a mountain through a narrow path. When the person looks at her surroundings, she faces the void and her reaction is a fear of falling. This process is called “vertigo”. The use of this metaphor, illustrates that the vertigo of secularization describes how the processes of reflexivity introduced by modernity’s autonomous processes of founding political authority have forced us to confront the challenge of our beliefs and others’ beliefs as co-existing, and as parts of a wider political culture that we still need to construct. With modernity, we have given ourselves notions that would allow us to live with others, to respect others, and to tolerate other peoples’ beliefs. We have been forced to do so by assuming that humans must set the norms of political life as an important sphere of social construction. This awareness can make us fearful. To dispel the vertigos that we might suffer, we have to create paths towards institutions that allow us to continue climbing our way up to the hill. It is this process of the creation of social institutions, in order to learn to live together, that I wish to focus as the political process of building up a human conception of authority. Thus, either we face the challenge not to fall into the void of fear, which is when violence happens, or we learn what we need to develop in terms of rules if we wish to learn to live with others.

In what follows, I would like to develop the idea that religions have played an important role in founding the political idea of authority. Religions can be seen as traditions. Nowadays, it is impossible for them to survive as closed traditions. All traditions have been subject to some kind of translations. The most interesting issue here, however, is that, religions have contributed to the idea of political authority but, contrary to what Carl Schmitt claims, not all political concepts were simply derived from theological translations (Schmitt, 1994). Some religious translations become true innovations. Thus, we must differentiate between these kind of translations by the same semantic meaning (as those to which Carl Schmitt refers), and those translations by linguistic and conceptual innovation which give place to an authentic political innovation. I also wish to argue that it is because of those innovative translations, which become socially successful, that we can justify the autonomy of the political dimension of a modern concept of authority.

When societies are capable of understanding the need to create their own rules, those vertigos of secularization can be exorcised. The difficult task of creating a new political world based on its own kind of authority requires a special type of creative process. It is a dialectic in which the disappearance of a lost world

can only be recovered through innovation. These processes were not only an exchange of worlds, but rather, as Blumenberg says, they were historical processes immersed in a dialectic of “radical discontinuity of belonging” (Blumenberg, 1991, p. 10). They offered us a knowledge of the “paradox” that we can grasp in the modern age’s basic characteristic of “worldliness” only under conditions that “precisely on account of this quality, [such a dimension] must be inaccessible to us” (Blumenberg, 1991, p. 10). It is for this reason that this interrelationship between religion and authority demands our attention, if only because we need to understand why some efforts of translation were more successful than others. Furthermore, some historical translations became important innovations. When the processes of translation were successful, they made a qualitative leap because they provided with a new political meaning, a modern concept of authority, by disclosing an important unseen dimension of the political world.

Weber described these processes of disenchantment as theoretical devices for understanding how the *locus* of sacredness was removed from its roots and put, in some way, into a different realm –that of the conscious tendency to rationalize our beliefs. With the growing distancing “effect” of our rational attitude toward religion between humans and the sacred, comes the necessity “of sustaining the ties between them in a much more deliberate and critical manner” (Geertz, 1973, p. 174). Thus, our need to find the autonomy for the concept of authority. Religious rationalization is, thus, not an all-or-none process. It is not necessarily irreversible or inevitable, but, as Clifford Geertz has argued, “it is a real one” (1973, p. 175). We must, therefore, look at the processes of secularization in the context of a complex cultural understanding of traditions. If we are to believe that societies already possess some sort of rationalized ways of coping with religion, then we must try to understand that these processes have already provoked what Geertz has described as the “shaking of the foundations of [a] social order” (1973, p. 173). Thus, secularization should not be seen as a Western panacea, but rather as a complex concept that best captures the metaphors of how societies seek to better situate themselves when faced with the growing complexity of plural societies and of their ways of rationalizing their beliefs². According to Weber, secularization was understood as the way in which societies accommodated their different realms of action by creating specific spaces for the political, the legal, and the private spheres³.

Redefining the Relations between Authority and Secularization

All great political thinkers have been conscious of the importance between religion and politics. If we look back at the history of philosophy, we find that not only the Greeks and Romans –whose traditions held that this relationship was one of the

² “John L. Esposito, a scholar of religion at Georgetown University and author of a new book on Islam, notes that Christianity and Judaism evolved gradually, and sometimes bloodily, over many centuries, while in Islam the pressure is accelerated” (Kristof, 2002).

³ See: Weber, 1958, and also Weber, 1964.

most important problems concerning the identity of their communities— dealt openly with these issues. Machiavelli, for example, was the first modern philosopher who understood the vital connection between religion and politics. He clearly visualized that the founding of a new religion was a task “due to men” and not “due to heaven”. In other words, “it is the subject to a kind of a first-order politics” (Beiner, 1993, p. 623). It is for this reason that Hannah Arendt thought Machiavelli best understood the importance of foundations for a political order when he argued that if “Moses was the founder of the Hebrew civilization; and Cyrus was the founder of the Persian civilization; Romulus was the founder of the Roman civilization; and Theseus the was the founder of the Greek civilization”, then “one would need to found a new religion” (Beiner, 1993, p. 623). For Machiavelli, the reinterpretation of Christianity by recovering the lost heritage of the Romans was the only possible path toward political creation. Translation in this religious sense entailed a new interpretation more consonant with the cultural demands of a neo-pagan politics. Thus, he thought that “Christianity had to be paganized” (Beiner, 1993, p. 625).

Hobbes belongs to the same civil/religious tradition. He began by focusing on how to use religion to promote the idea of political authority and, like Machiavelli, he understood that in order to do so he needed to de-Christianize Christianity. Instead of going back to paganism, as Machiavelli did, he decided to go back further and delve deep into the Judaic tradition for important insights. He drew a criticism of theocracy through a reading of the Old Testament. His conclusion was that only a monarchy could confront possible anarchy deduced by the idea of Hebrew prophets all claiming for some kind of authority. Hobbes thought that the rule of priests generated anarchy and only kings could stabilize the political order. Hobbes’s task was to save religion from interfering with the requirements of the political order.

We recall Rousseau’s efforts to say something meaningful about civil religion in *The Social Contract*. He captured, however, the particularistic tensions that all religions possess. Rousseau was caught between the particularistic goals of a closed community and those of the cosmopolitan brotherhood, which he so wished to highlight the political community he envisioned.

These classical philosophers were the founders of a new tradition that we now call “Civil Religion”. They wanted to configure a political theory in which this interconnection between religion and politics was described as the essential source for new meanings assigned to authority, legitimacy, and tradition. They wanted to find crucial translations of religious concepts which would allow them to prolong the relationship between humanity and the sacred. Their efforts to translate religious authority into the idea of political authority was a means to recover the dimension of “fear” attached to the idea of obedience. Thus, instead of coping with their historical vertigos of secularization, they succumbed to them. I say that they succumbed to their vertigos because they were trapped by their own paradoxical exits. In order to avoid violence, they were compelled to draw on violence. The paradox lay in their “attempt to become like God”. Both Machiavelli and Hobbes wanted to transcend violence by “gathering all violence into a leader so fearsome that order can be secured” (McGowan, 1997, p. 276). It is for this reason that Hannah Arendt explained this failure as a new kind of paradox, for they wanted “a

new absolute to replace the absolute of divine power [which] is insoluble because power under the condition of human plurality can never amount to omnipotence, and laws residing on human can never be absolute” (Arendt, 1965, p. 39).

Drawing a Concept of Authority from a Purely Secular Source

We find a different perspective in Weber’s account of the problem between religion and secularization. The primary source of Weber’s sociological analysis of authority can be found in his definition of the role of legitimacy in political action. Indeed, the concept of “legitimacy” is a central one in his work *Economy and Society*. Here Weber defines “legitimacy” as the belief in legality, which draws its source from the legal-rational process of enacted law⁴. Though he states that legitimacy is based on a “belief”, he does not fully develop how it is that in modern society law is dissociated from internal motivation. Instead, he reduces his explanation to a definition of legitimacy to a technical set of rules as means for ordering the calculation of groups’ interest⁵. This problem has attracted the attention of scholars specializing in Weber’s work on several fronts⁶. One important criticism focuses on Weber’s idea of legitimacy as being a decisionistic feature⁷ of his sociological analysis, for he gives no normative account connected to the internal motivations for deciding why rational rules are better ways of coping with the idea of legitimate authority⁸. This argument has been developed by Jürgen Habermas in his work *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus* (1973). Habermas’s main argument is that Weber was incapable of giving significance to the ideas of public debate and deliberation -features that are important components of democratic legitimation. Thus, Habermas’s main contribution to the critical debate lies in his claim that legitimacy is not sufficient grounds to validate any authority. Rather, we need a second level of validity: namely, that of a public process of how and why we choose certain rules over others, a process that Habermas calls “legitimation” (1973).

⁴ Weber defines that “the modern position of political associations rests on the prestige bestowed upon them by the belief, held by their members, in a specific consecration: the «legitimacy» of that social action which is ordered and regulated by them. This prestige is particularly powerful where, and in so far as, social action comprises physical coercion, including the power to dispose over life and death. It is on this prestige that the consensus on the specific legitimacy of action is founded” (Weber, 1978, pp. 903-904).

⁵ Peter Lassman argues that “the concept of «legitimacy» refers to the acceptance of the validity of the order of rules”. This definition, however, “is not concerned with the normative question of whether or not that body of rules ought to be considered legitimate, that is to say the question of the beliefs which justify acceptance” (Lassman, 2000, p. 87).

⁶ See: Beetham, 1991; Grafstein, 1981; Schaar, 1984; and Pitkin, 1972.

⁷ Lassman argues that “legitimacy, for him, was to be regarded as a precarious political achievement [...] Legitimacy is, in effect, defined in terms of legality” (Lassman, 2000, p. 88).

⁸ Habermas argues that Weber reduces the belief on legitimacy to a belief on legality. This cannot, in the long run, produce legitimation because a further condition needs to be met, namely, one must give reasons for the legitimacy of the rules accepted or created. This would be the source of authority for the moderns, according to Habermas. See Habermas, 1973.

Weber's view of authority resembles Hobbes's theory of politics. Yet instead of offering a connection to the religious dimension, which was central to Hobbes's idea of founding political authority, Weber ends up emptying the normative content of the structure of political authority⁹. This is why he ends up bringing a secular version of a Hobbesian view of the struggle for power.

Perhaps the best way to describe Weber's idea of political authority is to say that through the tensions that appear to be central in his thought, one is capable of understanding some of the main tensions that lie at the heart of defining political authority in the modern world. For example, Weber envisioned the modern structure of politics as an autonomous sphere. He also clarified this autonomous feature of modernity by distinguishing between social relationships and associations which, for him, are based on similarities of interest and ideals, such as those exemplified in a religious sect, and those relationships that are concerned with ruling and being ruled. Nevertheless, tensions arise when we understand that he believed political conflicts and problems will always be immersed in questions that concern ultimate values. He could only conclude that those conflicts of value are the consequences of disenchantment. Thus, Weber concluded that "the rule of man over man" (*Herrschaft*) was an inescapable condition of a historical rupture. He also believed that it was for this reason that the conflict over values makes our modern world a disenchanted one.

The Innovative Vision of Authority

If we leave behind Weber's sociological diagnosis of our modern "polytheism"¹⁰ and turn now to the tradition of what I call "political innovation", we must first focus on Hannah Arendt's work. She was conscious of the challenges posed by the vertigos of secularization. In her essay entitled "Authority" (1968), Arendt was able to grasp the complexities that surround our human efforts to dispel such vertigos. Her reconstruction of modernity showed the modern incapacity to draw a concept of "authority" (Arendt, 1968). We inherited one –originally taken from the Romans and later transformed by the Christians– losing in this very same process what made the connection between religion and politics an important dialectical liaison of innovation and transformation.

The Romans thought of authority as a "new beginning". The word "authority", Arendt reminds us, first appeared because it was derived from the word "*augere*", which means, "to augment". For the Romans "what authority constantly augment[s] is the foundation" (Arendt, 1968, p. 121). Arendt, however, claimed that "authority" also meant allowing someone to become an "author". The innovator of a translation was the conceptual figure to whom Arendt referred. She saw an author as

⁹ Lassman argues that Weber thought of "modern mass democracies" as "plebiscitarian democracies in which parties are involved in a continuous parliamentary struggle for power. Legitimacy resides simply in the ability of a charismatic party leader to maintain the support of his followers and of the masses. There is no attempt by Weber to appeal to any other standard of legitimacy" and, "this concentration on relations of rule and the struggle for power as the central reality of politics reveals a tension in Weber's account" (Lassman, 2000, p. 95).

¹⁰ By this expression he means the conflict over ultimate values as our legacy from religion.

becoming a key figure in triggering the new process of laying foundations. With this view, she already pointed out the artificiality of the creation of the sphere of politics. She believes that the most important feature of the political is the conscious effort of social construction -an effort that should allow us to build the political as something created, something that does not belong to the realm of needs, but, rather, to the realm of the public life, to freedom and action. To become the author of a body politic is also to become a creative builder of a political community. Since for the Romans the past played the most important role in laying foundations, they took from their past all favorable examples to envision their new political goals.

When the Christian Church became Romanized, it “adapted itself so thoroughly to Roman thinking in matters of politics that it made the death and resurrection of Christ as the cornerstone of a new foundation, erecting on it a new human institution of tremendous durability” (Arendt, 1968, p. 125). With this move, the translation of meanings allowed the Church to change the Christian faith into a religion. The Christians recorded the example of Christ and his followers as leading to the cycles of life with the stages of birth, death, and resurrection. It was then that the meaning of the Christian faith became a true religion, “not only in the post-Christian sense but in the ancient sense as well”, and with that, the whole world could “become Christian” (p. 126). What Arendt’s interpretation shows us is the importance of a new beginning tied to one faith, for “those who had laid, as it were, a curse on the whole realm of worldly public affairs and sworn to live in hiding - discovered in their own faith something which could be understood as a worldly event as well and could be transformed into a new mundane beginning to which the world was bound back once more (*religare*) in a curious mixture of new and religious awe” (p. 126).

What is most interesting is that Arendt realized “that the political had now, for the first time since the Romans, lost its authority and with it that element which, at least in Western history, had endowed political structures with durability, continuity, and permanence” (p. 127). This happened through the fusion of the Roman legacy with that of Plato’s political philosophy, which amalgamated itself with the Roman political concept of authority, and with the Greek notion of transcendental standards. This view reunited the particular and immanent causes as subsumed into a political order. The moral rules for all interhuman behaviour, and the rational measurements for the guidance of all individual judgment became one and the same (p. 128). This very process, Arendt argues, led the West to provide us with a failed concept of authority.

Plato’s philosophy, argues Arendt, offered the world of politics an undifferentiated conceptual set of references, which blurred the distinctions between ideas of the beautiful and the good, about immortality and the afterlife, and about hell and bodily punishments. Moreover, Arendt argues, this was a process in which religion was not translated into politics, rather politics into religion. Plato used his myths as political targets. “One of the clearest indications for the political character of these myths”, clarifies Arendt, is that “they imply bodily punishment, [and] stand in flagrant contradiction to his doctrine of the mortality of the body, and of this contradiction Plato himself was by no means unaware” (p.

130). Plato was the first philosopher to use religious devices as political threats. He coined the word "theology" and understood it not as the teaching and interpretation of God's words, but rather as "part and parcel of a «political science»", a subject he believed might be the leading guide for "the few" who need to rule "the many" (p. 131). Arendt argued that since Plato's political theory played a part in his philosophical thought, he regarded philosophical truth in politics as something that could not be demonstrated. Thus, he thought belief was necessary. Plato also believed that truth could not be the object of persuasion, but that he needed persuasion in order to reach the multitude. It was then that he provided the idea that only stories could become the appropriate vehicles to teach humans about rewards and punishments after death. By "persuading the citizens of the existence of hell", quotes Arendt, we can make them "behave as though they knew the truth" (p. 132).

When the Christian Church became interested in political power, the complexities of Plato's philosophy were reintroduced in a newer version. The Platonic idea of hell, which had strengthened religious authority in the past, remained victorious against secular power. Thus the legacy of the Roman notion of authority was forever lost. This loss allowed an even more perplexing thing to happen, since the only legacy that could be recovered was "an element of violence [which] was permitted to insinuate itself into both the very structure of Western religious thought and the hierarchy of the Church" (p. 133). Thus, Arendt's reconstruction shows us the problems associated with a historical vertigo of secularization, which Modernity left unsolved. The conclusion of Arendt's story describes the defeat of the Roman legacy and the preservation of the violent element that witnessed the crumbling relationship between religion, authority, and tradition. With Marx, religion was finally declared to be "the opium of the people", and from then on only ideologies could replace religious views. Arendt's conclusion is that the vertigos of secularization produce the most horrendous reactions of violence, precisely because we have lost our fear of hell. Consequently, religion loses its political element, "just as public life was bound to lose the religious sanction of transcendent authority" (p. 135).

Arendt became the real innovator when she searched for a way to establish the concept of authority based on a positive view of power and accepted the conditions of plurality. She replaced the act of founding that she so praised from the Romans with a new act of linguistic founding. Political foundation became a performative dialogue. The strength of her arguments is based on the way she transforms the idea of authority. Instead of conceiving it as a relationship of command-obedience, she saw it as the power of action and consent. Thus, she refused to identify power with rule and law with command (p. 40). Authority is the positive view of power, which "corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert" (p. 44). Instead of allowing the ruler to become the "authority", Arendt gives the authority to "a group" –that is, authority becomes intersubjective. It "remains in existence only as long as they remain together" (p. 44). Power is inextricably linked to action and it is a product of the activities associated with creating a public world. Leaving behind the dilemmas of the modern tradition, Arendt separates power and violence because power can be described as the counterweight to violence (p. 51). The

foundation of a political community is enacted by power as its “very condition”. By “enabling the group of people to think and act in terms of the means-end category” (p. 51), Arendt gives us the first decentered idea of authority and power. Both freedom and rights become political creations; both are products of power. Instead of visualizing rights as negative rights, the way liberals do, Arendt thinks of them as ways in which power reflects on actions and as an important, concrete tools for resisting violence.

Perhaps what makes Arendt a great political innovator is that she never loses the sight of the dangers of the political life. Furthermore, because of her efforts at dispelling the vertigos of secularization, she knew that contingencies could not be avoided in the political order. She knew that we cannot lose sight of possible outbursts of violence. The only way to avoid tyrannies, violence, or totalitarian regimes is not to lose the sense that we are related to others and a consented embodiment of a plurality, with many political and institutional settings especially created for it. It is here that the performative side of her idea of authority originates. She redefines the old idea of a social contract in a dynamic way: she sees the “founding” as a “presumption of equality among all members of the polity”, who, as members of the community, can endorse the linguistic act as it “establishes their founding” (McGowan, 1997, p. 283).

As her work clearly demonstrates, Arendt provided the autonomy of the political with her innovative concepts. The question, then, is: Has Arendt neglected religious motives? Has she neglected traditional concepts and values that draw from religious sources? The answer is no, she hasn't. Yet she has used them creatively to find with those translations a way toward real innovations. Take the religious concept of the covenant, for example, as many social contract theorists did in the past. When she presented the idea of a social contract, she managed to replace the idea of obedience to the ruler that stemmed out of an idea of God and fear and, instead, she used the ideas of promises and forgiveness (which, by the way, are also taken from the Christian tradition). As McGowan has rightly observed, “her contract is motivated not by the desire to attain security but by an attempt to enable action” (1997, p. 283).

Arendt knew that action and freedom are the political conditions of the new era, and her idea of a social contract is not meant to be used as a protection against chaos or anarchy, but rather as ways in which public spaces become the institutions of freedom and action. She redefined the already created ideal of the social contract as a political device only when she described it as the expression of what she called the “mutual promises” (Arendt, 1958, p. 244). “The sovereignty”, argues Arendt, “lies in the inherent faculty of making and keeping promises” (p. 245).

Another of Arendt's innovations comes from an interpretation of religion as she used it with her idea of forgiveness to highlight our human frailty. We humans are not gods. We make mistakes. We sometimes fail to keep our promises. We must look at others as ourselves. We must learn to forgive. This is the most human of all reactions.

The two faculties belong together in so far as one of them, forgiving, serves to undo the deeds of the past, whose “sins” hang like Damocles’ sword over every new generation; and the other, binding oneself through promises, serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men. (Arendt, 1958, p. 236)

Thus, humans who value this nonviolent, political space can have the power to keep it open “through their continuing acts of promising and forgiving” (McGowan, 1997, p. 285). She takes the idea of forgiveness from the Christian figure of Jesus. What makes her use of such a figure a complete innovation is that she sees him as teaching forgiveness because it is the most human of all our actions, “only through this constant mutual release from what they can do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new” (Arendt, 1958, p. 240). Thus, our capacity to forgive ensures our freedom and our ability to stimulate new actions.

As we have seen, Arendt draws from a variety of religious traditions. Sometimes she is inspired by the Jewish tradition. She seeks the power of storytelling as the great tales of the Bible helped the diasporic people not to perish and to remain together. At other times, it is the Christian faith, with the examples of Jesus, which enlighten us in our task of confronting our modern world. Christianity is read in the tonality of our human fragility. At other times, she recovers from the Roman ideals the figures of gods intermixing with humans: Janus, “the god of beginning”, and Minerva, “the goddess of remembrance”. The two figures become the symbols of the most precious features of her work. Weaving a tapestry from all these traditions, Arendt is capable of finding ways to connect them all to our political reality. By providing a new dimension of our political life, she creates those same spaces that she describes. Thus, she makes the political world disclose the new meanings needed for our lives. She transforms all our traditional understandings of religions. This is what is implied in my concept of her translations as innovation. She rooted the idea of authority as the most creative recovery from the best contents of all religious views.

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