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Partial Faith and the Postsecular

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A few years back, as part of my interest in what does or doesn't constitute new writing I became interested in the notion of the postsecular, prompted in large part by John A McClure's, *Partial Faiths, Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (2007). McClure argues for the recent emergence of stories about 'new forms of religiously inflected seeing and being' and he distinguishes the postsecular from the postmodern as being characterised by an openness to the transcendent in newly imagined forms that are provisional and imbued with mystery, a sense of the world as an 'inexorable excess of being over structures of interpretation and identity'. A postsecular narrative is characterised by 'unstable hybridity and ontological abundance' along with 'the interpenetration of multi-realisms'. Sound busy? It is, as any reader of Pynchon will attest.

As a writer this interested me. In 2006 I had published a *Quarterly Essay*, *Voting for Jesus*, which surveyed the increasing political influence of evangelical Christianity in Australia but the claim for a new postsecular age - that a predominantly secular era is over and we in the West are experiencing a revival of religious thought and practice in new and proliferating forms - was a broader and more interesting phenomenon.

McClure's work drew me to some of the theoretical underpinnings of his argument and I began by reading Jurgen Habermas, noted atheist whose anxieties—some would say, moral panic—are encapsulated in his late work, *An Awareness of What is Missing, Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (2010). Here Habermas argues for a European rapprochement with Christianity as a matter of political urgency. Secular modernity's promise of Progress has failed to materialize and postmodernism's hermeneutic of suspicion has worked to weaken the former liberal consensus by fostering an enervating moral relativism. Lacking a strong foundational myth, democracy is in need of a new cultural poetics and since Judaeo-Christian principles formed the ethical basis of democracy, they now needed to be fortified in the face of challenges from both Christian and Islamic fundamentalism. In a narrative that I came to think of as the-coffin-without-a-home, Habermas gives a rueful account of his good friend, the Swiss writer Max Frisch and how Frisch had asked for his funeral service

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to be conducted in a liberal Lutheran church because for an atheist there was nowhere else (an Australian would have employed a civil celebrant). This troubled Habermas. What have we lost in terms of meaningful communal ritual? How politically vulnerable are we because of secularism's impoverished psychology and how can we re-engage with religion as a source of poetic enrichment of the individual's 'lifeworld'? The plangent tone of this *cri de coeur* is touching even if its project is ultimately deflated by cold water contributions from four Jesuit theologians whose responses in *Missing* can best be summarised as: nice try, but religion cannot be used instrumentally in this way. It doesn't work like that.

From Habermas then to Richard Rorty, that romantic pragmatist who, like Habermas, wants to shore up the lifeworld against the depredations of neo-liberalism and unfettered scientism by finding some means of linguistically 'translating' the archaic and cultic power of religion into the secular sphere. Rorty's self-confessed 'fuzzy humanism' wants to decommission the faith, hope and charity of Christian teaching from scripture and develop these into a civic religion of solidarity. Among the most exasperating of theorists, for all the worthiness of his espousal of open-mindedness, of contingency and irony within a 'religion of democracy', Rorty's ultimate remedy for feelings of alienation is that old chestnut, Art: Shakespeare and Joyce, Proust and the Bible as 'wisdom literature'. A privatised encounter with the aesthetic will lead to more empathy, along with 'the substitution of poetry for religion as a source of useful ideals'. Seriously? What if one is bored by Proust or irritated by the minute dissection of affect in Henry James? Does this make one a moral cretin? And, like Habermas, Rorty makes no allowance for the unconscious. It's as if Freud never existed. Kristeva has argued for psychoanalysis as a surrogate theology, an attempt to redeem subjectivity from its 'amputated state' in the rationalised modern world and, outside the so-called New Age movement, there would appear to have been no advance on that.

Enter Rorty's sometime collaborator, Gianni Vattimo, a man who describes himself as a postmodern Marxist Catholic. I read Vattimo is as a kind of spiritual jester. Famous for enunciating the category of 'weak thought' (open, provisional), Vattimo is an optimist. Unlike Habermas, Vattimo argues for the postmodern as the very precondition of a revitalising pluralism. So far, so plausible but beyond this he sets out to reinvent Catholicism in his own playful image as Christianity without metaphysics (perhaps only an Italian would be so bold). There are no absolute truths, only interpretations. This is 'weak thought' that liberates us from 'enclosures of consciousness'. The irony is that it enables a return of the religious since atheism is just another form of foundationalist thinking. 'Deconstruction cannot subvert God unless it subverts itself'. God is not dead, he just has to be reinvented, largely by narrative fiat, in Vattimo's case a refashioning of the myth of the Incarnation; God exists but has handed his power to man. Herein lies the major difference between the postmodern caste of thought and the postsecular. Take religion and make of it what you will, just be sure to avoid authoritarian structures of power. The sophistry of this—not to mention its Eurocentrism—is breathtaking. Moreover, it has become increasingly clear from recent populist movements that the concomitant of weak thought is often weak narrative and weak narrative is no match for stronger, more fascistic versions.

William Connolly and Jane Bennett are in their way more ambitious. Art be damned, it's the new science of complexity that offers a better model. Like Habermas, Connolly and Bennett are pre-eminently political theorists concerned with the stability and resilience of liberal democratic cultures. Their response is to model a secular mysticism rooted in a new vitalist myth of Nature, the world as enchanted or sacramental animate materiality. Nature 'possesses a vitality that exceeds available modes of explanation'. Cultural theory, Connolly

argues has failed to keep up with recent developments in complexity theory in the sciences and he draws on these, along with the Deleuzian concept of rhizomatic structures to model a Leftist ontology that he calls 'immanent naturalism, 'the world in a constant state of creatively becoming'. In this quantum physics model of social theory the universe is endlessly creative but has no Creator. Religion is *naturalised into being* as such and the world is a theophany of 'cosmological energetics'. And how does this play out in the political arena? By fostering a sensibility (Connolly and Bennett like the term, 'visceral register') based on a love of the world for its own sake and an affect of profound gratitude that leads to a politics not of resentment but of a 'presumptive generosity' of spirit and a corresponding politics of inclusion. There's only one problem with all of this; it has no adequate model of individual psychology and its aim to fill secularism's 'black hole' of a meaningless universe with substitute epiphanies would appear to be no great advance on pantheism.

Postsecular theory, then? Mostly it adds up to strenuous and appealing efforts to develop John D. Caputo's 'religion without religion', dismissed by sociologists like Bryan S. Turner and Graham Ward as a 'philosopher's religion' that over-focusses on belief to the exclusion of lived practice in everyday life. It is as if, In Fredric Jameson's terms, global capitalism's colonisation of every area of lived experience can only be escaped 'through wilful vagueness and indeterminacy'.