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THE INTERTWINING OF BINDING AND UNBINDING
IN THE RELIGIONS OF THE BOOK

The religions of the book, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, all accept the Mosaic Pentateuch. They thus share the belief, expressed in Genesis, in a God who fashioned the world. From this belief they draw two very different lessons. The first is a universal claim drawn from the conception of a unique creator of the universe. They assert that the laws that express his creative will are all-encompassing. Philosophically, this translates into a sense that things are “true” to the point that they conform to God’s creative conception of them. As Heidegger observes, when we understand being as created being, then the notion of truth as correspondence is based on a prior conception of truth. Truth as the adequation of the human intellect to the thing is based upon both being adequate expressions of God’s creative intentions.¹ To the point that both minds and things accord with this, they are “true.” “Truth,” here, is equivalent to “being” since things have being to the point that they accord with the idea God has for them.² If we accept this, then we can also say that there is a right measure for them, a measure of their being true examples of their kind. What underlies this measure is God’s wisdom, that is, his reasons for creating us and our world. God’s laws, as expressed in the sacred scriptures, lay out the right measures for the ways things ought to be. What violates these laws is “unnatural.” It goes against God’s creative intentions in fashioning nature. The universal claim that is drawn from the conception of creation is, thus, that of universally binding laws, laws whose coherence can be traced back to their having a single source.

The second lesson drawn from the story of creation is the opposite of this. If, in fact, God created the world out of nothing then his creative action cannot be bound by the world. As occurring prior

¹ In Heidegger’s words: “Die Möglichkeit der Wahrheit menschlicher Erkenntnis gründet, wenn alles Seiende ein ‘geschöpfliches’ ist, darin, daß Sache und Satz in gleicher Weise ideegerecht und deshalb aus der Einheit des göttlichen Schöpfungsplanes aufeinander zugerichtet sind. Die veritas als adaequatio rei (creandae) ad intellectum (divinum) gibt die Gewähr für die veritas als adaequatio intellectus (humani) ad rem (creatam). Veritas meint im Wesen überall die convenientia, das Übereinkommen des Seienden unter sich als eines geschaffenen mit dem Schöpfer, ein »Stimmen« nach der Bestimmung der Schöpfungsordnung” (“Vom Wesen der Wahrheit,” in *Wegmarken*, Frankfurt on the Main: Klostermann, 1967, 76-7).

² In Christianity, their present lack of truth and being is traced to the Fall. See Paul, Romans 5:14, 8:21-22. Augustine expands on this theme in Chapters 26-27 of his *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*.

to the world, it cannot, by definition, be determined by the world. Since it is prior, it is radically distinct from it. This means that we cannot impose on God's action the relations that we find in the world. Thus, in the world, nothing exists without a cause, which means that for every event that occurs, one will always find a prior event that brought it about. But there is nothing prior to God's causation. As the first cause, God cannot be in the before and after of time. Thus, God escapes our conception of causality, which presupposes this temporal before and after. The same argument can be made with regard to each of our attempts to interpret God's creative actions in terms of the relations we find in the world. The second lesson, then, is that there is a radical alterity in the heart of being. God's being and action is different than that of the world he creates.

This alterity undoes all our standards, all our worldly certainties. Regarding it, we face, in Patočka's words, the *Mysterium Tremendum*, the mystery before which we tremble.³ This trembling shakes us loose from our everyday world in a much more radical sense than that imposed by philosophy. According to Patočka, the questioning initiated by Socrates brings about "an upheaval aimed at the former meaning of [our] life as a whole." It confronts us with "the problematic nature, the *question* of the 'natural' meaning" we previously took for granted.⁴ The result is a shaking of our world-view. Socrates, for example, makes us ask why we have understood the world in this way rather than in some other way. Why have we arranged our lives, our politics, our societies in the ways we find them? His invitation is to ask, politically and culturally, whether the reasons we give can withstand examination. Despite its radicality, this inquiry remains on the level of the world. The perspectives it calls into question are those of the world. Socrates invites us to pass from one such perspective to another. By contrast, the shaking induced by the *Mysterium Tremendum* calls the *world itself* into question. It confronts us with a perspective that is radically non-worldly. The question, why is there a world rather than nothing, could not occur to the ancients with their belief in the eternity of the world. But for those who accept creation, it remains a permanent puzzle.

These two apparently contradictory lessons alter the ancient world's sense of religion. Its original sense can be seen in the etymological root of the word "religion," which has been traced to the Latin, *ligare*, "to bind," *religare* signifying "to bind fast." Religion in the Roman world bound people to the social practices and observances of their cults. With the belief in creation we have the universalization of this binding. God's law is seen to hold universally, without exception. Yet, we also have a universal unbinding, an emphasis on that which transcends all practices and laws. Thus, on the one hand, we have the insistence on justice, on the punishment of the offender, on the payment of the

³ J. Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, trans. E. Kohák (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), 108.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 141-2.

transgressor's debts to God and society. On the other, we have an equally insistent emphasis on mercy, on the forgiveness of all debts. How can these two perspectives be combined? How are we to grasp this binding that is also an unbinding? My claim will be that neither is intelligible without the other. Each, in fact, provides the place where the other can disclose itself. What has led the religions of the book to undermine their own teachings has been their failure to grasp the essential intertwining of the two.

I. Religion as Binding

The notion of religion as binding, when pushed to extreme, has a remarkable consequence. It understands God in terms of his wisdom or creative reason. Seeing these expressed in nature, it ends up conflating God and nature. Descartes, for example, in defending the proposition that "all that nature teaches me contains some truth," writes in the "Sixth Meditation": "For by nature, considered in general, I now understand nothing else but God himself, or else the order and system that God has established for created things."⁵ If we accept this, then reading the book of nature can be understood as reading the mind of God. For Spinoza, the identification of God and nature is even closer. He writes in his *Ethics*: "Individual things are nothing but modifications of the attributes of God, or modes by which the attributes of God are expressed in a fixed and definite manner."⁶ In fact, there is only one substance; and this is God. Everything else has its being from God. As a mode of an attribute, an individual thing cannot exist independently of that attribute; and the attribute cannot exist independently of the substance of which it is an attribute. Hence, the thing cannot be a substance, taken as an independent being.

The scientific parallel to this view speaks, not of nature as expressing the substance of God, but simply as a system of laws. A thing is defined in its being through such laws. Kant, here, is an interesting transition point. He writes: "By nature, in the empirical sense, we understand the connection of appearances as regards their existence according to necessary rules, that is, according to laws. There are certain laws which first make a nature possible, and these laws are *a priori*."⁷ The chief among these laws is that of causality: nothing happens without its being caused. Without this, Kant writes, "there would be nothing that could be entitled nature."⁸ In fact, without it we could not even speak of natural things. What places things in nature are their

⁵ Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. L. LaFleur (New York: Macmillan, 1990), 76.

⁶ Spinoza, "The Ethics, Prop. XXV, Corollary, in *Works of Spinoza*, trans. R.H.M. Elwes (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1951), Vol. II, 66. See also *ibid.*, Prop. XVII.

⁷ I. Kant. *Critique of Pure Reason*, B263, trans. N. Kempt Smith (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1963), 237.

⁸ *Ibid.*, B280, 245.

relations of mutual causation.⁹ Now, for Kant, the definition of things in terms of laws does not point back to God. It refers, rather, to our subjective understanding. Thus, Kant traces causality to "the rule of the understanding through which alone the existence of appearances can acquire synthetic unity as regards relations of time."¹⁰ This synthetic unity is that of ourselves as unitary experiencers. To violate the rule of understanding by which we place events in a definite temporal order, making one event prior to another is, Kant attempts to prove, to violate the temporal unity of experience and, hence, the unity of ourselves as coherent subjects. Here, subjective unity replaces the unity of God. Before Kant, the coherence of the laws of nature could be traced back to nature's having a single creator: for Kant, it is in ourselves, in our own unity as experiencers, that the source of this coherence must be found. The same holds for the *a priori* universality of such laws. Their universal, *a priori* status with regard to experience is found in the fact that they are necessary conditions for *our* having a coherent experience of the world.

Kant, as I noted, is a transition point. Scientists nowadays simply speak of nature as a system of laws. What violates these, what does not fit in with them, cannot exist. This, incidentally, includes our consciousness. The philosopher of science, Daniel Dennet, for example, has remarked: "we are all zombies. Nobody is conscious."¹¹ The point holds insofar as consciousness in its felt, qualitative aspects, cannot be causally explained. If consciousness does not fit in with the world, if it cannot fall under the universal laws definitive of nature, then it has neither being nor truth. Behind this claim is, ultimately, the view that being is one, that it does not admit of any alterity. In Levinas' words, what is at work here is "the ancient privilege of unity, which is affirmed from Parmenides to Spinoza and Hegel."¹² This privilege, in fact, can be seen in the first lesson that the religions of the book draw from creation. God's unity and omnipotence are seen as the source of the universal laws of nature. Such laws include those that deal with our nature and conduct. Thus, from the biblical books of Leviticus and Numbers to all the various forms of religious law like the Sharia of Islam and the canon law of the Catholic church, we see the same universal claims. The divinely sanctioned laws are asserted to guide conduct without exception. Again and again, we encounter the same intervention of religion in politics. We find the same uncompromising stance. The attempts of the Catholic bishops to prevent the funding of contraceptives in the United States are an example of this.

⁹ See Ibid., B258, 234. This means, Kant concludes: "Each substance, therefore, must contain [...] in itself the causality of certain determinations in the other" (ibid., B259, 235).

¹⁰ Ibid., B262, 237.

¹¹ D. Dennett *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), 406.

¹² E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 102.

II. Religion as Unbinding

This ancient privilege of unity is, however, undermined by the second lesson drawn from creation. The transcendence of the creator with regard to the created implies that he cannot be defined in its terms. There is, as we said, an alterity in the heart of being: the being of the creature is distinct from that of creator. As Levinas expresses this: "The great force of the idea of creation such as it was contributed by monotheism is that ... the separated and created being is thereby not simply issued forth from the father, but is absolutely other than him."¹³ Only on this basis, according to Levinas, is a relation to a *transcendent* God possible. The "paradox of creation," he writes, is "the paradox of an Infinity admitting a being outside of itself which it does not encompass." Creation, he adds, gives us an idea of "an infinity that does not close in upon itself ... but withdraws ... so as to leave a place for a separated being." What we have here is the opposite of the vision that Spinoza presents. We are not part of God, we are not dependent modes of attributes of his divine substance. God's perfection is not to be all encompassing. Rather, the infinite shows its perfection by creating beings that are distinct from itself. In Levinas' words, "multiplicity and the limitation of the creative Infinite are compatible with the perfection of the Infinite. They articulate the meaning of this perfection."¹⁴

The result of this alterity does not just undermine any attempt to conflate God with nature. In the two accounts of Genesis, it also separates humans from nature. In the first account, God creates by dividing—light from dark, day from night, waters above from waters below, land from earth, living from nonliving, and finally humans from animals, their separation being witnessed by their "rule" over them. After each creation, God proclaims the result to be "good." The one exception is the creation of man. He is not said to be good, but rather to be the "image" of God. The reason for this is that he can choose between good and evil. He has not a nature fixed by the world, but rather one, in large measure, determined by his choices. The ultimate creative division is, then, between humans and the world. This, in fact, may be why Genesis repeats three times that man was created in God's image and likeness. Like God, he is not defined by the laws of nature as a thing is. After Adam and Eve choose not to follow his law, God remarks that man "has become like one of us, knowing good and evil." They know and they can choose between the two. Thus, in the story of Cain and Abel, God tells Cain, who is contemplating the murder of his brother: "Sin couches at the door. Its urge is toward you. Yet you can be its master."¹⁵ Cain chooses to murder his brother. The fact that he violates God's will does not affect his freedom. The alterity that separates God from creation also

¹³ Ibid., 63.

¹⁴ Ibid., 104.

¹⁵ Genesis 4:7 in *The Torah, The Five Books of Moses* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962), 9.

separates man. Both man and God are, in Levinas' phrase, "other." Neither can be defined as a thing can—as determined in its being through the necessary laws that relate it to other things. It is this very freedom that man shares with God that allows him to choose not to follow God. Creation, in Levinas' phrase, involves God's withdrawal, his leaving "a place for a separated being."

Given such alterity, how do God and man relate? How can God move man and yet respect his freedom? The religious response to this question is varied. In important ways, however, it appeals to the notion of love. As John writes in his first letter, "everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God." The point follows because, "God is love" (John I, 4:4). Thus, if one loves, one can do what one will. One has no need of the law. Both Judaism and Christianity, for example, ask that we love God and our neighbor as ourselves. What this signifies for Christianity is given by Jesus' response to the lawyer's question: "who is my neighbor" (Luke, 10:29). Jesus replies with the story of the good Samaritan—the man who bound up the wounds and looked after a person who was neither his co-religionist nor a member of his race. The neighbor, in this account, is simply a fellow human being. For the Qur'an, this follows from the fact that we are all children of Adam and Eve.¹⁶ The social reflection of this view is an emphasis on mercy rather than justice. One should manifest mercy even as one desires this for oneself. Thus, rather than seeking justice, the Qur'an advises, "let them rather pass over and pardon the offence. Don't you desire that God should forgive you? And God is gracious and merciful!"¹⁷ This view also finds expression in the tolerance that recognizes the alterity of the other, that will not impose upon the other what the other would not himself freely will. With regard to religion, such tolerance signifies, in the words of the Qur'an, "Let there be no compulsion in religion."¹⁸ One can as little compel faith as one can love.

III. The Intertwining

Both the lessons drawn from the story of creation are one-sided. By this I mean that neither can function on its own. On the one hand, we have the failure of all the communities that have

¹⁶ In the words of the Qur'an: "O mankind! Allah created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you despise each other)," (Surah 49, v. 24). An Islamic commentator writes: "we are all made the same way. We have the same basic makeup. We all need, want, and feel. We all frown, cry, smile, laugh, hate, love ... We worship differently, talk differently, dress differently, judge differently, and are taught differently, but we are all still human." For this text and commentary see: <https://hubpages.com/religion-philosophy/What-Islam-says-about-loving-thy-neighbor>.

¹⁷ Qur'an, Surah 24, v. 22, in *The Koran*, trans. J. M. Rodwell, (Dutton: New York, 1978), 445. For other Islamic expressions of the Golden rule see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Rule

¹⁸ Surah 2, v. 256 in *The Koran*, 367.

attempted to realize the ideal of complete freedom, of their members' loving and doing what they will. On the other, the notion of religion as binding ultimately fails since, were its ideal realized, a person would be reduced to a thing. Here, the loss of religious liberty becomes the loss of religion itself. In the attempt to ward off the shaking brought about by the openness of freedom, the temptation of the religions of the book is to endlessly multiply the laws that bind their adherents until they embrace all the details of life. The result is a kind of "autoimmune reaction." In biology, this term refers to the body's turning its immune reaction on itself. Systems designed to protect the body by immunizing it from biological attacks from without turn inward attacking its own structures. The religions of the book suffer this fate when they take as "other" what is actually part of themselves – this being the freedom that is inherent in the alterity described by the story of Genesis.¹⁹

The one-sidedness of both lessons comes from the fact that we are both free and not free: we are both an "image" of God and a creature of God. Our self-alterity is such that we span both sides of the divide. Both are intertwined in our identity. My use of the term "intertwining" comes from Merleau-Ponty. In his last, unfinished work, he claims that we are intertwined with the world. On the one hand, we have to say that the world is in us in the sense that we bring it to presence. Through our bodily senses and activities, we disclose it as a sensible world. On the other hand, the embodiment that makes this disclosure possible situates us in the world. Thus, each of us has to say, as contradictory as it

¹⁹ This autoimmune reaction is not limited to the freedom that these religions presuppose, it also embraces what Freud called the narcissism of small differences. In their attempts to distinguish themselves from their rivals, the religions of the book do not just repress the similarities they share with each other; they stigmatize their rivals by projecting traits that are designed to emphasize their differences. We find this in Judaism's relation to the Semitic religions in Canaan. It also appears in Christianity's relation to Judaism. Here, what is repressed are the Jewish origins of this faith and, more specifically, Christ's existence as a Jew. The fact that Jesus was executed by gentiles – that is, Romans – becomes transformed and projected so that the Jews become Christ's killers. Similar instances of transformation and projection can be found in Islam's conception of Christianity and Protestant conceptions of Roman Catholicism. Such examples recall Jacques Lacan's doctrine that the "unconscious" is that aspect of myself I refuse to recognize. In his words, it is "the censored chapter of my history." My refusal does not just result in my projecting what I repress on to the other. Insofar as what I project is actually part of my identity, it results in a distorted self-knowledge. What I project on the other results in a gap. In Lacan's words, my self-knowledge is marred by "the distortions necessitated by the linking of the adulterated chapter to the chapters surrounding it" ("Function and Field of Speech and Language," in *Écrits. A Selection* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, [1977], 50). The anti-Semitism of Christianity, given that it was originally a Jewish sect, can be considered as an example of such distortions. Since what such anti-Semitism targets is actually inherent in Christianity, it is an example of the autoimmune reaction.

sounds, "I am in the world and the world is in me."²⁰ As Merleau-Ponty makes clear, each side of the identity formed by an intertwining serves as a place of disclosure for the other. As within the world, I am in my mental and physical abilities disclosed by the world. What I say and do is publicly available. The causality used to describe the world can also be employed to describe me. Yet, the whole world, including its causal laws, is within me. I serve as its place of disclosure. It is through my actions that its senses are exhibited. I know, for example, the sense of a glass by lifting it to my mouth to drink from it, the sense of a microscope by peering through it.

The religious analogue of this intertwining places God and the world inside of each other. If man is, indeed, the "image and likeness" of God, one can say that God, through man, is present in the world. This world, however, is God's creation and as such is in God. Thus, present in man, God reveals himself as vulnerable. In his identity with the poor and the unfortunate, God shows himself as subject to the assaults of the world. Humans, here, are the place of disclosure of God. Present in his image, he appears as bounded by the impersonal forces of causality, forces that threaten to reduce this image and likeness to a mere thing. When, however, we see humans in God, then God becomes their place of disclosure. He discloses them as transcending the impersonal forces controlling the world. He exhibits them as free. Christianity explicitly embraces this intertwining in its doctrine of the Incarnation. God incarnates himself in a man, Jesus. He suffers the world's assaults. He is hungry, thirsty, and, ultimately, dies a terrible death. Jesus, however, is in God. God, as his place of disclosure, reveals him as more than the person who dies on the Cross. The transcendence of Jesus is such that he is capable of resurrection. Having died, he cannot lay claim to any of the world's resources. All the powers and abilities it might offer him are beyond his reach. The claim of the resurrection is that of an action beyond all these. The implicit reference here is to God's action before the world, acting outside of it to create it. The other religions of the book do not accept the Incarnation. They do not believe Jesus when he claims "I am in the father and the father is in me" (John 14:11) and, then, claims that the same intertwining links his followers to himself by asserting "I am in my Father, and you in me and I in you" (John 14:20). Nevertheless, we can see the same pattern insofar as the other religions accept that man is God's image and that, as such, man has a transcendent quality.

To apply this intertwining to the two lessons drawn from the story of creation is to see the binding and unbinding of religion as forming its very identity as a religion of the book. This identity is such that each side provides the other with the place of its disclosure. Thus, the religious laws give a space for freedom.

²⁰ M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 8.

They disclose it as in the world, as necessarily operating within its constraints. For example, their laws concerning marriage place the freedom of choosing a partner within the restraints of the relations of the family and the need to rear the young. Similarly, their rules regarding justice, of specifying the penalties for our offences against each other, limit the freedom to take revenge by taking account of the constraints incurred by our need to live together. Freedom, in turn, discloses the rules that religion imposes as fundamentally distinct from the laws of nature. They appear, not as expressions of the blind forces of nature, but rather as laws that we have to impose on ourselves. Their force comes from our self-restraint.

Ultimately, to see both the binding and unbinding as existing together is to see them as essential to the religions that accept the account of Genesis. Their intertwining constitutes the peculiar optic of these religions. This optic involves the binding that is inherent in the etymological sense of religion. Pursued in isolation, such binding expresses a sense of ontological unity that is hostile to alterity. It is behind the autoimmune reaction which results in religion's attacking the transcendence that is essential to its vision of creation and mankind. The optic, however, also includes a vision of the alterity, the transcendence that undoes the unity of being. Here, it exhibits its potential to transcend the sense structures that characterize our world. Such structures include those by which religion binds us to the world of our particular faith. Unless we relate these aspects—both the binding and unbinding—we cannot understand the religions of the book. Indeed, such religions, in failing to grasp themselves in these terms, ignore their potential for both good and evil. To think of religion in terms of its intertwining is to see it as engaging both in a binding that unbinds and in an unbinding that binds itself. It is to grasp it as responding to both sides of the alterity that we ourselves are.

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