Religion and Social Destiny: A Postmodern Analysis

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“Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
The proper study of mankind is man.
Plac’d on this isthmus of a middle state,
A being darkly wise, and rudely great:
With too much knowledge for the sceptic side,
With too much weakness for the stoic’s pride,
He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;
In doubt to deem himself a god, or beast;
In doubt his mind or body to prefer;
Born but to die, and reas’ning but to err;
Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
Whether he thinks too little, or too much:
Chaos of thought and passion, all confus’d;
Still by himself abus’d, or disabus’d;
Created half to rise, and half to fall;
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all…

--Alexander Pope, Essay on Man [from Epistle 2] (1732)

Introduction

The postmodern condition may be aptly and simply defined (in Hegelian\(^1\) terms) as “a state of existence where every thesis is valid and so too is every antithesis.” It is also worth noting that the synthesis (the outcome of the dualist conflict between thesis and antithesis) of Hegel’s dialectic does not ever materialize unto itself, as whatever transpires as the result of a dialectical conflict simply and immediately assumes its place as the most recent reigning paradigm—a new thesis to which an antithetical equal arises anew.

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\(^1\) Georg Wilhelm Frederich Hegel (1770-1831) German philosopher and graduate of Tübingen Stift seminary, well-known for his Hegelian dialectic, an ongoing process of conflict and change over time, characterized by three components, “thesis, antithesis, synthesis”. He was labeled “the Protestant Aquinas” by Karl Barth and his ideas were adopted by both Right Hegelians (politically-conservative Protestants) and Left Hegelians (atheists and political revolutionaries [like Karl Marx]).
As Alexander Pope\(^2\) demonstrates in his (above) work, *An Essay on Man* (1732), not only is human existence imperfect, it is characterized by a series of paradoxical and competing dualisms reminiscent of the religious underpinnings of the Gnostic tradition that oddly, also provide some epistemological foundation for postmodernist theory. In fact, if dualism is the order of all things universal, then perhaps postmodernity is not a new or contemporary schema or even a recent (d)evolution, but has always functioned (under other guises) as the base determinant of all social conflict, change, and reordering in the Hegelian tradition. And, if the dualism that governs everything in an imperfect universe—also a derivation from the Gnostic tradition—then *religion* (or one of its derivatives) has generally always been the central catalyst to social destiny—all dialectical systems, all history, all evolution, even the fate (or for that matter, *the end*) of humanity itself. A common postmodern logical derivation might be that the concept of *morality* cannot exist without an accompanying *immorality*, thereby validating *immorality* as necessary (and thus, supportable—even in some ways, promotionally so) toward the righteous differentiation between them. In other words, moralists, ethicists, and others must acknowledge and even to some degree, encourage that which they abhor, as doing so justifies, validates, and allows them to separate themselves (as Durkheim\(^3\) posited) from those who adhere to oppositional beliefs, ideas, positions, and practices. Furthermore, can the terms *moral* or *ethical* even be defined (for a singular and definitive meaning of either requires the acknowledgement of potential alternative meanings for both)?

Consequently, the “postmodern condition” is often defined as the evolution of society beyond the maturity and decline of the industrial revolution featuring the following characteristics: a) virtually unlimited alternatives (or a condition of incessant choosing); b) uncertainty and insecurity; c) individuality; d) the fragmentation, deconstruction, and reconstitution of the social structure in varied or unique forms; and, e) the powerful influence of all social processes by mass media messaging.

But, when was world history not guided by these prominent influences? It may very well be that in the quest to identify “the postmodern condition” all that was recognized and defined was simply the perpetual social forces that have always steered social evolution and the concept of “postmodernity” is neither new nor unique. In fact, every dialectical stage of history theoretically had its own “postmodern” condition, as while “modernity” today may be defined as industrial society, “modernity” then would have been defined much differently—and what transpired after the most “modern” economic pinnacle of every epoch would have been seen as their “postmodern” age—the causation of which has remained relatively consistent throughout history, and one where *religion* has always been the driving force behind the generic concept of human *progress*, for better or worse.

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\(^2\) Alexander Pope (1688-1744) was a Catholic 18\(^{th}\) century English poet and essayist best known for his satirical verse and translation of Homer. He was a prominent Enlightenment philosopher and social critic.

\(^3\) Refers to Emile Durkheim’s “functions of deviance”, in this case, “separation of right from wrong”.

53
The Law of Human Progress Sameness

Auguste Comte⁴ (1798-1857) attempted to “restore order” to society in the aftermath of the French Revolution by seeking to establish an equivalency argument between the old religious orders of history and the new Enlightenment Era secular ideas of science, order, and progress.

By paralleling the development of religious evolution (expressed as the transition: fetishism→polytheism→monotheism) to the evolution of the sciences (expressed as the transition: metaphysics→polyscience→monoscience), Comte sought to establish the science of sociology as the new “science of all the sciences” and further, as a “religion of humanity” (or, humanity worshipping itself). As both religion (the thesis) and science (the antithesis) followed the same general pattern of development, Comte contended that religion and science were actually the same thing (and had always been), just with new names and fresh perspective—and for lack of a better expression, certainly a postmodern interpretation of faith. Of course, just as Jesus Christ (and His Crucifixion) had been the figure and catalyst responsible for the development of Christianity, Comte came to believe he was the new messiah that would unite and bring order to the world under his new religion of humanity (now known as sociology). His utopian socialist ideals to equivocate what he believed were “archaic faiths” with modernity and science would not be widely accepted (and in intellectual circles he suffered his own crucifixion to say the least). Still, he recognized that religion was so critically important to the spread of ideas, outcomes, and social progress that he had to cloak science (and himself) in clerical robes.

The Theory of Dialectical and Historical Materialism Religion

Another convenient starting point for exploring the idea that every social destiny has been a religious evolution featuring postmodern forces is a reevaluation of Karl Marx’s “Theory of Dialectical and Historical Materialism”.⁵ What initially appears in Marx’s dialectical progression to be a lengthy history of economic exploitation of downtrodden laborers by their wealthy and powerful masters (the haves versus have-nots) is actually a history of how the idea of religion has determined history and the state of all things. To Marx, economic history is religious history—from the Pharaohs who established themselves as earthly gods with their attendant slaves (who volunteered in many cases to serve and please them), to the feudal lords (and Catholic hierarchy that stressed God’s order of authority from Pope to king to lord, all deriving their power in that order from God above who coerced serfs to comply and remain holy to their roles and masters), to the Bourgeoisie owners of the means of production exploiting the proletarian labor class, and in many

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⁴ French polymathic intellectual, considered the Father of Sociology.
⁵ Karl Marx (1818-1883) was a German historian and economist who was known as a Young Hegelian, although a “Left” Hegelian. His dialectical progressions of history and economy are highly critical of religion and prompting him to conclude that atheism was a necessity for the establishment of a classless society as religion had always been employed by the elites of society to exploit labor. The concept of “dialectical materialism” first emerges from Marx’s work, Capital: A Critique of the Political Economy (first pub. 1867).
cases, their often deeply instilled Protestant values of hard work, sinless living, achieving Heavenly (not Earthly) reward, turning the other cheek when wronged, and encompassing the doctrine of forgiveness.

It is why Marx saw religion as a fatal impediment to the end of economic exploitation and the establishment of a classless society based upon his socialist ideal, “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.”6 It also prompted Marx to declare that “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”

And, “We created God in our own image...” and it is nothing more than a source of comfort (or Lenin’s, “spiritual booze”, as he termed it) for the oppressed working classes. Not unlike Comte before him, Marx believed that the foundation of every society was theism, so it was not surprising that he established a systematic atheism involving the worship of ideological socialism and classlessness as a suitable replacement for traditional religion. He too believed that God was collective humanity that should worship itself.7 God, after all, had been created by the powerful elites of society to exploit others for selfish materialistic gains throughout history and Marx willed to design a theology that would allow the inescapable function of religion in society but one that would allow the development, adoration, and eventual worship of his communist ideal—a new, (and again) postmodern kind of systematic theology reflected by quotes such as this:

“Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”8

Marx’s friend, financier, and co-founder of Marxist thought, Friedrich Engels, even sounded more postmodern after reading Hegel, that he proposed three laws of dialectics: a) the law of unity and conflict of opposites; b) the law of the passage of quantitative changes into qualitative changes; and c) the law of the negation of the negation.9 On the other hand, as observed by James Doull in his paper entitled, “Hegel’s Phenomenology and Postmodern Thought”, dialectical laws are not necessarily “either-or” as

6 Slogan first used by French socialist politician Louis Blanc in 1851 and popularized by Karl Marx in his work, Critique of the Gotha Program (1875)
9 Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) was a friend and contemporary of Marx. His dialectical laws are found in his unfinished work, Dialectics of Nature (1883).
people, in reality, live in both simultaneously, giving rise to the perpetual uncertainly and limitless choice indicative of human existence.\textsuperscript{10}

The Gnostic Holocaust and Medieval Catholicism (and its Demise)

While Marx used the Hegelian dialectical method to construct his “Theory of Dialectical and Historical Materialism”, he proclaimed that his dialectical method was itself in opposition to Hegel’s. He claimed that Hegel’s process turns “the Idea” into its own entity—the “demiurgos” of the real world (referring to the imperfect creator god of the Gnostics)—the external, phenomenal form of “the Idea”. Marx’s ideal becomes the material world reflected by the human mind and translated into thought.\textsuperscript{11}

It is believed the Gnostic tradition in Christianity predates Catholicism and dates back to the 1\textsuperscript{st} century. Its varying forms, beliefs, and sects throughout its history display such variety that Gnosticism was at best, deeply fragmented. Because of its regional and doctrinal differences, great Gnostic unity never materialized leaving it susceptible to marginalization and persecution from the expansive, larger, more hierarchical, and all-powerful Roman Catholic Church.

Gnostic dualism advanced the belief that there was a true God who could only be experienced internally and another—the imperfect creator god (the “demiurge”) that created the flawed universe and the non-divine human world. Centuries before the medieval period, Gnostic dualism had already been declared heresy by the Catholic order, but continued to persist in enclaves throughout Europe. By the beginning of the 13\textsuperscript{th} century, Catholic bishops, who were the “wildly wealthy” political and spiritual rulers of the time, had unified (often forcibly) all disparate Christian churches under its centralized doctrine. However, Gnosticism still provided one of the few alternatives to Catholicism, and despite being pushed underground, their numbers continued to increase presenting a perceived but growing threat to Catholicism.\textsuperscript{12}

The case of the Gnostic Cathars probably provides the best example of the Roman Church’s reaction to what was concluded to be a burgeoning revolt. In 1209, Pope Innocent III (who had decreed just after his ascension in 1198 that all political power emanates from the Papacy)\textsuperscript{13} ordered hundreds of thousands of Crusaders to Cathar villages in the south of France to slay everyone present and raze the


\textsuperscript{13} Pope Innocent III (1160/61-1216) was the most significant pope of the Middle Ages. In his Letter to the Prefect Acerbius and the Nobles of Tuscany [1198] decreed that here are “two great dignities in the firmament of the universal church..., the greater on to rule the day, that is, souls, and the lesser to rule the night, that is, bodies. These dignities are the papal authority and the royal power. Now just as the moon derives its light from the sun and is indeed lower than it in quantity and quality, in position and in power, so too the royal power derives the splendor of its dignity from the pontifical authority...” (Source: Medieval Sourcebook)
countryside, bringing lasting infamy to the phrase, “Kill them all. God will recognize His own.”

The Albigensian Crusade, as it was known, lasted for decades, followed by an Inquisition to root out, convert, or execute any remaining believers, eventually resulting in the total annihilation of the formerly powerful Cathari resistance as well as all copies of their texts and manuscripts. Gnostic sects who managed to persist adhering to their traditional beliefs in secrecy would actually re-emerge to be among the first so-called Protestant sects.

With the annihilation of the Cathars and the elimination or marginalization of other Gnostic sects, the Catholic Church had established a de facto monopoly on faith in Europe by the 14th century. Just over a hundred years later, Johannes Gutenberg would develop the mechanical moveable type printing press (around 1439—the first invention of mass production and communication that would characterize the entire Industrial Revolution) and the serendipitous development that would come to define a new age of religious revolution.

Gutenberg’s printing press was not invented, developed, and perfected (as has been commonly thought) to provide a means of mass producing Bibles due to a shortage of scribes or an excessive demand for the books for the expansion of Catholic parochial education and outreach. But, it did revolutionize the process. Marshall McLuhan commented that with the Gutenberg printing press, “print culture brought about the cultural predominance of the visual over the aural or oral” which changed the medium, and thus the message at the time. Or, as English Protestant John Foxe proclaimed, with regard to media attacks (printed materials, ballads, pictures, plays, etc.), “Either the pope must abolish knowledge and printing, or printing must at length root him out”.

Parochial education transformed from the training of priests and nuns to educating the masses, albeit in church doctrine, reading, writing, grammar, rhetoric, and logic. The problem was that as the Catholic Church succeeded in teaching more people these admirable qualities, there was never a guarantee that the only thing they would read was the Catholic Bible or what they would write or debate were supportive of Catholic doctrine. It is often proclaimed that “a little education is a dangerous thing” and so it was for the Catholic hierarchy.

Needless to say, the great antithesis known as the Reformation was about to begin.

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14 Scott, Lindsey. _Op cit._
15 Scott, Lindsey. _Op cit._
16 Johannes Gutenberg (1398-1468) was a German blacksmith and goldsmith who developed the first moveable type printing press, considered by many scholars to be the most significant invention of the modern age as it influenced and served as a catalyst for the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, scientific revolution, and eventually the Industrial Revolution. It was the first invention of mass production and its impact is still being experienced in the era of postmodern mass communication and information technologies.
The Protestant Ethic and Spirit Paradox of Capitalism

Max Weber's, *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-05)\(^{20}\) explores the transition from the agrarian feudal order of the authoritarian Catholic tradition to modernity (commonly defined as the Industrial Revolution). According to Weber, industrial capitalism evolved in Europe (specifically, Germany and Britain) and recognized that the more Protestant the area, the more the new industrial economy took root. America, for instance, developed almost exclusively as a Protestant colony and thus, developed their industrial economy and capitalist economy in the purest form possible. Weber's general theory employs the use of a method known in sociology as *Verstehen*, or "understanding". He examines the macro, dissect it to ever more micro levels over and over, until he reaches the individual level of daily experience, altruism, and empathy.

The theory begins with the first great Reformer, Martin Luther. Known for his "ninety-five theses", or points of disagreement with the mother Church, Luther was excommunicated (more or less), gathered his following, and formed what came in time to be called the Lutheran faith. He contributed a pivotal concept into the new Protestant doctrine, known as "the calling"—a God-given role for all to perform on Earth. Regardless of occupation or situation, God made it happen, and one always wants to please God. Translating to the value of *hard work* found in what came to be known as the Protestant Work Ethic, it set the stage for the rejection of idleness and promoted industrious behavior.

John Calvin (1509-1564), Protestant reformer in France and Switzerland (with deep influences in Scotland, England, the Netherlands, Germany, and America) introduced the concept of "predestination"—the notion that one's eternity, whether elected to Heaven or condemned to Hell, is decided prior to one's birth. This notion was a brilliant stroke of reverse psychology if nothing else. No one knew their eternal fate, and it was most important that one must be *saved*, so to demonstrate to oneself and to others that one was among the chosen, all worldly behaviors must reflect that one must be among the chosen. If there was any doubt of God's approval for one's choice of behavior, it simply was avoided. The practice of *sinless living* became a norm. And, to insure that the traditional Seven Deadly Sins were averted, the notion of *frugality* emerged as essential. Non-indulgence in luxuries, contentment with necessities only, insured the avoidance of *pride, envy, gluttony*, and *avarice*, while *predestination* prevented *anger* and *lust*. One's calling insured against *idleness* or *sloth*. Hard work, the production of quality products sold at a fair price insured a successful business model. Frugality insured tight budgets and savings of profits. The *calling* insured money only be spent to enhance one's calling, and so a cycle of investment and reinvestment into one's vocation evolved into a capitalist economic system giving birth, in time, to the Industrial Revolution.

But that which began as a religious doctrine to prevent the deadly sins, emerged as a postmodern quandary and a dialectical certainty. Success in one's calling translates to profits and wealth which can best be enhanced by controlling

production costs, especially that of labor. When the concepts of exploitation and excessive profits enter into the economic discussion of capitalism, success in one’s *calling* begins to look amazingly like greed—and the original Protestant values that were intended to prevent the deadly sin eventually become the very social forces responsible for its inevitable commission. When spiritual values tailored to the avoidance of sin eventually result in industrious actions, behaviors, and practices that can be labeled, sinful, unethical, or immoral, a kind of dialectical and value redefining process has surely occurred that sounds remarkably like what is labeled “the postmodern condition”.

As economic materialism in the post-Darwinist age of evolutionary naturalism became the dominant perspective in America and parts of Western Europe, it was only a matter of time until the Protestant-induced era of industrial capitalism would begin to meet its demise. A shift was about to begin marking the decline of tradition (including denominational religions) in favor of earthly pursuits and social and political cause-based venerations, whether they be ideological or utopian, spawning collective movements, touting reliance on government, or by taking direct action (such as attempting to solve social problems such as civil rights, war, poverty, and the environment).

“True-believers”\(^{21}\) of such movements and social dedications can well be described as “practicing” forms of postmodern pseudo-religions (not unlike Marx’s “atheism” which could technically be a “religion”) [i.e. belief in nothing] or the worship of humanity and the collective state which he described as “communism” (i.e. the earthly heaven for all).

**The Principle Fatalism of Inertia (or, It’s Hard to Stop a Speeding Train—but it Eventually Does—One Way or Another)**

Whether using the dominance of Catholicism during the feudal eras of agrarianism, or the emergence of Protestantism and subsequent Industrial Revolution, or the rise of Marxist anti-capitalist ideals and socialistic atheism as examples—all are historical movements rooted in religious faith, with specific ideals and value systems that diffuse across groups of people, carrying specific doctrines with some form of universal medium in messaging, often directed by one or only a few individuals, that create a condition of *inertia* that could only be dissipated by an eventual, but equally powerful dialectical change that launches civilization into a new epoch (or cycle of inertia). This endless process always seems to follow a pattern of growth→dominance→dissatisfaction/disillusionment→alternative→collapse and replacement→growth→dominance…and so forth.

Catalysts always intervened to undermine the existing order—like the printing press and parochial education during Catholic domination in Europe, early Protestant values leading to eventual sins of pride and greed, atheism and socialist revolution deconstructing the traditional order to the point of near amorality, and promoting a lack of structure and certainty, and deviant behavior, often as an alternative to tradition...(i.e. marijuana and other illegal drug use, establishment of new forms of marriage and family, etc.), that incurred massive and unrepayable

public debts. (In sociology, this is often referred to as “path dependence”, or as scholar James Mahoney describes the condition, it occurs when a contingent historical event triggers a subsequent sequence that follows a relatively deterministic pattern.)^{22}

**Other Examples and Some Final Observations**

The cited examples of historical evolution discussed thus far, demonstrating that religion has been the central driving force of history causing dialectical evolution and creating cycles of history also demonstrate that the characteristics of postmodernity have always been extant in human societies, especially regarding the social institution of communication and media. These characteristics and observations are common and not limited to just a few theorists, and are simply most observed in today’s post-industrial, post-structural (or postmodern) society.

These same patterns are seen in the works of Nietzsche, in his *transvaluation of all values*^{23} perhaps being the best example. They are observed in Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.^{24} They are dissected at length by Vilfredo Pareto in *The Mind and Society*,^{25} especially when discussing human *residues* and *sentiments*, as well as his theoretical model known as *the circulation of elites*.^{26} And, they are certainly explored by Oswald Spengler in his megahistorical *magnum opus*, *The Decline of the West*^{27}

When universal dualism, coupled with the cyclical and dialectical nature of society, and the characteristics of postmodernity and “the human need to believe in something”^{28} (i.e. religion or spiritualism or highly-principled social causes) all considered simultaneously, some common threads emerge concerning human history but the most important is the common factor of the *media*.^{29}

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^{29} An excellent discussion of the interrelationship between religion, media, and social (d)evolution may be found in an article by Kristoffer Holt entitled, “Media, Authenticity, and Religion: Søren Kierkegaard as Media Critic”. Accessed 02/24/2015. <https://www.academia.edu/2605801/Media_authenticity_and_religion._S%C3%B8ren_Kierkegaard_as_media_critic>.  

60
Conclusion

The final word on the role and function of religion (and it is essentially "postmodern" in nature) is taken from Robert Alun Jones' analysis of Durkheim works. Durkheim came to understand that:

"The difficulty for a society living through the period of "transition" and "moral mediocrity" described in The Division of Labor and Suicide was in imagining what form its future symbols might assume....Scientific thought, in short, is but a more perfect form of religious thought; and Durkheim thus felt that the latter would gradually give way before the inexorable advances of the former, including those advances in the social sciences extending to the scientific study of religion itself. In so far as it remains a mode of action, however, religion will endure, albeit under yet unforeseen forms."

Thus, religion has not only been the primary catalyst for all social and historical change, it eternally persists in some reconstituted form beyond its current historical manifestation—a phenomena which could very well be termed, "postmodern". It has actually always been this way, and in a sense, the "the postmodern condition" has been a perpetual (and dialectical) presence in the history of civilization.

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