theories and methodologies

Praise the Web

DAVID THEO GOLDBERG

TOWARD THE END OF HIS OPENING LECTURE IN *THE HERMENEUTICS OF THE SUBJECT* (17–19), MICHEL FOUCAULT DRAWS A DISTINCTION BETWEEN ancient and modern modes of philosophizing. He bases the distinction on differing conceptions of determining the grounds of the true and the false and the subject's access to them. The distinction and shift are well-trodden ground, as we'll see, even if Foucault marks them in characteristically provocative ways. I will argue, though, that with the advent of the World Wide Web the distinction is incomplete, not least in regard to the religious implications of the three modes and their underlying theological considerations. The World Wide Web, in short, signals the emergence of a new way of being and thinking to rival the ancient and the modern, even as it draws on elements of both.

For the ancients, the path of access to the truth is prepared through what Foucault calls "spirituality." Spirituality consists in the "practices," "experiences," and "processes" of legitimated searching by which subjects transform themselves in order to access and recognize the truth before them (15). Spirituality is "the work of the self on the self," the transformative preparation or "conversion" opening the subject up to the truth. Spirituality thus involves "research," a form of searching—ordered activities and experiences that lead to altered modes of looking at the world, transformations in how one lives and interacts with others and with the material stuff of the world.

The subject's "access to truth," for the ancients, thus requires work, the sort involved in "preparation." This is not just labor on the stuff of the world but a preparation of the self, the transformation of the self into subject. It involves, in short, discipline, even discipleship. And the payoff, "the reward," for all this effort is access to the truth it bestows on the subject. The subject is fulfilled as a result, comes to experience a state—of "beatitude," of "tranquility"—unavailable, unachievable other than through this process of preparation, conversion, and transformation. Realization of the truth is a profoundly religious undertaking, a distinctly religious experience (17–19).

DAVID THEO GOLDBERG is the director of the University of California Humanities Research Institute; the executive director of the Digital Media and Learning Research Hub, sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation; and a professor of comparative literature and criminology, law, and society at the University of California, Irvine, where he is also an affiliate professor of anthropology and a fellow of the Critical Theory Institute. His most recent books include *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (Wiley, 2009) and, with Cathy N. Davidson, *The Future of Thinking: Learning Institutions in a Digital Age* (MIT P, 2010).

© 2011 BY THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.2.448 Published online by Cambridge University Press

For the modern, by contrast, access to the truth requires no extrinsic preparation of the self. To know the truth, Foucault suggests, requires only that one recognize the conditions of knowledge. Becoming modern is nothing else than attending to knowledge. There is no appeal to the authority of the Word, to authority at all. It involves no conversion. The conditions of knowledge include formal considerations of method and supplementary ones of being educated in the formal rules and bound by prevailing epistemological consensus, by studied disinterestedness, by the dropping from consideration of—one might as well say inattention to—the sorts of spiritual experience stressed by the ancients. This process may be a preparation, but it is a preparation of training in instrumentalities, not a conversion of the self.

There is no reward for the moderns like spiritual transformation or subjection to authority. Rather, there is the careful pursuit and development of knowledge for no reason other than knowledge itself. Here truth can no longer "save the subject" (19). Whatever a subject takes to be the advantages or rewards of knowledge acquisition is extrinsic to the pull of knowledge for its own sake. Any appeal to authority is subjection to authority's power over one; it is, as Foucault puts it, to enter a condition of "tutelage," of subservience. If tutelage is governance by others of oneself, enlightenment is government by oneself, self-direction. Tutelage, the appeal to authority, is a failure of nerve, a fault of one's own, a personal failing.

Foucault points out in *The Government of Self and Others* (the lectures immediately following *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*) that modern recourse to reason establishes autonomy, direct and unmediated access to the truth, the capacity to detect error, and a comprehension that counts as knowledge, independent of the authority of the Word (31–32). It is a pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. And this pure pursuit, unmediated and fueled by nothing but its recognized intrinsic value, modern reason pushes by appeal to its own endless epistemological progress, its accumulated enlargement. Whatever material rewards may follow have to do with improvements in application, considerations additional to the epistemological drive, and are completely contingent (*Hermeneutics* 14–19).

The starkness of the contrast Foucault draws between ancient and modern conceptions can be challenged easily enough. *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* is concerned with reviving elements of the ancients' engagement with "care of the self" as a central emphasis in ethics. Moreover, many have pointed out the influence of older, religiously driven epistemological considerations on modern conceptions of truth and knowledge formation, while noting important contrasts (e.g., Asad; Taylor). Ancients and moderns at least share concerns over epistemological authority and guarantee, over pedagogical preparation and method enabling subjects to recognize the truth when faced by it, over the zealousness with which knowledge is pursued and indeed the training in pursuit of which knowledge is engaged, and so on. Responses to these issues may differ, and the issues themselves may be differently posed, but the notorious epistemological breaks that theorists such as Louis Althusser and Foucault supposedly suggested are not nearly as deep as their critics or proponents alike have often presumed. Foucault himself traces the onset of the modern philosophical conception to Aristotle, long predating the more usual attribution to the Renaissance and further eroding any claim to definitive rupture.

There nevertheless remain noteworthy distinctions between what Foucault calls the ancient and modern relations to truth and its access. The prevailing contrast has long been between the religious and scientific ways of being in the world. There are significant contrasts in how subjects are prepared for induction into religious order and into scientific

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.2.448 Published online by Cambridge University Press

method—how they are encouraged to defer to authority, not least in relation to knowledge claims—and in claims to openness in the pursuit of knowledge. Moreover, there are distinctions to be attended to regarding the relation between word and deed—for instance, in deciding what to do in the face of moral dilemmas (think of, say, blood transfusions) or in determining the proper subject and method of experimentation. In short, we could say that the ancients and moderns differ in their relations to truth and the practice of life. But the contrasts also have to do with the supposed clash of religions, factions, and cults, on one side, and schools, labs, and knowledge interests, on the other.

Of course, contrary to any reductive prediction or explanation, religion did not disappear for the moderns. As globalization became more planetary, accelerating through the movements of colonialism and capitalism, increasing technological sophistication, and shrinking space-times, contrasting religious practices came into focus and contact and became more contending, even contentious. Religion and its impositions and ways of knowing and being in the world, after all, played key roles in imperial expansion and colonial control. But the kinds of religious belief and commitment, passion, and practice also proliferated. That the modern distinction between public and private had no place for the ancients entailed that religion for them was a public commitment, more often than not identified with ruling power. Religion for moderns increasingly became a private commitment and at least in principle, if only for some in practice, eschewed proselytizing (Foucault, *Government* 11).

Cultural experimentation associated with the secular commitments of the moderns brought about new ways of relating to nature, to mysterious powers in the world, to the inexplicable. Conversion, oftentimes prompted by proselytizing and a kind of conscription but sometimes also by curiosity and need, sincere conviction and profound experience, heightened tensions if it didn't lead to clashes between established religious arrangements. But with Westernizing "modernization," conversion was less and less often state-mandated, as proselytizing attended overwhelmingly to individuals in their private being and belief. And the commitments of moderns to a secular public sphere underpinned also the emergence of a tradition of critique that came with maturation to take as its proper object as much the hypocritical shortcomings of modern modes of being as the suffocating constraints associated with the antiques (Asad, Brown, Butler, and Mahmood).

This ground has more or less been covered. If we have never (quite) been modern, we are also in important and substantive ways not ancient, in Foucault's contrast of these conditions. But this way of putting it, as a colleague is constantly wont to correct me, presupposes a univocal we, one (ironically) universal in its reach as in its diversity. The "clash of religions" is reduced largely to a family squabble, caused by remnants of the ancients who have not purged themselves (sufficiently) of their antiquity, have not become modern enough. The self-authorization of the modern, the claim to epistemological transparency, rational neutrality, and tolerance, becomes little more than hubris, as many have since pointed out.

What this hubris hid from view and, in hiding it, denied and could not explain was a religious turn, vigorous in its proliferation and energy, that has become so much a component of late modern life. Prevailing accounts have considered this turn the renewal of traditional forms of religiosity. To think of it simply as such would be a profound mistake, though the notion may have superficial resonance. It is not so much a re-turn as a new relation to the religious, if often expressed or coded, represented or rationalized, in conventional, even traditional, terms. The canon has

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.2.448 Published online by Cambridge University Press

been altered, and certain once-overlooked, meaningful or important practices are now stressed. Conditions and relations of contemporary life conjure novel responses to concerns, perceived lacks, constituted needs. That some states, or parties in states, have insisted on a pressed identification with this or that religion—the "Jewish state" or "Muslim states" or a "Hindu state" or more recently even a "European Christian state" or a "white Christian state"—bears out this push beyond the merely (or barely) modern.

The fact that these recent responses are coded, among other possibilities, in religious terms suggests that the practices they prompt are signaling something new again. The responses conjure novel expressions of enchantment, seeking to address intensified social dislocations, social anomie or alienation, perceived powerlessness, the lack or failure of older community arrangements, and profound loneliness in isolating social conditions. The communities that proliferate around some massively multiplayer online games and other forms of committed social networking, for example, their intensity of commitment and passion, the forms of interaction and the ethical practices animating them, suggest a profound shift from modern social practices.

These social intensifications and shifts are overdetermined. They are prompted by the mix of globalization and financializing neoliberalism; by a growing, if not mobilized, anxiety about powerlessness, drift in the ocean of generative differences, shrinking horizons, and loss of control over one's local domain; and by explosive awe in the face of proliferating bodies and flows of information. Security has become paramount but also tantamount to keeping the unknown and the socially different out. The widespread concern with immigration and especially with the presence of Islamic cultural practices in societies of the global North today bear this out (Goldberg 100–01).

Enter the World Wide Web. The Web has both exacerbated matters and dramatically altered them. No longer is it enough to contrast the ancients and the moderns. The history of the present suggests, at the very least, a third turn. This turn is not simply the exacerbation of the modern, its hyperventilation or aftermath, the postmodern, though it is tied up with the latter, emerging in part out of the conceptual and metaphysical openings the postmodern movement helped initiate. Just as the modern incorporated aspects of an ancient metaphysic, so the contemporary turn bears modern(ist) facets. We now have more: the ancients, the moderns, and the World Wide Webbies (the Webbies, in short).

The shrunken, quickened worlds fueled by globalization exacerbated contrasts between existing religious groups. Some religious critics increased (and sometimes stressed their criticisms as a way to increase) proselytizing and expanded recruitment, romanticizing the reach of radical intervention as they railed against the corruptions of capital's promiscuities. Globalization dashed hopes for social securitization even as the technology to realize them was futilely sought. But it also proliferated groups, cults, commitments, and convictions, conjuring and liberating possibilities of reaching almost everywhere. The constant, instantaneous space-time engagements that technology has made possible and the abstracted differences they have encouraged have liberated many to say pretty much everything about anything or anyone to all. This condition of proximate distance has led, counterintuitively perhaps, to a growing insistence that the here—the place the enunciating subject claims to inhabit—is for *this* set of beliefs only, to the exclusion of dissenting beliefs or expression. Tensions are heightened, and isolation ironically is magnified while being undermined, even made impossible.

Webbies share with ancients the virtues of community. But community for the

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.2.448 Published online by Cambridge University Press

former, unlike the latter, is virtual rather than local, driven mostly by a perceived sharing of interests, not of place. It is worldwide in possibility and principle, if not always in practice, sometimes reinventing homogeneity and the reach for identity even in distributed difference. Webbies, in this, are more like moderns than ancients. They are radically promiscuous, inheriting capital's voraciousness and, as such, prone or at least easily available to commerce.

So Webbies pay deference to virtual community, to participation, to co-creation and re-creation. If moderns release the subject from governance by others, they do so only under the authority exercised by knowledge, by a universal truth ever outside the subject. Webbies, by contrast, take the truth as made, co-created or co-produced, as crowdsourced. Knowledge is crafted together, the truth metaphysically made and remade collectively. There are truths, context-bound, contested, remixed, re-created, never truth as such.

The tags *ancient* and *modern* take their cue from their temporal reference points. They signal times, social periods, first and foremost, frames for reconstructing general social relations and practices, prevailing if not privileged ways of thinking, living, relating, and doing. *Webbie*, by contrast, is principally spatial and relational in implication if not prompt, suggesting dispersal, nodes in intersecting threads. While all three together make up a logic of periodizing, *Webbie* concerns itself more with the lines of connectivity than with the time of being.

Each of these social tags conjures different knowledge practices, common sense, and hermeneutic dispositions (as well as internally distinguishable reading practices within them, as Saba Mahmood has it). Ancients privilege preparation and service. Moderns emphasize discovery, free expression, and (self-)expansion. Webbies define themselves in terms of networking, connecting, remixing and repurposing, openness, transparency, and directness. Of course, they may be as open to illusion as ancients or moderns. The vision may be more robust than the fact, but that can be said of all three. If for the ancients and moderns the crucial matter is, as Foucault puts it, "access to the truth," for the Webbies the truth is more an enterprise than an arrival point. It—or, really, they—is made and remade, purposed and repurposed. Webbies do not so much take stock as make stock, together, openly remaking themselves as they reinvent the world they inhabit and even embed older, established identities and identifications (e.g., race) in the emperor's new codes.

Now, the statement that one approaches knowledge making *religiously* could mean a couple of things. It might mean that one's attitude is zealous, that one pursues knowledge with fervor, with great conviction and commitment. Or it could refer to one's formal preparation for gaining knowledge. Ancients are inherently religious in the latter sense, as Foucault's formulation suggests. Moderns only sometimes express themselves religiously in the former sense while at least rhetorically eschewing the peculiarly religious resonances of the latter. Webbies sew the two together, combining passion for the practice with induction into a way of being, a body of knowledge, and authorized practices.

At the same time, ancient and modern modes of knowledge formation and ways of accessing the truth can be slotted into Webbies' framework. That's the payoff of Webbies' promiscuity. Though the ancients are regarded as the traditionally religious, Webbies can still be religious, if in a Webbie sort of way. They can incorporate into the Web's frame ways of being, doing, and especially comprehending that are taken to be—often dismissed or criticized as—Old World, ancient, antique. What the dismissal misses is that the Webbie who comes across as an ancient is in fact stressing different aspects of the ancient, ones likely overlooked or not stressed or regarded as marginal by ancients

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.2.448 Published online by Cambridge University Press

proper. Webbies here, in short, are neoancients, ancients in Webbie ways. Likewise with Webbie moderns, Webbies who invoke or stress or act in modern mode. They are not retreating into modernity but redefining the way of being.

Webbies can be religious in the ways the Web orders their lives and they live through the web of conditions, relations, and possibilities, subject to its frames of reference, its ways of connecting and networking, its modes of knowing, its formulations of and access to the truth. So a Webbie who is a Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist does not simply benefit from the Web's affordances instrumentally. In entering the Web world, in having the World Wide Web define their being in the world, even if only instrumentally to start with, religious believers (begin to) take on its ways of being and doing. They become Webbies in their religiosities.

Like Webbies generally, religious Webbies network incessantly, independent of place. They are communicatively promiscuous within the bounds of their religious reach. They interact with the unseen, even unknown, the unplaceable and unfixable, user names and user interfaces, avatars and acronyms. They influence and are influenced by new ways of interpreting founding texts, new readings of the Word, new words in the shaping documents, words hitherto overlooked. New practices are accordingly conjured, rationalized by novel understandings, new relations, the fabric of emergent formulations linked at best tenuously to older canonical knowledge and its supporting beliefs.

Here too the supposed foundationalism of traditional religiosities is transformed, if not completely undercut or undone. The fixity and fixation of religious traditionalism comes up hard against the liquidity of the Web. This is not to deny the obvious point that religious interests and institutions are readily able to invoke the instrumental affordances of Web technology. In many ways, doing so has enabled religious entities to reinvent and renew themselves. But I want to insist that, instrumental affordances notwithstanding, traditional religious conception is constitutively at odds with World Wide Webbiness. The inherent restrictions of religion are challenged by the Web's relative openness. The attractions and affordances of Web life—the easiness of communication, the utility of connectedness, and the increasingly global reach, which are as instrumentally appealing to religion as to commerce, say—bring with them a nonrestrictable, expansive community, an instantaneity, and prolific potentials. Together with the facility to turn up the volume and be noticed instantaneously, globally, and to elicit violent responses, this promiscuity ultimately challenges the boundedness of traditional religion, its capacity to control or at least determine message and morals, canon and conduct. The enchantments religion historically traded in, the magical and mysterious qualities of the traditional religious imagination, are displaced by the enchantments of virtual worlds and the imaginaries they conjure. Where religious commitment and experience survive the challenge, they are dramatically transformed from their older, more traditional modes.

There is clearly a clash of beliefs among these ways of being, ancient, modern, and Webbed—one involving ways of knowing, access to the truth, notions of what the truth is, and normative practices. I have been intimating that ancients, moderns, and Webbies are differently disposed to traditional religion, each multiplicitously. Each way of thinking and being enables religious thinking and practice to take place under its jurisdiction, just as each is characterized—perhaps even to a degree defined—by the religiosities and their struggles with one another that circulate within its world-making frames. Moderns may refuse the crowdsourcing and dehierarchizing of knowledge expertise associated with Webbies. And ancients may decry

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.2.448 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the promiscuities Web life promotes even as they may be quick to exploit its instrumentalities. Viewed nontemporally, the three could be seen as coexisting side by side, "horizontally," as Mahmood has put it to me, pushing doxically and politically against one another.

I have been suggesting that antiquity, modernity, and the World Wide Web are more or less totalizing ways of being and doing, frames of thinking and communicating, of authorizing knowledge and grounding truth(s). As such, each is a shaper of the religious. Religious belief and practice, accordingly, are bound, shaped, generated, and circulated by these broader frames of world making. And insofar as religions today enter a common social space, virtual or material, they inevitably come into conflict. Their clashes are resolvable in the final analysis only if each pulls the other onto its own ground and reconceives its meaning, significance, and value in its own terms.

God is great. Science is good. But long live the world of the Web.

Works Cited

Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003. Print.

Asad, Talal, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood. *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech. EScholarship*. U of California, 2009. Web. 15 Aug. 2010. Townsend Papers in the Humanities 2.

Foucault, Michel. *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–1983*. New York: Picador, 2010. Print.

———. *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France, 1981–1982*. New York: Picador, 2005. Print.

Goldberg, David Theo. *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*. Malden: Wiley, 2009. Print.

Mahmood, Saba. "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?" Asad et al. 64–100.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007. Print.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.2.448 Published online by Cambridge University Press