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“Religion” and Its Limits: Reflections on Discursive Borders and Boundaries

ABSTRACT: The keynote contributes to critical analysis of religion and attendant categories by proposing that religions be understood as vestigial states. According to this hypothesis, religion is a modern discursive product that is not present in the Bible. The category evolves as a management strategy, a technology of statecraft to contain and control conquered, colonized and/or marginalized populations as an alternative to genocide. Examples are drawn from Greek mythology, Jewish and Druid history and recent Buddhist politics. The author uses texts pertaining to international law and political philosophy to argue that viewing religion as synonymous with displaced, uneasy, former government opposes male hegemony by revealing the political structure of mystified nostalgia for male leadership. She also maintains that understanding religions as restive governments promotes clarity in regard to contemporary conflicts between religious freedom and equality rights. Psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein and Wilfrid Bion are cited to support the disassembling of foundational terms of Religious Studies.

KEYWORDS: Critical religion, deconstruction, vestigial state, Deuteronomy, genocide, Jewish history, Greek mythology, male hegemony, feminist theory, psychoanalysis

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Jules Coleman writes that “Progress [in a mature field of inquiry] can be made only if much of the conventional wisdom is displaced, and its central questions are reframed” (Coleman 2011, 184).

My talk today is a critique of discursive borders and boundaries that have long characterized religious studies. I am convinced that such critique, already underway through the work of many scholars, will displace conventional wisdom and reframe central questions in our field.

The deconstruction of religion and attendant categories in the sub-field that some are calling “critical religion” is crucial, I think, not only for improving academic analysis but also more broadly for promoting progressive politics. The subject fascinates me to the point of obsession.

Immersion in classical studies, feminist theory and psychoanalytic thought leads me to see critical religion through a particular lens. Hopefully, my description of this trajectory of thinking will be interesting to you and might even prove useful in your own work. At the very least, I might succeed in convincing the skeptics among you that this is a line of argument to which in the words of playwright Arthur Miller, “attention must be paid” (Miller 1949).

I’ll start with the text of Deuteronomy 20, lines 16 – 18:

But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them - the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites – just as the Lord your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God.

God’s instructions regarding the towns given as “an inheritance” are as clear as they are harsh. According to the previous five verses, gentler treatment is ordered for other cities that are “very far from you, which are not towns of the nations here” (Deut. 20: 15). If the people of these places offer no resistance, they can become colonies to be exploited; if they resist, after their downfall, all males are to be executed, while the women, children, and livestock are to be taken as spoils. Even so, whether in surrender or defeat, the fate of those distant towns is preferable to those inherited ones closer to home.

In her book, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, Amy-Jill Levine writes that she is “appalled by the sanctioned genocide suggested by [this] passage in Deuteronomy...” (Levine 2006, 14). She goes on to derive the following lesson from such texts: “The passages and the past should serve as reminders of the evils that humans perpetrate on each other in the name of religion” (Levine 2006, 15).

Levine’s book has a worthy, ecumenical goal. As a Jew and a prominent New Testament scholar, she promotes respectful, engaged

dialog between Christians and Jews. She advises that "one comes to the interfaith table not with guilt and not with entitlement, but with humility and interest" (Levine 2006, 14).

I suggest that both dialog and scholarship pertaining to such texts and to the ideological and communal traditions of which they are a part ought to be characterized by another quality in addition to humility and interest – namely, critical sensibility toward the terms that have conditioned discussion for so long.

Levine is correct that humans do "perpetrate evils on each other in the name of religion." However, her statement only applies to relatively recent history. The group to which the God of Deuteronomy grants an inheritance and orders to commit genocide is surely not motivated by "religion." That concept is yet to be invented. Similarly, at this time, God could not command his people to fulfill his wishes with AR 15s.

By expressing outrage about the role of "religion" in this mandate for slaughter, Levine is employing an anachronism to describe what is going on. I suggest that such misdirection obscures machinations of power and governance in both ancient and contemporary times.

The "Lord your God" in Deuteronomy 20 seems to aspire to control every aspect of the life of his polity. The stated goal of the genocide is to insure no practice or bit of culture of the previous inhabitants of the land he is handing over to his people remains. If the members of his group destroy all those who embody different ways of living – i.e. "all the abhorrent things they do for their gods" – his people will think of themselves as constituting a cohesive group in a jurisdiction over which he has absolute control.

It will most probably appear counterintuitive if not nonsensical to those who are not familiar with current debates in religious studies to say that Deuteronomy 20 is not about religion. After all, the terms of the passage explicitly refer to deities: the "Lord your God" talks about his competitors as "other gods" and the travesties linked to them are translated as "sin". This is vocabulary that is now associated with "religion" – a word that, despite its capacious vagueness and malleability, is used (however problematically and paradoxically) to indicate a distinct sphere of human conduct. The Lord God of Deuteronomy is not confining himself to setting out rules for specific bounded activities and practices of his people. *Au contraire*, he is concerned with total control. God and "gods" in Deuteronomy are referents whose scope and range we can only intuit from our vast temporal and cognitive distance. Nevertheless, we can be quite sure that the linguistic and institutional distinctions currently conveyed by these words were not similarly operative in biblical times.

Instead of using the term "religion" to reference what is going on in Deuteronomy 20, I suggest that we think of the genocide God orders as a tactic of government. Of course, the word government exists in contemporary vocabulary and is itself an anachronism when applied to the

particular ancient world of the text. In spite of this obvious truth, it is nevertheless useful to put the term “religion” out of play when thinking about or discussing this and other biblical passages. My interest in bracketing out “religion” is not so much in order to depict the past with better accuracy (although this might be one probable result), but more for the sake of developing a clearer view of the present. By refraining from using “religion” as a descriptor in epochs in which it has not yet been invented, we can, I think, begin to see how and why “religion” became a technology of governance in structures we now call “states.”

I want to argue that “religion” is an invention, a strategy, a technology, a tactic of management that among other things, can provide governments with an alternative to genocide. It evolves in different times and places as a category that enables ruling entities to grant limited sovereignty to specific - possibly dissident - groups instead of eliminating them entirely.

However, this is a solution that lacks the finality that would come with thorough eradication. Groups given special jurisdictional status could challenge the boundaries imposed on their spheres of authority and eventually expand them. There is also the additional risk, recognized by the God of Deuteronomy, that the larger population might adopt habits and customs of the only partially vanquished group and thus destabilize the ruling order from within.

I have been working on a theory to take account of the evolution of ‘religion’ as a tool of statecraft for the containment and management of distinct and possibly rebellious groups whose status is understood as having been reduced by a newer ruling order. I argue that religions function as vestigial states composed of mutating institutions and ideologies that exist in relation to the dominant governing order that contains and defines them. Vestigial states are permitted some authority over particular behavioral or territorial jurisdictions pertaining to specific populations. They are ‘once and future’ governments, alternative ruling orders, governments in waiting that are commonly narrated as having once exercised broader powers in fair and beneficent ways superior to those of the present government (Goldenberg 2015; 2018; 2019).

In some instances, the fully empowered better governing order is not thought of as in the past, but rather is projected into the future with the idea of another world to come after death. Groups sometimes called “new religious movements” can be very creative about the location of the superior ruling order. It can be imagined as happening on another planet or on this planet after radically changed circumstances brought on by an apocalypse. Although vestigial states might be restive and ambitious to expand their influence and authority, their members can also, for long periods of time, be satisfied with the spheres of jurisdiction accorded them.

Vestigial states can be useful to dominant states to support and aggrandize power by references to mystified, always previous, authority that supposedly justifies contemporary governance. The United States routinely cites forms of Christianity for such a purpose.

That the "state" is itself a modern concept is sometimes raised as an objection to problematizing "religion" as a recent invention. To clarify: I am not claiming that something now called a state is more ancient than something now called religion. What I am pointing to as significant is the development of a concept of governance that is supposedly separate from a recently imagined sphere of thought and behavior termed "religion." This assumed distinctive entity is what I am joining other scholars in describing as novel, modern and without the particularly deep historical, 'ancient' roots that are frequently claimed.

According to Ernst Kantorowicz in his fulsome study, *The King's Two Bodies*, "state" as a broad term for governing structure evolves from at least the time of Aquinas when "*status*," meaning "*status publicus*" is used as a general description of "government" without the "connotation of abstractness" (Kantorowicz 2016 [1957], 271 n. 235). I am using the word in this broad sense to refer to governing structure, ruling authority, or dominant regulator.

Kantorowicz' analysis also supports my emphasis on the consonance of concepts of "state" with similar structures that have come to be labeled "religion." He unravels classic legal, philosophical and theological texts that attach theistic notions of supernatural destiny and eternal endurance to governments of first Roman and then Christian heritage. Kantorowicz shows that the Roman notion of *patria* as gesturing toward a glorious aggregate of polity that is worth dying for was greatly enhanced through the idea of the double nature of Christ (Kantorowicz 2016 [1957], 232 passim). Christ as Lord both human and divine evolves as a basis of law and statecraft (albeit unevenly and differently inflected) in Britain and the European mainland. From the middle ages onward, governments, influenced by this legacy, whether or not self-described as 'secular,' go forward with a model that deifies and mystifies whatever principle or entity is posited as foundational – such as the rule of law, inalienable rights, a particular document, freedom, justice, or territorial jurisdiction. I want to argue that states whether dominant and widely recognized as authoritative or vestigial and now currently known as religions, rest on a fluctuating mix of claims to transcendence and immanence. Thus, are religions made of the same stuff as are the governing structures that name and contain them and limit their spheres of sovereignty.

I do think Carl Schmitt's famed utterances about theology and the state can support this argument. In 1969, Schmitt states the analogy this way: "Everything I have said on the topic of political theology [are]

statements of a jurist upon the obvious theoretical and practical legal structural resemblance between theological and juridical concepts (Schmitt 181, n. 15) ." I particularly like this later form of Schmitt's more frequently quoted sentence that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts." I prefer the 1969 formulation because the word "secularized" isn't there to confuse things and because yes indeed, the resemblance between what is called the "theological" and the "juridical" is stated as "obvious."

I want to push the genealogy of theological back further than I think many who use and cite Schmitt do. I suggest it is an error to think of what now is called "theology" as separate from past regimes of practical rule, from past structures of governance. Theology as it is now conceived arises only when the concept of gods has been diminished and restricted. That there was something that could be called "theology" or a "theological construct" separate from law and government in the past is fantasy. It is wrong, I think, to interpret Schmitt as saying that the theology now understood as distinct from secularized government predates contemporary government and thus looks like it. Rather, it is more accurate to say that contemporary governments derive from past forms of government and that the "theological" as a distinct category has been invented and projected onto the past for strategic and rhetorical purposes.

I first took note of the dynamic that I now understand as the superseding and taming of a previous sovereignty when I was an aspiring classicist keen on ancient Greek cosmology and genealogy. I was struck by the transformation of the vile God Uranos in Hesiod's *Theogony*. After being castrated by his son Chronos, Uranos apparently reconciles with Gaia, who, in response to his cruelty toward their children, had commissioned his mutilation. In diminished form, Uranos morphs into a kindly yet distant wise counsellor. A similar, but more expansive and better written metamorphosis is described by Aeschylus in the *Oresteia*. The bloodthirsty, bone-chilling Furies are tamed by Athena who, after defeating them in the forum of a court of law, leads them to a place below the earth and promises them eternal recognition and ritual honors. These are poetic (and, in a sense, patriotic) accounts of the succession of ruling orders in which a previous government is moved away from the locus of contemporary power without being completely excised. That which was once truly supreme is now merely idealized. Uranos and the Furies are marginalized and simultaneously extolled. It is no coincidence that, in their new, largely symbolic role, these deities become supports for the regime that displaced them. The incorporation and laudatory citation of references to former, disempowered governments to bolster dominant regimes is a management technique that is observable currently. For example, the invocation of God on documents and coins and the use of clergy on ceremonial occasions are now parts of the governing apparatus of U.S. and Canadian governments

that are supposedly no longer justified by and beholden to ecclesial authorities.

I am not saying that the displacement and subsequent gestures of veneration toward Uranos and the Furies are examples of the creation of "religion." Even though these sidelined powers are labeled deities and, in the latter example are accorded specific rites, the category of religion (as other than a set of ceremonial practices connected with government) had not yet entered history. Hesiod and Aeschylus are writing about the progression of governments. "Religion," as a term and management technique for displaced and diminished government pertaining to a particular population, evolves much later in fits and starts in different histories and geographical contexts.

In other work, I describe this process with a range of illustrations. Judaism, for example, becomes a "religion" gradually through millenia of violent displacements by Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans and, most recently, Germans (Goldenberg 2015). Because, thankfully, none of these military solutions were final, the practices, customs, institutions, literature, laws and ideologies of the Jewish people became the material of Judaism, gradually molded into a "religion." Work by Leora Batnitzky in her 2011 book *How Judaism Became a Religion* traces a part of this modern development from a time in which as she writes "...Judaism and Jewishness were all these at once: religion, culture and nationality" (Batnitzky 2011, 2). I agree with the argument she advances in this book that the concepts of nation-state and religion emerge together. I understand my work as probing the paradox and illusion of the separation of this pairing. In relation to Judaism specifically, Yishai Blank, refers to the "dual meaning of Jewish [as] both a religion and a nation..." (Blank 2017, 127). The argument I am outlining here clarifies, so to speak, the muddiness of this distinction not only in regard to Judaism, but as relates to "religion" as a category. The example of Jewishness is particularly interesting because with the foundation of Israel as a nation-state and the growing prominence of the orthodox rabbinate in that state, one can see an instance in which what I am naming a vestigial state can take control of dominant governing ideology and institutional structures. The narrative that accompanies this transformation will be one of idealized return to a ruling regime that was unjustly ousted in the deep past.

I argue that understanding religion as a management mechanism is a useful hermeneutic in regard to long histories of groups such as the Druids. In his account of the Gallic wars, Julius Caesar describes the Druids as in firm control of government. After their defeat, they are diminished and exiled to Iona and some smaller islands. Gradually, Druidism becomes a "religion" in Britain that is officially recognized as such for purposes of charity in 2010 - an evolution traced by Suzanne Owen and Teemu Taira in an excellent essay (Owen and Taira 2015).

I see the strategic use of the category of religion as operative in the Dalai Lama's move in 2011 to declare himself head of the religion of Tibetan Buddhism in distinction from an elected head of state. He thereby undercuts the Chinese claim that the Panchen lama who is under Chinese control is the true leader of Tibet. If the separation is recognized, the argument pertaining to the Panchen lama will concern only a diminished sphere called "a religion."

In his text titled *The Creation of States in International Law*, that is now a benchmark in legal theory, James Crawford writes that "despite the conclusion that statehood is not everything, the world has been homogenized into States" (Crawford 2006, 254). He refers to the reduction of the number of what he calls "not-full-sovereign" entities as somewhat functional governing structures since "the early part" of this century. I suggest "religions" now function as such entities and that the understanding of their nature as quasi states would help to clarify problems, paradoxes and trends of contemporary governments in which challenges to law and spheres of sovereignty involve what are called "religions."

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Crawford defines sovereignty as "the location of supreme power within a territorial unit," (Crawford 2006, 12) and sees it rather paradoxically as both a criterion for and a consequence of statehood (Crawford 2006, 89). He discusses five other features that characterize states: 1. Defined territory; 2. Permanent population; 3. Governing structure; 4. Capacity to enter into relations with other states; and 5. Independence (Crawford 2006, 37-95). These attributes of states basically cohere into a single quality - namely, effective authority over a particular jurisdiction. Effectiveness is the factor stressed in Crawford's text as a generally necessary though not sufficient trait of a state. Consequently, since the history of establishing the conditions enabling effectiveness is bracketed out, in Crawford's words, "an entity may become a State despite serious illegalities in the method or process of creation" (Crawford 2006, 89). I understand the category of religion to have gained traction as a technology of government partially as a mode of recompense, a technique of solution, for what Crawford terms "illegalities" in the foundation of states, particularly those with a recognized colonial past. The illegalities of the past are sources of the anxieties of sovereignty in the present.

Two significant features of states that Crawford does not mention are: authority over violence and hegemonic masculinity. It is the gaps and contradictions in governments' management of violence and male dominance that give quasi states - i.e. religions - important entrees to increased power. Max Weber identified jurisdiction over legalized violence

as the one domain over which states do not relinquish control (Weber 2004 [1919]). The overt violence in martial or police form is jealously guarded as is the violence-in-waiting that is necessary to enforce court decisions. I argue that control over these varieties of violence is generally the dividing line between vestigial and dominant states. Note that the label "religion" is often disputed when a group is seen to muster violent means to fulfil a goal or doctrine. This tendency is apparent in the invention of terms such as "Islamist" or "political Islam" to distinguish Islam as a "religion" in places in which Islam is not the governing ideology of a fully functioning state.

Two exceptions to Weber's dictum about the state's exclusive control of most forms of violence are so-called domestic violence and the physical alteration of genitals of male and female infants. In these matters, jurisdiction over violence is sometimes handed over by proxy to faith-based arbitrations or to decisions of leaders in empowered, vestigial constituencies.

Jurisdiction over the types of violence that states most readily franchise out is related to male dominance. Religions, for the most part, insist on maintaining a male hierarchy and structure of decision-making in contrast to many of the states that authorize and contain them. These dominant states have, for the last several decades, been according women greater power and influence. One reason for this difference is that dominion over the family and a so-called private sphere of living is generally one jurisdiction that fully functioning states hand off in differing degrees to the marginalized states within them. Although Saba Mahmood describes the development of what gets termed family law in Egypt differently, in her 2015 book *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*, she traces how domesticity becomes allotted to somewhat unique "Islamic" forms of governmentality (Mahmood 2015). This is the type of management tendency that in varied contexts and histories results in the modern and largely illusory creation of "private", personal spaces over which religions are granted authority and influence.

It has taken decades of feminist theory and activism to disturb the putative separation of what is termed politics from "personal" issues related to sex, marriage, child care, housework, and domestic abuse. The deconstruction of the ideological pairing of the category of religion with the private and personal is a product of this discourse. The second wave feminist slogan "the personal is political" confronts the illusion of religion as separate from politics as much as it does the fantasy of private, apolitical living spaces. The slogan should always be paired with a sister dictum, namely: The Religious is Political. Although women's domination occurs throughout culture, it is the imagined separateness of family, home, sex and reproduction which maintains oppression. Positioning these spheres as the appropriate territories of religions, constructs women distinctively as the

unique subjects of two governmental orders – one that of the dominant state, the other that of the vestigial powers within it.

Because displaced governing orders retain their sway in familial and sexual spheres of jurisdiction, religious authority in these venues is ripe for expansion as is happening in “faith-based” tribunals in various countries.

In addition to widespread classification of the spheres of family, sex, and reproduction as ‘religious’ jurisdictions, gender hierarchy and privilege are also impacted by the nostalgia for male leadership preserved in what I am calling vestigial states.

Despite some valiant and fascinating efforts to document a time in which women were in control of government in the deep past, such accounts are overwhelmed by the weight of recorded history. Because religions, as restless once and future forms of government, are continually hearkening backwards to past models of leaders and patterns of authority; and because they derive legitimacy in large part because of perceived ties to these traditions, masculine hegemony is preserved within religions as if in amber.

While it is true that female religious leaders are gaining prominence in many venues, progress is slow and undoubtedly hampered by the veneration of foundational texts that establish authoritative succession from male deities to the male avatars who resemble them. A famous example of this is Pope Paul VI’s *ex cathedra* (and still operational) statement in 1977 reaffirming the exclusion of women from the priesthood: “The Christian priesthood is ... of a sacramental nature: The priest is a sign, the supernatural effectiveness of which comes from the ordination received, but a sign that must be perceptible and which the faithful must be able to recognize with ease. ... Sacramental signs represent what they signify by natural resemblance. ... When Christ’s role in the eucharist is to be expressed sacramentally, there would not be this ‘natural resemblance’ which must exist between Christ and His minister if the role of Christ were not taken by a man. In such a case it would be difficult to see in the minister the image of Christ. For Christ himself was and remains a man” (*New York Times*, 1977).

It is important to stress that in Catholicism as in other patriarchal traditions, male hegemony in all aspects including scriptural interpretation is being contested. Success is so far limited. Women in positions of ecclesial authority signal a newness that can in itself provoke anxiety; while male leaders offer the stable comfort of sameness. Male dominance in marginalized religious governments give support to masculine leadership in dominant states that often cite affinity with past sometimes biblical symbols of governance to shore up their own legitimacy. “In God We Trust” is stamped on U.S. coinage and since 1954, “one nation under God” is recited in the Pledge of Allegiance. Canadians rather recently went further – when in 1982 a constitution was ratified with the following first

line: "Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law.." (*Constitution Act 1982*).

Fondness for leaning on divine models of male authority extends to contemporary Russia as well. Vladimir Putin finds support in the Russian Orthodox church and seems delighted to be photographed alongside Patriarch Kirill. President Putin is quoted as saying that the church has always "inspired people to constructive action and heroic deeds for the Fatherland" (Valente 2020). Members of the ragtag band Pussy Riot recognized the confluence of the dual mutually reinforcing patriarchies when in 2012, they sang a song in Moscow's Christ Savior Cathedral that asked Mother Mary to rid their country of Putin. Even though the church was largely empty at the time, the women were given two years of jail time for "a criminal act that went against tradition and ... violated public order" (Elder 2012). The relatively heavy sentence confirmed the seriousness of the threat that the voices of three women in tights represent to the current male ruling order buttressed by Russian Christian orthodoxy.

The obsessive construction and reconstruction of public governmentality as male is one thing that Freud stresses in his highly speculative account of the evolution of monotheism. I find Freud's description of the process of mystification and deification in relation to government is congruent with understanding the modern category of religion as a mechanism of statecraft. Freud draws no distinction between "religion" - i.e. Jewish and Christian versions of monotheism - and the state in any of his work. In Freud's texts, theism is the distortion, idealization and glorification of past male rulers. The Jewish and Christian images of God grow out of anxieties about the foundational traumas Freud posits - traumas that both ground and haunt male governance.

Women are allowed public authority only in temporary, sporadic circumstances as figures of respite from the paranoid ferocity of male competitiveness. Freud draws no line between secular and religious spheres of authority in this narrative and does not remark on the overlap.

All psychoanalytic theory about culture can appear awkward especially when conjecturing about aetiology such as the literal murder of primal fathers as depicted in *Totem and Taboo* (Freud 1913). Nevertheless, psychoanalysis is useful in pointing out and elaborating persistent patterns that appear and reappear compulsively over long periods of time. This recognition of repetition can move discursive boundaries, expand awareness and permit something new to happen.

I suggest that the trauma that founds states - the "illegalities" to which Crawford refers in his text - are the various atrocities, displacements, appropriations, banishments and evictions - in the histories of most contemporary states. Because religion, as I'm arguing, is one solution to the problem of how to maintain sovereignty over a diverse set of living subjects - it is a symptom of trauma and displacement that both covers up and

marks what was once done and/or what is currently excluded. The symptom, according to Freud, is always a compromise that pushes in one direction and pulls in another. The behavioral structure designed to push away awareness of a disruptive truth paradoxically tugs cognizance of it toward consciousness. Each time Lady Macbeth washes her hands in pantomime, the horror of her crime comes more and more into focus and repression of her guilt over Duncan's murder becomes less possible.

The psychoanalytic metaphor of thinking about religion as a symptom does I think highlight the paradox of marginalization and empowerment that characterizes the category. The position given to a religious group in a dominant state is always an unsettled compromise that vacillates between disenfranchisement and privilege; abjection and adulation.

As restive structures of vestigial sovereignties that function as symptoms of that which has been displaced and/or disgraced, religions both generate (and soothe) anxieties of governments. The vicissitudes of anxiety motivate action and policy. In Melanie Klein's thought, anxiety operates in two modes - paranoid/schizoid and depressive (Klein 1975). The thorough genocide God commands in Deuteronomy can be seen as a paranoid response inspired by a fear of retaliation from within. Over time, with some measure of stability and the solidification of his rule, this God might experience the more complex condition of depressive anxiety fueled by a measure of guilt that could inspire some reparative gestures - such as, perhaps, the creation of religion instead of the enactment of genocide.

In Kleinian theory, guilt and its vicissitudes are veritable engines of culture: she and theorists influenced by her work, have written that high art, theatre, opera, literature, architecture and philosophy as well as everyday habits and practices are initiated and sustained by need for reparative expression and satisfaction. I want to add governmental formations - in particular religion - to the list of cultural creations that Freudian and post-Freudian theory links to deep and enduring psychological dynamics.

I find the Kleinian perspective expansive because it opens up awareness of the emotional and perceptual resonance of all cultural form. Such thinking, I suggest, disaggregates political environments by contextualizing and historicizing ideas and institutions against a background of human vulnerability and affect.

I'll conclude by mentioning the work of another brilliant psychoanalytic writer in the Kleinian tradition - Wilfred Bion. In "A Theory of Thinking," Bion proposes the metaphoric, discursive existence of two elements at play in mental processes - alpha and beta (Bion, 1962). Alpha elements function as building materials for thinking - they can be joined to other alphas in constructions. They can be disassembled and reassembled,

and reconfigured if and when necessary. They are, as it were, lego for the mind – if lego parts could be imagined not as solid plastic but rather made of sticky clay. In contrast, there are betas – which are impossible to incorporate – they are hard round huge marbles with definite and impermeable borders and boundaries. Betas do not join up, are not subject to revision, and cannot be made flexible in psychic constructions. They are the stuff of psychosis, catatonic stasis and, at times, extreme violence. Except of course if they become alphas – which does happen if their discursive limits can be breached.

As scholars, writers, theorists, we work with alpha elements and help produce them for others. Two examples of recent books that make this effort are Nelson Tebbe's *Religious Freedom in an Egalitarian Age* (Tebbe 2017) and Cecile Laborde's *Liberalism's Religion* (Laborde 2017). Tebbe proposes a method to approach controversies pertaining to equality rights and so-called religious" objections to those rights. His stated goal is to foster what he terms "social coherence" through reasoned dialogue with ground rules based on principles each side can accept. Outcomes are not predetermined. To create a focused but open-ended climate for discussion, issues and categories – religion among them – must be disassembled, i.e. broken down to evaluate behaviors in particular circumstances. Laborde pushes in a similar direction toward more careful appraisals of specifics related to what counts as "religion" in relation to living a "good" life. A flaw in Laborde's work is that she refers to "religion as such" – an impossible category that she ought to have disassembled. Yet in clearer parts of her text, she calls for a "move away from the category of religion altogether" (Laborde 2017, 238). I agree with this suggestion wholeheartedly.

I noted an example of better discourse when I read various news reports about the 2018 abortion referendum in the Republic of Ireland. Relatively few journalists referred to the vote as involving the influence of the vague, generalized category of 'religion.' The focus was on the Catholic Church as a particular institution. Such specificity yields a clarity that I hope becomes less rare.

Both Tebbe and Laborde encourage a collective effort at what Bion considers thinking – namely the activity of disassembling and reassembling components of experience to construct discourse whose borders and boundaries can allow and contain the affective life of a diverse population.

It is worth noting that liberalism as it is often described – is concerned with promoting "the Good" and not "the Great." Positing a large scale grandiose goal of national greatness is, in the trajectory of psychoanalytic theory that I am citing, the stuff of idealization and concomitant denigration – the favored mode of tyrants and demagogues who tend toward final solutions involving the purging of difference from national borders as depicted in Deuteronomy.

If “religion” is thought of as a unique, separate entity – if this category is imagined as an “it” that is too, shall we say, “sacred”, special, miraculous – it can behave as a beta element – as inaccessible, and impermeable to reformulations that compose salutary cultural life. Persistent presentations of religion or of a deity as absolute and unconditioned can become magnets for quasi-psychotic authoritarian – beta-like discourse of both grievance and triumph. Understanding religion as an invention in the technology of statecraft that functions as both solution to and symptom of ever-present tensions of governance is a suggestion that is depressive (in the best Kleinian sense of that term) – it is a bit of theory that turns away from dramatic abstraction for the sake of promoting sustainable – yet intermittent – sanity.

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