

Religious Diversity Within the Limits of Radical Neo-Enlightenment

By Mark Manolopoulos

Abstract

This paper begins by briefly sketching a ‘return to universality’ with what the author calls a ‘radical neo-Enlightenment’ that is driven by a revolutionary rationality. As part of this delineation, the essay discusses how this rationality is itself delimited, and how the apparently ‘unlimited’ figure of divinity is itself also delimited. The work then sketches how Christianity (for example) may be refigured according to this logic, publically expressing its revolutionary ethico-political core and privatising its speculative aspects. In other words, radical neo-Enlightenment would work towards retaining what is truly divine in religions and spiritualities, and excising their destructive excesses.

It is with some trepidation that I shall propose limits: after all, our epoch is witness to the philosophical and cultural reclamation of difference, divinity, infinity, excess – figures that challenge the limit; ‘figures of the limitless,’ one might say.¹ But I shall argue for limits with only *some* trepidation: with all the crises that plague the planet – for example, ecological devastation and anthropogenic climate-change, driven by the delusion that there are no planetary *limits*; or the financial collapses, predicated by a capitalistic logic of *limitless* lending and spending – with all these crises precipitated by a perverted limitlessness, we *must* propose parameters, we are forced to enforce the need for boundaries. Indeed, the time has come – and has perhaps even passed – for us to recognize and embrace what we are required to do today: to *love* (or re-love) limits, and to lovingly apply them (even if ruthlessly) – even when it comes to something as cherished as ‘diversity.’ For if there is a tendency in multicultural societies in general and postmodern theory in particular (including – and perhaps *especially* – theology) to valorize or even idolize limitlessness, we run the risk of validating the various plagues of excess ruining the Earth: ‘capitalism,’ ‘democracy,’ etc. – and, yes, in some ways and to some degree, even ‘religion’ and ‘religious diversity.’

The Return of Universality

I must stress that radical theory’s reclamation of the limitless is a good thing, but even one of the leading advocates of the very legitimate reclamation of particularity (and the concomitant deflation of any over-inflated universal Reason), John D. Caputo, recognizes that it is time we reclaim “some version of universality:”

There certainly have been circumstances in which it was important to insist upon the universal over the particular. With the advent of modernity that is precisely what we had to do: to insist upon the universal rights of people as opposed to the particular privileges of certain people. Now the postmodern situation *presupposes* modernity and that we've passed through this universalizing element. . . . So today our insistence upon singularity is in the context of having already moved through the Enlightenment. And now we want to protect difference. But we only want to protect difference *given* that we have certain universal conditions – the universal rights of all human beings – respected. That is why today, in our culture of differences, we see still another phase, in thinkers like Alain Badiou, who say we presuppose differences and must find universality or the same. That would be the next dialectical phase.²

My ambitious claim is that this “next dialectical phase” – or perhaps the ultimate phase, a definitive, conclusive phase that is nevertheless somewhat revisable and open-ended – should be nothing other than what I am calling ‘radical neo-Enlightenment,’ whose basic mission is nothing less than the configuration and ethico-political deployment of a universal Reason which transforms humanity and saves the Earth. Expressed otherwise: radical neo-Enlightenment is the logic of the coming revolution. The passionate thinking that will devise and drive the revolution is neither modernity’s bloated yet narrow hyper-rationalism whose offspring include scientism and New Atheism, nor an impotent rationalism which may have unfortunately lost its universal force as a consequence of postmodernity’s rightful reclamation of that which exceeds or eludes Reason. Our neo-rationality avoids these excesses and retains its noble task of thinking humanity’s transformation and Creation’s renewal.

One could immediately interject that such an ambitious conception of Reason contradicts my critique of limitlessness with which I began, for now it appears that I am making a case for a limitless thinking, since a universal reasoning is – it would appear, and by definition – limitless; that it has no limits – that is what makes the universal *universal*. A valid objection, to be sure. But I have already intimated that there are two types of limitlessness, good (divinity, for instance) and bad (capitalistic excess, for example). And could we not propose – quite tentatively, to be sure – that something which might differentiate them is that a good limitlessness paradoxically possesses some parameters?

Two examples might suffice to augment this tentative argument, offered with fear and trembling. First, a bad limitlessness. I have already noted that capitalism is driven by a greed that knows no bounds; various crises and disasters we are presently experiencing exposes capitalism as a bad limitlessness, and any ‘limitations’ imposed by government are likely to be cosmetic and ultimately ineffective (as witnessed by the ongoing climate-change and financial crises). The second example is theological: the divine (if there is any) is perhaps the most exemplary example of the utterly unlimited, whose infinity is one of its ‘defining’ characteristics; but it nevertheless possesses other defining and delimiting characteristics: that it be loving, just,

reasonable, etc. After all, the rational person would not believe in an insane or evil deity – or, at least, one could not adore it. And so, even divinity is/would be delimited in some ways.

The rationality that inhabits radical neo-Enlightenment, then, is a good type of limitlessness, to be deployed everywhere *because* it has its own limits or guidelines. After all, how could such a radical logic avoid the excesses of both over-inflated and impotent rationalisms if it is not itself a self-restrained thinking, whose parameters ensure that its self-confidence does not become bloated and arrogant? Radical neo-Enlightenment's rationality is, in other words, a limited limitlessness, quasi-unlimited, a thinking whose very boundaries allow it to be unbounded. But by what is this thinking demarcated? This huge question cannot be comprehensively addressed in a relatively short paper which is itself bound by the immediate task of articulating how this thinking re-figures religious diversity and its limits – but at least aspects of this new or renewed Reason will be variously indicated and intimated throughout the present exposition.

The Unlimited Delimited: Openness and God-dess

To begin with, radical neo-Enlightenment is driven by a philosophical open-mindedness: it accepts and affirms undecidability, and it is open to various possibilities which have been traditionally shunned by excessive rationalisms. For instance, this neo-rationality is very open to the possibility of divinity. We must recognize and insist on the divine's characterization *as a possibility* – for that is what it is, given that there is no absolutely watertight proof or evidence for the divine (for the time being). And such a stance is rigorously theological: belief is, by definition, *belief in something, not knowledge* of something. The question of divinity is undecidable, with faith (or unfaith) being a decision that occurs in the midst of this inescapable undecidability.³ True faith is marked by uncertainty, by doubt, thus ensuring that faith remains faith; the thoughtful believer (or unbeliever) thus always remembers that they may be wrong, that their belief may be false, their hope hollow. There is, then, obviously no room for dogmatism in radical neo-Enlightenment; no tolerance for fundamentalisms and extremisms.⁴ And this philosophical intolerance obviously also holds for any reverse fundamentalisms, such as hyper-empiricist or scientistic logics that dogmatically shut off the possibility of divinity.

I must also stress that this philosophical openness is *not* indiscriminate or absolutely/unlimitedly open; this openness should not be construed as the conceptual equivalent of 'anything goes' – far from it. Indeed, the fact that I am proposing limits to religion and religious diversity signifies that our openness is a critical openness, an open-mindedness that is 'nevertheless' discerning, delimiting. I thus emphatically insist on the difference between radical neo-Enlightenment's rational openness and the hyper-relativism riddling this world.

Consequently, I insist on the difference between our critical openness and the kind of almost unrestricted openness exhibited by a pro-actively multicultural society such as Australia. One should assert, in an apparently anti-politically-correct and *seemingly* 'conservative' way, that the substantially unrestricted religious freedom that prevails in the West today (barring,

perhaps, some ‘cults’ or the occasional media bashing of Scientology) is a manifestation of an ‘anything goes’ attitude. In an age of the unrestrained exhibition of supposed difference, we can already begin to perceive a need for limits to religion and religious diversity. And it is already obvious, then, that our open-mindedness is very different to an ‘anything goes’ liberalism, and that this discerning openness itself inhabits and reflects a thinking that is both universal and self-restrained – universal precisely because it is self-restrained.

‘Binding’ God-dess

So, radical neo-Enlightenment makes room for the possibility of divine ‘existence.’ But we must also ask *what kind* of deity is admissible? In other words, what figurations of the divine are not offensive to Reason and the revolution? What depictions of divinity *inform* and *inspire* revolutionary skepsis and praxis? I have already cited some defining characteristics of an acceptable and affirmable deity: good, loving, just, rational. I will not attempt to define these qualities here, for two opposing reasons: on the one hand, I would anticipate that rational beings would reach broad agreement in terms of what these concepts mean; on the other hand (and somewhat paradoxically), some of these ideas might be somewhat abyssal (e.g. ‘What is justice?’) and lead us beyond the limits of this paper. After all, what is most pressing for our present purposes is how divine characteristics and construals hold up under the scrutiny of an ethico-political rationality which asks: how are these notions used or abused by humans? In other words, are our figurations of divinity enlightening and emancipatory, or do they continue to enslave ourselves and the planet?

A simple, brief, concrete example will suffice here: the continued portrayal of an exclusively male deity, represented by gender-exclusive terms such as ‘God’ and its pronouns (‘He,’ ‘Him’), perpetuates patriarchy and sexism by giving them ‘divine sanction.’ But with the “next dialectical phase” and the coming revolution, there is no room for a gender-exclusive theologic and lexicon, which doesn’t automatically mean jettisoning existing terms, but rather re-figuring them e.g. “God” may be expressed as “God-dess”: not only is the deity thus configured as perhaps both male and female, but the all-important hyphen also signals a divinity that is perhaps beyond or otherwise than gendered.

If we are to offer content to the divine possibility, then, we must proceed with extreme caution, so that this content aligns with – indeed, even inspires and assists – human enlightenment and progressiveness rather than tyranny and oppression. This is the challenge for faith, since history tragically shows how traditional theologies and spiritualities have been constructed and deployed by the powerful (emperors, clerics, politicians, the media, etc.) to keep the masses ‘in the dark,’ subjugated. That is why we, today, should insist on beliefs that are thoroughly thoughtful. Rigorously rational religion, then, is open, anti-dogmatic, feminist, ecological, homophilial, anti-racist, anti-colonialist, anti-capitalist, and so on.

And so, the only acceptable belief in the coming age of radical Neo-Enlightenment will be that which aligns with a passionate thinking. Does this mean the invention of an absolutely new

religiosity, and the concomitant rejection of existing religious traditions? In line with our philosophical openness, we should allow for the possibility of some kind of radically rational belief independent of our existing religious traditions. Time may tell. But we should also allow for the possibility/probability that we also remain open to existing religious traditions – albeit in radically transformed forms. How so?

Christianity Ltd.

I can speak from experience in this regard. During my tertiary education, postgraduate studies, and continued exposure to the truths of philosophical currents such as feminism, deconstruction, ecological criticism, Marxism, etc., these epistemic forces have informed and reformed my Christian faith, so much so that I am now a self-described ‘anti-Christian Christian.’ What does this mean? To begin with, I recognize my faith *as faith*, so I may be wrong: the divine is a possibility which may be real or imagined. Deity (if there is any) is or would be characterized by a love for the whole Creation, by the desire for justice, for a global community of equals (and therefore some kind of proto-, and/or even neo-, communism) – biblical motifs that unfortunately remain submerged, even in faith communities (primarily because of their subversiveness).

And of course there is no Christian faith without some kind of appropriation of the Christic event; obviously any reclamation must be critical, thoughtful, discerning. Jesus of Nazareth was perhaps or probably a historical figure who may have some kind of special relation with divinity. Maybe, maybe not. I thus remain open to the possibility of a triune deity, but we open-minded ones also remain open to the possibility of a unitarian divinity, or a deity that may somehow be both (‘Trinit/Arian’), or neither, otherwise. Until any possible Second Coming, the Nazarene’s theological status remains an open question. In the meantime, we just don’t know. What we *do know* is that the dogmatic imposition of the Trinity, the silencing of the Arians, and irrational hereticization is the kind of violence that we vehemently reject and has no place in radical neo-Enlightenment.

More important for the mission of this radical rationality is how the progressive, enlightened aspects of the Nazarene’s life and words may be ethico-politically instructive today: to love, to give, and to forgive; to be on the side of the poor, the outsiders, the freaks; to oppose and overthrow oppressive religious, political, and economic institutions; to be willing to sacrifice one’s life in the mission to liberate and enlighten the world. What this sacrificial element entails is that we revolutionary believers (in both senses of the phrase) must be willing to face criticism and resistance, and for those living in less enlightened and downright oppressive places in which the Dark Ages are alive and well, our sisters and brothers shall be faced with persecution and death.

And how does radical neo-Enlightenment approach the Scriptures? Given that we have access to the Nazarene’s life and teachings via multifarious and contradictory biblical texts, we must be ruthlessly discerning, not swallowing it whole, but instead retaining whatever is

enlightening and emancipatory in them, and rejecting whatever is conservative and oppressive. In other words, we must read with Reason.⁵ As an anti-Christian Christian, I also abandon the clerical, superstitious, ritualistic aspects of Christianity and retain its revolutionary ethico-political core (to love, to share, to hope, and so on). The result is a neo-Christian faith that is ‘simultaneously’ rational and inspiring, tentative yet programmatic, epistemically humble yet brashly offering some ethico-political content, some revolutionary guidance (to love, to share, to be passionate and compassionate, to act, to be willing to offer one’s life for the Cause, etc.).

One may already begin to perceive the private and public aspects of this kind of Christianity. On the one hand, the radical Christian should remain private about the speculative aspects of this faith (e.g. belief in some kind of divinity; that Jesus may be some kind of divine ‘site’; etc.): these beliefs should not play a role in terms of one’s interaction in society; they should not impact how one relates as a citizen of the world. In other words, there should be strict limits on this speculative aspect of faith: it should not be admitted into the public domain, for it cannot be logically or empirically substantiated. On the level of the public and universal, it holds no traction, and must be bracketed – even though it may be true. On the other hand, the radical ethico-political core of Christianity certainly aligns with the rational ethico-political goal of a society structured by solidarity and sharing, so this aspect of Christianity should certainly be admitted in the public domain. Indeed, it should be allowed to encourage, inspire, and motivate the Christian in becoming involved in revolutionary ethico-political praxis.⁶ This imperative is driven by both Christianity and Reason. They both share this common ground.

Rationality as the Ground of a True Ecumenism

This very limited sketch of a particular faith that aligns with the “next dialectical phase,” radical neo-Enlightenment, is obviously and certainly applicable to other religions and spiritualities, to all belief systems. For this neo-rationality – which arguably happens to arise out of the ‘Greco-Christian West’ – is radically indiscriminate in this regard: it does not favour one region or religion above others. Radical neo-Enlightenment is not Eurocentric or Christocentric but ecocentric and universal. With this next phase, non-Christian and Christian believers alike will be called upon to practice radical-progressive versions of their faiths that align with this universal rationality, re-aligning their belief systems within its limits.

Whether by the art of gentle persuasion or by just force, the world’s religions and spiritualities shall thus be critically delimited for their own sake and for the common good of humanity and the planet. The critical delimitation of belief systems will also mean that ecumenical and multi-faith movements shall be *truly* united, bound by a radical rationality, a critical openness, the rejection of dogmatism, the abandonment of restrictive beliefs and practices, and so on. As paradoxical as it may appear, religious dialogue can only truly, meaningfully, take place in the context of a universality that imposes parameters on belief. As paradoxical as it may appear, it is these very thoughtful borders which provide the shared ground, the truly common ground, between the various faiths and spiritualities.

Another affirmative consequence of rationally-circumscribed belief systems is that they will be able to form alliances with an equally rational atheism (an atheism that is otherwise than the ‘New Atheism,’ which is dogmatic, and therefore nothing new), for we will have more commonalities than differences, given the common ground of a radical rationality. And of course this solidarity will extend to those between belief and unbelief, agnostics. Yes, true intra-faith and inter-faith harmony and unity. Progressives of whatever persuasion, then, will be united and driven by the task of transforming culture and thus saving Creation.

And so, radical neo-Enlightenment allows for religious ‘diversity’ in a nuanced and limited sense. Only such an apparently excessive measure will effectively overcome the ongoing horrors of religious dogmatisms, fundamentalisms, extremisms, and their countless socio-political correlates. For only a universal Reason shall offer the rules for all of us getting along (including getting along with non-human others), a getting-along which shall also enable the re-flourishing of the Earth. With radical neo-Enlightenment, religions will thus be compelled to privatize elements of belief (for example, one may privately believe that a Jewish carpenter is some kind of ‘concentrated’ site of divinity); religions will be forced to dispense with their oppressive elements (their sexism, dogmatism, etc.); but they shall also be allowed and indeed encouraged and invited to bring to the public sphere those elements of their faiths that align with Reason, with a radicalized rationality open to the possibility of the divine, thus contributing to radical neo-Enlightenment’s task of ethico-political emancipation and transformation.

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Notes

¹ This paper was originally intended to be presented at the Australasian Philosophy of Religion Association's 2012 Conference: 'Religious Diversity and its Philosophical Significance.' (I was unable to present the paper due to illness.)

² John D. Caputo and Mark Manolopoulos, "Good Soup and Other Gifts: With John D. Caputo," *With Gifted Thinkers: Conversations with Caputo, Hart, Horner, Kearney, Keller, Rigby, Taylor, Wallace, Westphal* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), 51-73, 64-65.

³ Whilst Jacques Derrida should be credited with heralding/recalling the pivotal role of undecidability, two thinkers who rigorously explore undecidability's significance for faith are Caputo and Robyn Horner. Refer to John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Robyn Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001); also refer to Mark Manolopoulos, "When Marion's Theology Seeks Certainty," *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* (2002) 4.1 <http://jcr.org/archives/04.1/manolopoulos.shtml>.

⁴ One could perhaps object – as somebody did in relation to another paper in which I also stress anti-dogmatism – that my position is "rather paradoxically dogmatic in its rejection of dogma": without buying into this sophistry, I would just point out that the key word here, 'paradoxically,' is telling: a paradox is some kind of 'contradiction' whose logic Reason cannot reject. (The full details of the article in question is: "Reading Scripture with a Scalpel," *Sino-Christian Studies: An International Journal of Bible, Theology & Philosophy* 13 [June 2012]). A book that explores the question of non-dogmatic belief (albeit from a perspective that differs somewhat from mine, a perspective that has less faith in universal reason) is Jeffrey W. Robbins' *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology* (Aurora: The Davies Group, 2004).

⁵ Refer to Mark Manolopoulos, "Reading Scripture with a Scalpel," *Sino-Christian Studies: An International Journal of Bible, Theology & Philosophy* 13 (June 2012) which offers instruction as to how the thinking believer should rationally discern the Scriptures – which, of course, applies to any religious texts.

⁶ In an interesting sort of way, there is a parallel here in the way in which deconstruction delimits – or at least acts as a “lever” on – religion: for Jacques Derrida, deconstruction will say nothing about any private or secret experience of the divine (so Derridean deconstruction presumably remains open about such a possibility), but deconstruction has leverage once this experience is translated into public discourse. Refer to Jacques Derrida in Jacques Derrida, John D. Caputo, Kevin Hart, and Yvonne Sherwood, “Epoché and Faith: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (New York: Routledge, 2005), 27-52, 37.