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CONTENTS

Introduction <i>Melanie Siebert</i>	1
Religion in the Public Sphere: The Limits of Habermas's Proposal and the Discourse of "World Religions" <i>Matt Sheedy</i>	3
The Prophetic Vision of Beauty: The Ethical Intersection of Literature and Theological Aesthetics <i>Katharine Bubel</i>	21
Articulating Religious Change: Bini the Prophet, the Seer <i>Jason Redden</i>	37
Notes on Contributors	57



## INTRODUCTION

When differing streams of thought converge, the interactions are often synergetic, but also turbulent. This issue of *Illuminate* features work by Canadian graduate students that addresses the theme “Confluence: Where Worldviews Converge.”

Matt Sheedy’s essay “Religion in the Public Sphere: The Limits of Habermas’s Proposal and the Discourse of ‘World Religions’” wades into the unsettled realm of public discourse where secular and religious worldviews often churn up misunderstanding and miscommunication. Sheedy argues that Habermas’s conception of “world religions” is shaped by Euro-hegemonic history and he articulates the necessity of reconsidering religion as a normative category.

In “The Prophetic Vision of Beauty: The Ethical Intersection of Literature and Theological Aesthetics,” Katharine Bubel uncovers affinities between Dostoyevsky’s aphorism “beauty will save the world,” Solzhenitsyn’s entreaty for artists and writers to pursue beauty’s “secret inner light,” and the assertions made in Christian theological aesthetics. In both literature and theology, Bubel locates the “decentering effect of beauty” and considers the ethical implications.

And in “Articulating Religious Change: Bini the Prophet, the Seer,” Jason Redden listens to the voices of Witsuwit̓en and Gitksan narrators who speak of the work of Bini, one of the influential Indigenous prophets of the Northwest Plateau in the early nineteenth century. Redden proposes that these accounts complicate the scholarly work on the Indigenous prophet tradition that tends to frame the tradition as a reaction to the sickness and hardships that resulted from colonial invasion. Drawing on the perspectives of Indigenous narrators, Redden sees the prophet tradition as not simply reactive,

## *Introduction*

but as a creative form of local agency whereby change was anticipated and directed.

These writers each explore a dynamic zone where various worldviews, stories, and histories intermingle, and they reveal how contrasting perspectives can enrich and inform one another. We hope you enjoy this issue. The editorial board would like to thank Leslie Kenny for her editorial guidance in this project. Many thanks also to Paul Bramadat, director of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, for fostering an environment that supports graduate scholarship and for the weekly stimulating coffee-time discussions. And thanks to the many people at the Centre who too work to create this place of confluence.

Melanie Siebert,  
for the *Illumine* 2009 Editorial Board

RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: THE LIMITS OF  
HABERMAS'S PROPOSAL AND THE DISCOURSE  
OF "WORLD RELIGIONS"

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**Abstract**

*Since 2001, Jürgen Habermas has turned increasingly toward questions on the role of religion in the public sphere. Modifying his earlier position, Habermas now argues for the equal inclusion of religious voices in the political public sphere and urges for the recognition among secular citizens that we are living in a "post-secular" world that must become adjusted to the continued existence of religious communities. Such a process requires that secular citizens undergo a "cognitive dissonance" when confronting religious claims and attempt a "translation program" to discover the profane truth content contained within. While there is much to commend this position, I argue that Habermas's model is unnecessarily constrained by his narrow understanding of "religion" as a normative category, and that he privileges a Euro-hegemonic conception of "world religions" while circumscribing the parameters for how discourse on religion—both in philosophy and in the public sphere—ought to proceed.*

**I**n a recent essay, Jürgen Habermas proposes a more inclusive approach to the role of religion in the public sphere than he was previously willing to permit.<sup>1</sup> Pointing to such phenomena as the fall of the Soviet Union and the attacks of September 11, 2001, he asserts that religion has gained a "hitherto unexpected political

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<sup>1</sup>Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14 (2006), 1.

importance,” thus warranting a renewed consideration.<sup>2</sup> Maeve Cooke observes this nuance in Habermas’s thinking, noting that since 2001 the tone of his writing on the importance of religion has been less cautious than in the past, calling for the inclusion of religious language in public debate.<sup>3</sup> Habermas’s renewed consideration is not without precedent, however, and can be detected in embryo in some of his earlier writings. In his 1992 essay “Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking,” for example, Habermas admits a certain indispensable relationship between religion and philosophy, where the former continues to inspire the latter through the force of its semantic content, thus maintaining what he calls a “curious dependence” between the two.<sup>4</sup> It is not until his 2006 essay “Religion in the Public Sphere,” however, that he makes the transition from recognizing the existence and value of this dependence to granting religious actors reciprocal rights in the realm of public discourse. While ultimately denying religious voices a place in the legislature, Habermas’s move raises some important questions about the limits of communicative rationality and the problem of toleration more generally. On the one hand, it pushes the boundaries of public discourse by challenging secular citizens to grapple with the “profane truth content” of religious statements while, on the other hand, urging non-religious citizens to embrace the realities of a “post-secular” world that must learn to accommodate the continued existence of religion as a force in public life. Habermas’s move thus places a shared burden on religious and secular persons alike, and proposes a framework where religious voices can contribute to political decision making without becoming overtly politicized in the process. Furthermore, it suggests a renewed understanding of the nature of the social contract which, by mutual consensus, citizens (ideally) agree to enshrine in a secular constitution. In this way, an egalitarian foundation for political public discourse is more equally distributed and, what is more, a higher standard is set

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2 For an earlier statement on these themes, see Jürgen Habermas, “Faith and Knowledge,” in *The Future of Human Nature*, trans. Hella Beister and Max Pensky (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

3 Maeve Cooke, “Salvaging and Secularizing the Semantic Contents of Religion: The Semantic Contents of Religion: The Limitations of Habermas’s Postmetaphysical Proposal,” *International Journal of Philosophy* 60 (2006): 189.

4 Jürgen Habermas, *Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 51.

## *Habermas and the Discourse of “World Religions”*

for critical self-reflection, one that requires all participants to undergo a form of “cognitive dissonance” so that they might internalize the position of the “other.” In short, Habermas’s proposal advocates a pragmatic program for including religious voices in the political public sphere in order to facilitate rational communication.

While the nature and corresponding models of deliberation of the political public sphere are by no means a settled boundary (nor, for that matter, is the question of how cognitive dissonance might be applied in public debate), Habermas does not seem concerned with the logistics of a positive model, but rather with the normative, and thus theoretical, question of how and on what grounds we ought to ideally proceed.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to what he sees as an authoritarian and dogmatic Marxist model, as espoused by Lukács, or the impotent political quietism of Adorno’s negative dialectics,<sup>6</sup> Habermas endorses a radical social democratic vision of the public sphere, where members of a self-determining citizenry “present normative dialogue as a conversation of justification taking place under the constraints of an ‘ideal speech situation,’” and where the conditions of universal moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity are taken for granted.<sup>7</sup> Problems with this model notwithstanding, his conception of an idealized public sphere does pose some interesting questions for debates on inclusion, deliberation, and the reduction of antagonistic tendencies in modern liberal states, not least of which are those that arise between religious and secular citizens. For one thing, Habermas’s theory of modernity establishes the terms by which subjects in modern societies are able to undergo a “learning process” whereby actions can be coordinated and consensus facilitated under a pragmatic and “post-conventional” conception of the meaning of moral utterances.<sup>8</sup> Habermas’s

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5 For a selection of critical essays on Habermas’s model of the public sphere, see Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge Mass: The MIT Press, 1992).

6 See, for example, Andrew Edgar’s chapter on the public sphere in his book *The Philosophy of Habermas* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s UP, 2008), 27-55.

7 See Seyla Benhabib, “Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition and Jürgen Habermas,” in *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 105.

8 For a clear elaboration of Habermas’s theory of modernity and discourse ethics, see James Gordon Finlayson, *Habermas: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 62-105.

prescriptions run into problems, however, when we consider his understanding of “religion” as a normative category, and how the limits he sets forth for dialogue serve to privilege a narrow discourse at the expense of other, more critical interpretations. On this point, we may rightly ask whether Habermas’s conception of religion and valuation of its role in public discourse could be used in the service of a hegemonic political agenda (i.e., one that is Eurocentric), and whether the boundaries that he sets for secular citizens to engage the religious are unnecessarily constrained. Though I will elaborate further on the logistics of Habermas’s theory, it is with these last two points that I am chiefly concerned.

At the outset of his 2003 essay “Intolerance and Discrimination,” Habermas grants a certain pride of place to the early struggles for religious toleration—from the *Edict of Nantes* in France (1598), and the *Act Concerning Religion* in Maryland (1649), to the *Toleration Act* of 1689 in England—as templates for all other constitutional rights within a liberal democratic framework and as harbingers of modernity.<sup>9</sup> Just as early debates on tolerance required a “learning process” through deliberation, so too does democratic will formation involve the act of “mutual perspective taking” in order that democratic power becomes generalized and institutionalized within the state. Moreover, this goal of mutual recognition of another’s right to believe differently than oneself requires a cognitive adaptation to competing worldviews and a process of recognition and legitimation by all parties of the moral content of a mutually agreed upon democratic and secular constitution. Noting that the U.S. *Bill of Rights* of 1776 “was the political pacemaker en route to establishing a freedom of religion that rested on the reciprocal respect of the religious freedom of others,” Habermas demonstrates a strong concern with what he sees as an authoritarian religious “revivalism” in both the Muslim world and in the United States in particular.<sup>10</sup> He argues for a more expansive view of John Rawls’s notion of the “public use of reason,” urging that a “uniting bond” of civic solidarity be established

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9 Habermas, “Intolerance and Discrimination,” *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 1, 1 (2003): 22.

10 Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 3. For a critique of Habermas’s notion of a post-secular constellation see Hans Joas, “Post-Secular Religion: On Jürgen Habermas,” in *Do We Need Religion: On the Experience of Self-Transcendence* (Boulder, Col: Paradigm Publishers, 2008), 105-111.

*Habermas and the Discourse of “World Religions”*

through a reciprocal cognitive adaptation among secular citizens—an adaptation, he stresses, that should be “distinguished from the political virtue of mere tolerance.”<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, secular citizens need to develop what he calls a “self-reflective transcending of a secularist self-understanding of Modernity,” and a recognition that they live in a post-secular society that must become “epistemically adjusted” to the continued existence of religious communities.<sup>12</sup> This turn away from Rawls’s notion of the “public use of reason” seeks to reconcile itself to the reality of a post-secular world and to come to terms with the fact that religious claims constitute “a reasonably expected disagreement” in the political public sphere.

In her critique of this argument, Maeve Cooke notes how Habermas distinguishes between a “critical engagement” with the cognitive substance of religious statements from a “critical assessment” of a statement’s validity. In this way, he seeks to retain post-metaphysical thinking within the purview of social philosophy, while recognizing the continued dependence between secular and religious identities and the potential for semantic renewal.<sup>13</sup> While ultimately lauding Habermas’s ideas, Cooke finds some problems with the narrowness of his approach. For one thing, she notes, Habermas fails to distinguish between beliefs that are epistemologically authoritarian from those that are not. The problem with the former is that they make claims to truth without mediation through language (and thus inclusion and deliberation), and disregard history and context in their argumentation. More importantly, the presumed certainty of religious experience that the authoritarian holds precludes any kind of critical assessment.<sup>14</sup> While she is largely in agreement with Habermas’s suggestion that the psychological burden of cognitive dissonance be distributed equally between secular and religious citizens alike, Cooke rightly points out his failure to fully consider how requiring public contributions to the process of legislation through a “post-metaphysical vocabulary” might impair the political participation of religious believers. In this way, non-authoritarian religious voices could be barred from the decision-making process unnecessarily. As

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11 Habermas, “Religion,” 15.

12 *Ibid.*, 15.

13 Cooke, “Salvaging and Secularizing,” 195.

14 *Ibid.*, 199.

she writes:

Jettisoning the elitist, absolutist, and a-historical elements of traditional modes of metaphysical thinking, we can endeavor to develop non-authoritarian modes; metaphysical thinking of this kind acknowledges that its guiding assumptions are mediated by language, history, and context and understands them not as indisputable claims about the structure of the mind or the world, but as arguments that raise claims to validity that can be subjected to critical interrogation in open-ended, inclusive, and fair processes of public argumentation.<sup>15</sup>

Cooke's positive valuation of "non-authoritarian" metaphysical thinking touches on a potential deficiency in Habermas's argumentation. By failing to distinguish between modes of religious self-understanding (authoritarian from non-authoritarian) he does, in effect, exclude potential voices from the legislative process that may very well meet his standards of practical reason. While I do not wish to defend the legitimacy of Cooke's suggestion to include what she calls "non-authoritarian" metaphysical thinking within the legislative process, nor investigate this problem here, it is worth considering whether Habermas fails to distinguish between different modes of metaphysical thinking, and if so, if this constitutes a significant oversight in his theory.

The real crux of the problem, however, is that Habermas not only fails to distinguish between modes of religious *self-understanding*, but that he also neglects to distinguish between modes of *understanding religion* and thus narrows the boundaries for critique. Consider the following statement from "Religion in the Public Sphere":

In short, post-metaphysical thought is prepared to learn from religion, but remains agnostic in the process. It insists on the difference between the certainties of faith, on the one hand, and validity claims that can be publicly criticized, on the other; but it refrains from the rationalist presumption that it

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 205.

## *Habermas and the Discourse of “World Religions”*

can itself decide what part of the religious doctrine is rational and what part irrational.<sup>16</sup>

In advocating for an “agnostic” approach, Habermas first distinguishes between faith and validity claims, thus separating truth statements that have no direct consequences for public discourse (e.g., I believe that Jesus is the son of God) from those that do (e.g., homosexuality is a sin). He goes on to grant the “certainties of faith” a privileged domain, thereby permitting religious doctrines an exemption from rational critique. To put it differently, post-metaphysical thought refrains from passing judgment on religious claims to faith. Its only demand is that ideas professed in the political public sphere be profane, in light of the fact that a change in epistemic attitudes for the “religious consciousness” requires a difficult learning process that has “ambiguous consequences” from a social and cognitive point of view.<sup>17</sup> Underlying Habermas’s concern is the endangerment of political integration when the gap between worldviews splits a society into “fundamentalist” and “secular” camps. In the case of the former, and indeed for all religious groups, it is necessary that they are able to develop a self-reflexive and pluralistic view of modernity, such that the truth claims of “non-believers” are understood as inevitable disagreements to be worked through in rational discourse and not merely rejected out of hand.<sup>18</sup> In the case of the latter, a non-reductionistic and reflexive attitude toward the religious is required, and one that “refrains from passing judgment on religious truths, while insisting, in a non-polemical fashion, on making a strict demarcation between faith and knowledge.”<sup>19</sup> While I think that such a notion is essentially correct in its recognition of the difficulties required in moving from a conventional to a post-conventional moral framework, and, moreover, recognizes that a complementary learning process cannot proceed upon the presumption of the *a priori* validity of a secular (scientific) worldview, it does not follow, as Habermas

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16 Habermas, “Religion,” 180.

17 Habermas, “Religion,” 18.

18 *Ibid.*, 18.

19 Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere: Cognitive Presuppositions for the ‘Public Use of Reason’ by Religious and Secular Citizens,” in *Between Naturalism and Religion*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 140.

argues, that, “only the participants and their religious organizations can resolve the question of whether a ‘modernized’ faith is still the ‘true’ faith.”<sup>20</sup> While there is value in leaving internal debates as to the “true” faith to believers as a tactical position, as it satisfies a level of reciprocity in public discourse that would restrict secular critiques to “validity claims that can be publicly criticized” (as in the case of homosexuality mentioned above), such a distinction could potentially limit the opportunity to open up discourse on religion to a deeper analysis. What is problematic here is not so much the restriction placed on secular citizens toward leaving faith claims to believers, but rather the implication that this dimension of religiosity is somehow unimportant for the consequences of public debate. Since Habermas’s theory is normative and *not* positive or explanatory, a critical theory of religion must attend to the historical and indeed theological claims to faith in order to reveal, among other things, prevailing modes of false consciousness, prejudice, ethno-centric bias, and so forth.

Common to the academic study of religion is the *a priori* rejection of any notion of a “true” religion, be it from an *emic* or an *etic* point of view. In other words, the truth claims of religious traditions are neither validated nor denied, though they are often subject to a materialist critique from the perspective of the social sciences. Accordingly, the following statement by Habermas must be met with suspicion:

At best, philosophy circles the opaque core of religious experience when reflecting on the intrinsic meaning of faith. This core must remain so abysmally alien to discursive thought as does the core of aesthetic experience, which can likewise only be circled but not penetrated by philosophical reflection.<sup>21</sup>

While this argument may be reasonable within the current purview of positive discourse within the public sphere, a domain that has largely resisted the incorporation of the academic study of religion, it does not hold true for philosophical reflection, especially when such discourse is broadened to include a critical social theory in the study of religion. While it is true that for certain schools of

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20 Ibid., 19.

21 Habermas, “Religion,” 17.

thought, most notably amongst phenomenological thinkers in the tradition of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolph Otto, and Mircea Eliade, the experiential realm should remain a realm unto itself beyond explanation or critique,<sup>22</sup> for many others such methods grant an unwarranted *sui generis* status to religious claims, thereby making them immune to criticism.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, much recent work on cognitive theories of religion, such as those by Pascal Boyer and Harvey Whitehouse, have been explicit in engaging the experiential realm in the mind of the believer.<sup>24</sup> Here an important question must be raised: How can Habermas expect secular citizens to undergo a cognitive dissonance while not being allowed to critique theological claims to truth from a critical, while respectful, position? Is such a requirement not then placing a similarly undue burden on secular citizens? Here I will suggest that part of problem can be traced back to Habermas’s understanding of “religion” itself. Since critical discourses on religion are able to move beyond the simplistic and stereotypical atheist/theist divide, criticized by Habermas when he refers to positivist models of religion as “scientism,”<sup>25</sup> and are able to mount a critique of religion on less cognitively jarring terms, though in ways that are no less challenging (e.g., a recent ad supported by Richard Dawkins, which read, “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life!”),<sup>26</sup> Habermas’s concern over the need to approach religious consciousness while not challenging “truth claims” amongst adherents, is unnecessarily conservative and premature. Moreover, by adopting a position that exempts certain theological questions from public critique, Habermas ignores the socio-political and historical construction of “world religions” as a

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22 See Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Co., 1991), 220-250.

23 See Donald Wiebe, “Religious Studies,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. John R. Hinnells (New York: Routledge, 2005), 98-121.

24 For an overview of such theories see Luther H. Martin, “Religion and Cognition,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. John R. Hinnells (New York: Routledge, 2005), 473-488.

25 See Habermas, “The Boundary Between Faith and Knowledge: On the Reception and Contemporary Importance of Kant’s Philosophy of Religion,” in *Between Naturalism and Religion*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008).

26 Atheist Campaign.Org: <http://www.atheistbus.org.uk/>.

Euro-hegemonic discourse in need of critical examination. Here I will suggest that a critical investigation of such problems in the domain of philosophy (and in the social sciences and humanities more generally) would significantly enhance Habermas's normative model for debates involving religion in the public sphere.

While Habermas's prescriptions for public discourse mark a change from his earlier thinking, we can detect a continuity of his position on religious faith in some of his previous work. In his essay "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World," Habermas attempts to ascertain the premises under which philosophers and theologians can communicate, and by which the former can understand the status and truth claims of the latter. Citing his preference for "methodological atheism" he comes to the conclusion that philosophy cannot borrow the discourse of religion as *religious experience*, but must borrow instead from "the universe of argumentative discourse that is uncoupled from the event of revelation." Phrases such as "redemption" and "messianic light" should thus remain out of bounds for post-metaphysical thinking.<sup>27</sup> Concerning his statement that religious experience can "only be circled but not penetrated by philosophical reflection," we must ask whether or not Habermas is privileging religion as a *sui generis* category.<sup>28</sup>

In his recent book *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, Hans Kippenberg takes an historical look at how nineteenth century developments in philosophy, sociology, and anthropology, among other disciplines, helped to shape religion in a particular way. Crucial to Kippenberg's analysis is the question of why religion appears the way it does. Noting how nineteenth century thinkers sought to de-religionize religion into ethics and thereby protect it from sustained scrutiny, his inquiry charts a series of developments that have had a lasting impact on the field. One such development that he explores is the tendency for certain nineteenth century thinkers to move away from the aggressive scientism of the Enlightenment, toward a renewed sense of the importance of religious history. Dissatisfied with the

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27 Jürgen Habermas, "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence from in this World," in *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*, ed. Eduardo Medieta (New York: Routledge, 2005), 309.

28 Habermas, "Religion," 17.

## *Habermas and the Discourse of “World Religions”*

various ruptures and dislocations of modernity, with its mechanized objectification of the world, Kippenberg notes how leading thinkers made a turn toward asceticism and mysticism, where such categories as “thoughts,” “feelings,” and “meaning” were given a pride of place. One such thinker was Ernst Troeltsch, who advanced the notion that only religion would be able save culture from a descent into materialism, and that Christianity could actually save humankind by separating humans from the culture that threatened to overwhelm them.<sup>29</sup> What is important to note here is that trends amongst nineteenth century philologists, anthropologists, and sociologists, who made profound and influential contributions to the study of “world religions,” tended to frame their discourse along the lines of a rational and universal religiosity, though one that was still steeped in the Christian tradition.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to finding parallels with Habermas’s views on theological criticism, we might also observe here traces of his discourse ethics and his notion of post-metaphysical thinking. While these parallels are by no means exact, Habermas’s notion of religion can be broadly situated within this theoretical heritage. More importantly, it is here that we find an entry point to critique the deficiencies of his position. If religion, thusly conceived, is a heritage we cannot dispense with, then learning from and accommodating it is certainly a reasonable course of action. It would seem that Habermas’s writings on post-metaphysical thinking and, more recently, on religion in the public sphere, are geared in this direction. But if religion is merely conceived of as a remnant of the past where, following Habermas, semantic traces may still reveal “profane truth content” for secular discourse, then what does this mean for how we can conceptualize religion in the public sphere? More importantly, if discourse in the political public sphere is to include religious points of view, must we refrain from analyzing the discourse of religion in a critical fashion? Lastly, if the goal of public discourse is for free and unconstrained communication where, in the interest of containing religious voices to the weak public sphere, we find a need for secular citizens to

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29 Hans Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 122.

30 For a discussion on such trends see Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999).

also undergo a cognitive adaptation to religious perspectives but *not* criticize theological propositions, then we find in Habermas a marked contradiction. By imposing this limitation on the force of secular critique, Habermas risks privileging a certain dimension of theological belief as a *sui generis* category. Moreover, by allowing theologians the sole privilege of solving problems in “their” domain, he ignores the fact that theological assumptions are the product of Euro-hegemonic historical discourse, and thus can and should be contested as “real” and “legitimate” categories of investigation.

In her book *The Invention of World Religions*, Tomoko Masuzawa undertakes a similar project to Kippenberg, though offering a more biting critique of normative assumptions in the contemporary study of religion. Pointing to those “religion friendly scholars,” of whom we may include Habermas (though not without condition), she notes the ambiguous line between the reality of religions on the one hand (i.e., in a generalized and tangible sense), and their legitimacy as a normative category on the other. Such confusion thus raises the question of how we are to lend legitimacy to something that may not be “real” at all, since it is largely the product of Western scholarship. While the discourse of world religions in the present day claims to have turned away from nineteenth century notions of the search for “origins” and the “primitive,” questions of Eurocentric bias still loom large. As Masuzawa points out:

In some localities, being religious—to put it more concretely, practicing or engaging in what has been deemed ‘religious’—may be related to the question of personal and group identity in a way altogether different from the one usually assumed (i.e., assumed on the basis of the western European denominational history of recent centuries). In some cases, for that matter, religion and identity may not relate at all.<sup>31</sup>

It is important to note here the distinction Masuzawa makes between the *reality* of religions and their *legitimacy*. She does not deny that religions *exist* as a normative category of classification, but rather questions how they have been defined and made legitimate in

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31 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.

## *Habermas and the Discourse of “World Religions”*

a particular historical and cultural climate. While limitations of space do not allow for a detailed exploration of Masuzawa’s critique, one short example should prove illuminating.

In discussing nineteenth century constructions of Islam, Masuzawa notes how the tradition’s classification as an “Arab” and “Semitic” religion was the product of a belief in the universality of Christianity, and as a way to interpret how other religions could be so persistent and, in the case of Islam, so powerful. The Aryan religions, for their part, of which Christianity was seen as the ultimate manifestation, were considered the bearers of the universal principles of the modern world: science, art, democracy, law, individuality, and the normative construction of “world religions.”<sup>32</sup> Acknowledging the move toward a discourse of “plurality” and “diversity” of religions in the first half of the twentieth century, Masuzawa’s study reveals how contemporary classifications of world religions are still embedded in this Eurocentric discourse, where the East preserves history while the West creates it. A mere glance at some of the titles of Habermas’s essays, for example, “Israel or Athens: Where does Anamnestic Reason Belong,” or “The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers,” reveals a consistent preoccupation with the Western “Judeo-Christian” (religious) and political heritage of Enlightenment philosophy, and is thus largely limited to an occidental lens.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Habermas’s debates on religion have overwhelmingly been with Christian theologians, such as John Baptist Metz, Jürgen Moltmann, and Joseph Ratzinger.<sup>34</sup> For Masuzawa, to speak of religion as a category of classification is to tap into a “systemic network of discursive organization” that was shaped in the service of Eurocentric interests. As she argues at the end of her book:

Instead, criticism calls for something far more laborious, tedious, and difficult: a rigorous historical investigation that

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32 Masuzawa, 206.

33 Both essays can be found in Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), 2002.

34 See *Observations of “The Spiritual Situation of the Age,”* ed. Jürgen Habermas, trans. Andrew Buchwalter (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985); and Habermas and Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2006).

does not superstitiously yield to the comforting belief in the liberating power of “historical consciousness.” . . . This is one of the reasons historiography must always include the historical analysis of our discourse itself.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, by failing to problematize religion as a constructed category, Habermas also runs the risk of ignoring the socio-political role that religion plays in relation to human culture. Russel T. McCutcheon takes up this point when he writes the following:

To limit a priori the scale by which one studies these religious things to emic, devotee’s self- core of the datum is to fail to understand individual and social religious life, religious associations, religious experiences, and their academic study as well as inherently the practices and engagements of historical and contextualized human beings.<sup>36</sup>

As a consequence of this limitation, valid, illuminating, and non-confessional methods of analysis (sociological, psychological, political, feminist, etc.) are often excluded *a priori* to the investigation.<sup>37</sup> A corollary of this pitfall, notes McCutcheon, is that it proceeds by studying human beings “as if they were simply believing, disembodied minds,” and thus avoids, to quote Masuzawa, “confronting the relations between material, cultural productions (e.g., a myth one studies) and the concrete political and economic conflicts and inequities of the people under study.”<sup>38</sup> In short, what McCutcheon’s observations reveal for my critique of Habermas is that by assuming the category of religion as different from other kinds of human discourse, and that scientific and theological categories are ultimately separate pursuits, he runs the risk of privileging theological

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35 Masuzawa, 328.

36 Russel T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 11.

37 For a critique of Habermas’s failure to engage with feminist discourse, see Seyla Benhabib, “The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Moral Theory,” in *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

38 McCutcheon, 13.

*Habermas and the Discourse of "World Religions"*

claims as a de-contextualized category that is divorced from the complex socio-political and historical interactions that are always already present in the creation of "meaning." In such a way, Habermas may be compromising his larger goals of embracing plurality and so-called "toleration" by avoiding an investigation of the legitimacy of theological discourse itself and, in the process, privileging a small, select group of (largely Christian) theologians at the expense of other religious and secular critical points of view.

In this essay I have argued that Habermas's more inclusive reconsideration of religion in the public sphere is limited by his narrow conception of the discourse of the study of religion. As a normative (critical) discourse theory, his suggestion that both religious and secular citizens undergo a mutual cognitive dissonance in order to share the burden of reciprocal perspective taking, has significant implications for any positive model seeking to apply his ideas. Such a model is compatible with Habermas's notion that we live in a post-secular world, namely, one that is reconciled to the continued existence and influence of religion amidst an ongoing process of secularization. What is more, such a model elevates discourse to the highest ideal by seeking to instantiate not merely a formal or legal mode of toleration, where discourse and boundaries are set by the narrow demands of forbearance of an other's beliefs, but a model of intrinsic toleration, where communicative ethics are put forward as a mode of action to be undertaken in a radically new light. Though it is not at all certain *if* and *how far* such insights can inform and enlarge the scope of discourse on religion in the public sphere, it is important that such critiques be seriously considered in light of the very real discords, both within and between religious and secular formations, that threaten to make the very possibility of communication null and void. If we are to take Habermas seriously, then a critical theory of religion should also consider how discourses like those of Kippenberg, Masuzawa, and McCutcheon, reveal a fundamental flaw in Habermas's understanding of religion as a normative category of investigation. Consideration of the discourse of theology and of "world religions" as the product of a Euro-hegemonic history opens up a whole range of possibilities for critiquing religion in both the academy and in the public sphere. Significant progress on this front may very well offer insights on how far the critique of religious (and secular) consciousness may go, and on what terms it

may proceed. In this sense, cognitive dissonance between secular and religious worldviews need not necessarily avoid certain forms of critique once a critical and more nuanced understanding of religion, in all its complex and theoretical manifestations, is enlarged beyond its current limitations.

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THE PROPHETIC VISION OF BEAUTY: THE ETHICAL  
INTERSECTION OF LITERATURE AND  
THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

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**Abstract**

*In his 1970 Nobel Prize in Literature lecture, Russian author Alexandr Solzhenitsyn asserted that the famous utterance of Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin, "Beauty will save the world," was not the issue of vain hope or foolish romanticism, but rather "prophecy." This paper will investigate the way in which Solzhenitsyn's ethical claim concerning literature intersects with theological aesthetics, especially in the latter's assertion that beauty must be recovered from its decline beneath the amorphous sublime and re-associated with the good and true. Solzhenitsyn's challenge was primarily addressed to the global community of authors, calling them to offer a collective moral "field of vision" for humanity through their literary art. I will locate the ethical import of this literary "field of vision" in its relation to self-knowledge, and then explore theological aesthetics' claim that the identity of the human being is revealed, judged and affirmed in an encounter with the beauty of Christ.*

"And so perhaps that old trinity of Truth, Good, and Beauty is not just the formal outworn formula it used to seem to us during our heady, materialistic youth. If the crests of these three trees join together, as the investigators and explorers used to affirm, and if the too obvious, too straight branches of Truth and Good are crushed or amputated and cannot reach the light—yet perhaps the whimsical, unpredictable, unexpected branches of Beauty will make their way through

and soar up TO THAT VERY PLACE and in this way perform the work of all three. And in that case it was not a slip of the tongue for Dostoyevsky to say that ‘Beauty will save the world,’ but a prophecy.” —Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

In his lecture for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1970, Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whose celebrated writings revealed to the world the crimes of the Stalinist regime in Russia, knowingly countered the prevailing opinion on the status of beauty expressed in contemporary aesthetics discourse. Kant’s famous differentiation in *Critique of Judgment* between the peaceful, harmonious play of the imagination with the beautiful, conceived as bounded sensible form that universally pleases, and the destabilizing, dynamic encounter with the sublime—the formless, unrepresentable and indeterminate—signalled beauty’s decline from the central interest of modern aesthetics. Today, the diminution of beauty is maintained by many theorists, often out of an expressed concern for justice. As Eastern Orthodox practitioner of theological aesthetics David B. Hart acknowledges, “There is . . . an undeniable ethical offense in beauty: not only in its history as a preoccupation of privilege . . . [but also in] its unsettling prodigality.”<sup>1</sup> Beauty will appear in places of unspeakable anguish, a free play of light amidst the hideousness of ethnic cleansing, suicide bombs, epidemic, and famine. It seems that beauty, if not complicit in, is at least indifferent to violence and suffering in the world, and this may strike the human sensibility as a sign of cruelty. But some push the indictment still further. Implicated by its evocation of the gaze of desire that purportedly always objectifies, obfuscates, and owns the other, beauty “has come to be identified as a source of oppression and discrimination,” according to art critic and curator Saul Ostrow.<sup>2</sup>

Into such a climate of growing ambivalence if not outright hostility towards beauty, Solzhenitsyn, who was acquainted with suffering through his exile to the Soviet gulag, interjected a remarkable claim

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1 David Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 15.

2 Saul Ostrow, “The Eternal Problem of Beauty’s Return,” review of *Beauty Matters* edited by Peg Zeglin Brand/*On Beauty and Being Just* by Elaine Scarry/*Monster/Beauty: Building the Body of Love* by Johanna Fruch/*Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Art Journal* 62, 3 (2003): 113 (italics mine).

## *The Prophetic Vision of Beauty*

for beauty's moral force. In his address to the writers of the world, he dares to assert that it is "a certain peculiarity in the essence of beauty" that gives to art "the convincingness . . . [that is] completely irrefutable."<sup>3</sup> Attesting to the potency of beauty's "secret inner light," he writes that "through art we are sometimes visited—dimly, briefly—by revelations such as cannot be produced by rational thinking."<sup>4</sup> According to Solzhenitsyn, art that conveys "the truth . . . as a living force," inherent in its very form and not just as a proposition carried within it, is incontrovertible. As such, art—particularly literature—can thus be prophetic in exposing violence as the "method" and falsehood as the "principle" wielded by totalitarian governments, but also in countering more subtle forms of ideological captivity and coercion around the world.<sup>5</sup> While decrying authoritarian attempts to control art, such as he personally suffered under the Communist regime, Solzhenitsyn was still emboldened to ask: "For what purpose have we been given this gift? What are we to do with it?"<sup>6</sup> Through his speech, he sought to "reproach, beg, urge and entice" the artist to recognize that "the gift of talent imposes responsibility on his free will."<sup>7</sup> That task is to create truthfully, to bear witness to "that which lies nearby" so that art, and especially "world literature," may convincingly offer humanity a collective "field of vision" in which to "see itself as it really is."<sup>8</sup> His hope was that such vision, giving form and presence to the various individual and collective experiences from one generation to the next and one people group to another, would give rise to a shared "scale of values" concerning the dignity and freedom of human beings. By this universal sense of measure, we would have the means by which to both "pass judgement" on institutions and individuals, and close the "yawning gap" between cultural-linguistic frameworks.<sup>9</sup>

Solzhenitsyn's urgent proposal that literature must act as a mirror for human consciousness and action, echoing the philosopher's

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3 Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, "Nobel Lecture," in *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1968-1980*, ed. S. Allen (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 1993), 2, [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1970/solzhenitsyn-lecture.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1970/solzhenitsyn-lecture.html).

4 *Ibid.*, 2.

5 *Ibid.*, 10.

6 *Ibid.*, 2.

7 *Ibid.*, 6.

8 *Ibid.*, 9.

9 *Ibid.*, 3-4.

injunction to “know thyself,” is framed in a metaphysical understanding of great works of art as embodied instantiations of beauty. The particular work acts as a conduit of a “bright thrust of light” that “inflames even a frozen, darkened soul to a high spiritual experience.”<sup>10</sup> In this conception, the Eastern Orthodox Solzhenitsyn draws from a long Christian tradition of theological aesthetics. Though only recently developed as an interdisciplinary field of study, theological aesthetics has its roots in the thought of the Church Fathers, who subsumed and “converted” the Neoplatonic formulation of beauty as the radiance overflowing from the Absolute One into the realm of material beings. Plotinus stated, “We ourselves possess beauty when we are true to our being; . . . our self-knowledge, that is to say, is our beauty.”<sup>11</sup> This notion of the connection between self-knowledge and beauty became a central concern of theological reflection, especially through the writings of Saint Augustine, who explicated it through the concepts of memory, reason, confession, and forgiveness, leading to his memorable address to Christ: “Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you.”<sup>12</sup> In this paper, I will explore the intersection of the moral view of art and literature as expressed by Solzhenitsyn and the premise of theological aesthetics, a point at which is found the shared notion of the prophetic force of beauty, namely, that the ethical desire for the good arises and is directed and chastened by a decentering revelation of what it is to be fully human.

From what do we derive our values, our sense of right and wrong, our “ought-to-be’s”? Theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, whose seven-volume *The Glory of the Lord* is the seminal text of theological aesthetics, asserts that the ethical sense is activated in the primal recognition of beauty: the face, or presence, of the other. Von Balthasar tells us that the “I” of a child “awakens in the experience of a ‘Thou’: in its mother’s smile through which it learns that it is contained, affirmed and loved in a relationship which is incomprehensively

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10 Ibid., 2.

11 Plotinus, “On the Intellectual Beauty,” in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 3rd ed., ed. David H. Richter (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2007), 119.

12 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992), 201.

## *The Prophetic Vision of Beauty*

encompassing, already actual, sheltering and nourishing.”<sup>13</sup> Such a dawning of consciousness resonates with Hans-Georg Gadamer’s description of truth in *Truth and Method* as *aletheia*, the “radiance,” mode of appearing, or disclosure of being to our finite comprehension, which is the defining aspect of beauty.<sup>14</sup> The truth of “myself,” von Balthasar is asserting, is not something to be proved like a scientific fact, but is experiential, originating in an encounter that reveals an “I” existing because of a “Thou,” and this is first experienced in the *alethetic* vision of the face of the mother, a face that is not our own. Subjectivity is grounded in sensual awareness of the other and in recognition of primordial dependency. The “I” is not self-existing but born into and continuously carried forward in a social, and thus moral, context. This truth of a self founded in and dependent upon otherness rather than in the operations of a solitary *cogito* will be repeatedly manifested, from infancy onward, though it can and—as one must admit by examining human behaviour—inevitably *will* be forgotten, evaded, or denied.

In that initial glimpse of beauty in the face of the mother, the journey for every human is begun and defined as *epektasis*, a reaching out towards what he or she desires. Von Balthasar maintains that desire is originally oriented by that first social encounter, “the experience of being granted entrance into a sheltering and encompassing world”—pure gift.<sup>15</sup> However, the “distinction” of the self from the parent in the process of individuation gives rise to a consciousness of freedom. Out of this consciousness come the inevitable searching questions, such as: Who am I? What will satisfy me? And how do I matter? The Aristotelian conception of the uniqueness of human nature, perhaps most notably explicated in *Nicomachean Ethics*, stresses the fact that humans ask these kinds of questions, that humans make *choices* about their ends whereas other species seem to have their ends assigned to

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13 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 5, ed. Brian McNeil and John Riches, trans. Oliver Davies, Andrew Louth, Brian McNeil C.R.V., John Saward and Rowan Williams (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 616.

14 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1994), 457.

15 Von Balthasar, vol. 5, 616.

them.<sup>16</sup> As an exercise of freedom to realize our humanity, morality is understood to be a project, an endeavour that encompasses more than following a list of proscriptions and commands, an absolute law that is somehow encoded in our being and immediately knowable. Rather, becoming human requires an ontologically grounded imagination, vigilantly attentive to our fragile contingency and condition as a “being-towards-death,” as the existentialists make us aware, but also alert to desire and to what delights and stirs our longings.

Charles Taylor takes up this position in *Sources of the Self*, asserting that to be human is not only to go about choosing ends, but also to be continually seeking identity through “orientation to *the good*.”<sup>17</sup> This moral self-interpretation, Taylor tells us, is not achieved in isolation, but through the “language community” into which we are born and through which is articulated “some framework(s) which defines the shape of the qualitatively higher [the good] but also a sense of where we stand in relation to this [good].”<sup>18</sup> Drawing on the insights of Taylor, Trevor A. Hart writes in his essay “Creative Imagination and Moral Identity” that “one vital source of articulation [of moral identity] lies in those social practices of imagination which, since Kant, we habitually refer to as ‘the arts.’”<sup>19</sup> Hart insists that interaction with imaginative works gives us opportunity to think analogously about our own lived world, to be open to the challenge or reinforcement of our assumptions of meaning and coherence. Further, as Thomas Merton writes, the most compelling “poets and poetic thinkers” are those

who construct myths in which they embody their own struggle to cope with the fundamental questions of life—[and who] are generally ‘prophetic’ in the sense that they anticipate in their solitude the struggles and the general consciousness

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16 Ric Machuga, “Getting from Is to Ought: Why there is no dichotomy between ‘facts’ and ‘values,’” *Books and Culture: A Christian Review* 10, 3 (2004): 28.

17 Charles Taylor. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 33 (italics mine).

18 *Ibid.*, 42.

19 Trevor A. Hart, “Creative Imagination and Moral Identity,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 16, 1 (2003): 11.

## *The Prophetic Vision of Beauty*

of later generations.<sup>20</sup>

To this assertion, I will add the warning from Solzhenitsyn, considered to be a poet-prophet by readers across a wide band of the ideological spectrum: “But woe to that nation whose literature is disturbed by the intervention of power . . . It is the closing down of the heart of the nation, a slashing to pieces of its memory.”<sup>21</sup> Creative works must be allowed to present their truths without coercion or violation in order that they may express not only a clear vision of what is but also what *ought*—and what *is possible*—to be. This should give us in the “free world” pause: what might be the unrecognized “intervention of power” to restrain, tame, and contain art’s subversive potentialities in our own democratic culture? Solzhenitsyn, it must be acknowledged, did not overlook in his “prophesying” what he observed to be the corrosive effect upon human values of rampant materialism and a debased understanding of freedom in the Western world.<sup>22</sup>

But what compels us to heed the prophetic voice of the poet? Why would we attend to what our “language community” teaches of the good, the call to our socio-ethical responsibilities, even should it come to us through the imaginative works of literature? Is there an innate desire, or *eros*, that naturally corresponds to some universally clear and apparent “good”? Taylor contradicts such a notion, referring to the Freudian ego which, if free, “would be a lucid calculator of pay-offs,” and not much more.<sup>23</sup> Rather, as Elaine Scarry maintains in *On Beauty and Being Just*, Plato, Augustine, Dante, and the line of poets that creatively appropriated their metaphysical view were right to insist that one of the primary ways of moral orientation is the disorienting or “decentering” encounter with beauty, which not only stirs up desire, but awakens the sense of careful attention. In this way,

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20 Thomas Merton, “Prophetic Ambiguities: Milton and Camus,” in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Bro. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1985), 252.

21 Solzhenitsyn, 6.

22 See Solzhenitsyn’s 1978 commencement address at Harvard University, “A World Split Apart,” <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/solzhenitsyn/harvard1978.html>.

23 Taylor, 33.

Scarry argues, “beauty prepares us for justice.”<sup>24</sup> Scarry joins Gadamer in a return to Plato in order to recover the idea that “the intangibility of the good finds an analogue in the beautiful.”<sup>25</sup> Gadamer explains: “The beautiful reveals itself in the search for the good . . . [and] that which manifests itself in perfect form attracts the longing of love to it. The beautiful disposes people in its favour immediately.”<sup>26</sup> Beauty, the compelling appearance of a self-transcendent reality in excess of our rational comprehension and irreducible to our control, reveals what we might otherwise elude in our search for self-knowledge: the good that demands a re-ordering of our desires. In the frequently quoted words of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, beauty declares, “You must change your life.”<sup>27</sup>

With this understanding of beauty’s relevance to the good, theological aesthetics joins with Solzhenitsyn in his indirect but firm contradiction of modern aesthetics’ preference for the formless sublime. Beauty matters. It is tangible particularity. Rather than being sublimely amorphous and abstract, the other, by whom we are faced with an ethical demand, is embodied and sensuously encountered while exceeding our conceptual anticipation and grasp. Theological aesthetics understands beauty as both immanent and transcendent, the infinite appearing within the bounds of the finite. It argues for this understanding on the basis of the Incarnation. For theological aesthetics, the ultimate, archetypal form of beauty is Christ—a beauty Francesca Aran Murphy defines as radiance that “communicates the reality of all of the transcendentals. If being, truth and the good are interpreted in its light, their own reality will shine forth.”<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, theological aesthetics claims that the incarnate Christ—the Divine Word become flesh—is the revelation of the sublime glory of the Trinitarian communion of God, offered to the embodied imagination within the form (Gestalt) of an immanent, perceivable human life. Further, theological aesthetics sees the enfleshed form of Christ as

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24 Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 78.

25 Gadamer, 481.

26 *Ibid.*, 481.

27 Rainer Maria Rilke, “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” in *Translations from the Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1962), 181.

28 Francesca Aran Murphy, *Christ the Form of Beauty: A Study in Theology and Literature* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 32.

## *The Prophetic Vision of Beauty*

analogically present in the encounter with each human other, and in the infinite instances of the beautiful in nature and in art, since all of being, by virtue of creation and incarnation, participates in the beauty of Christ's form. "Therefore," writes von Balthasar, "it is right that the child should glimpse the Absolute, 'God' . . . first in its mother, its parents."<sup>29</sup> Tangible encounters with particular beauty analogically communicate the form of beauty that, for theological aesthetics, is not a static Platonic idea or concept, but a person—the Incarnate God.

The metaphysical notion of beauty's power of attraction and correspondence with the true and the good is the theme by which theological aesthetics has endeavoured to articulate its gospel (or "good news") as a revelatory encounter with the glory and graced form of Christ. John W. de Gruchy, a South African theologian grappling with a complex of issues, from apartheid's legacy to AIDS, follows Solzenhitsyn in asserting that

a concern for truth without goodness and beauty lacks the power to attract and convince those whose critical sensitivities are repelled by . . . dogmatism. A concern for goodness without truth or beauty . . . degenerates into barren moralism and misguided iconoclasm. In short, truth and goodness without beauty lack the power to convince and therefore to save.<sup>30</sup>

Approaching the matter from "below," in the realm of the phenomenal experience rather than speculative thought, Alejandro Garcia-Rivera proposes in *The Community of the Beautiful* that "aesthetics be recast as the science which asks . . . *what moves the human heart?*"<sup>31</sup> Again, aesthetics is a matter of self-knowledge and desire, but according to Garcia-Rivera, it is recognizably a *religious* event. It is religious because "beauty's trace reveals a divine starting point," a transcendent connection.<sup>32</sup> Without the recognition of this

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29 von Balthasar, vol. 5, 616.

30 John W. de Gruchy, "Holy Beauty: A Reformed Perspective on Aesthetics Within a World of Unjust Ugliness," 3, in *The Project on Lived Theology*, <http://livedtheology.org/pdfs/deGruchy.pdf> (accessed 2 December 2009).

31 Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999), 9.

32 *Ibid.*, 10.

transcendence, “the Church will find difficult the expression of her faith, much less her conviction of the dignity of the human person, and even less, be a sacrament to the world.”<sup>33</sup> Without reference to beauty as a transcendental, desire would be merely self-referential, with no freedom of flight into the opening and re-ordering of beatific grace; however, without beauty as immanent form, faith would have no tangent with the earth.

To persuasively “be a sacrament” to the world, as von Balthasar documents in *The Glory of The Lord*, the early Church borrowed its metaphysical formulations from antiquity’s “great themes” to testify concerning “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, the recurring Christian theme of “eros as the fundamental yearning of the finite creature for transcendence in God as the primordial unity, the primordial beauty” is a Platonic formulation.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, the affirmation of the dignity and worth of immanent created beings that analogically bear the “trace” of the divine beauty is an expression of divine *agape* in Plotinian terms. Despite the appropriated tropes through which it is articulated, the beauty that is the subject of theological aesthetics, argues Eastern Orthodox theologian David B. Hart, is distinctly a peaceful persuasion and not the totalizing violence that absorbs the many into the One, of which Greek metaphysics have been charged and convicted. In *The Beauty of the Infinite*, Hart addresses the “postmodern” critique of metaphysical discourses of sameness and analogy (especially as articulated by Levinas and Derrida), asserting that the former, the charge that metaphysical conceptualization reduces everything to identity with the ego, does not apply to theological aesthetics, which is centered in a narrative of difference and particularity, including the affirmation of the goodness of multitudinous creation and “the concrete person and history of Jesus.”<sup>36</sup> As for the latter, Hart asserts that the concern that analogy denies the difference and distance between the objects interrelated through its operation fails to rightly comprehend the analogy of being central to Christian metaphysics.

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33 Ibid., 11.

34 2 Corinthians 4.6.

35 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 4, ed. John Riches, trans. Brian McNeil C.R.V., Andrew Louth, John Saward, Rowan Williams and Oliver Davies (San Francisco, 1989), 321.

36 Hart, 13.

## *The Prophetic Vision of Beauty*

Hart writes:

There is also a moral element in receiving the glory of God's work under the aspect of beauty. . . . A proper understanding of beauty's place in theology may show how Christian thought eludes metaphysical ambitions [to deny difference and overcome distance], without sacrificing . . . the language of analogy, reconciliation, or truth.<sup>37</sup>

It is just this concern about Christianity's assimilation of metaphysical violence of which John D'Arcy May writes in *Transcendence and Violence*. He insists that wrong is committed against the "religious Other" in cross-cultural (missional) contexts where the absolutist dogma of theo-ontology, derived from early Hellenistic influence on the Church Fathers, "remains 'ontic,' even 'positivistic' in its orientation to Being, of which God, in the end, is regarded as a unique instance."<sup>38</sup> In response to such an objection, fellow missionologist Lesslie Newbigin, similarly to Hart, recognizes the creative use of Greek concepts by the Church, for "there can never be a culture-free gospel." "Yet," he adds, "the gospel, which is from the beginning to the end embodied in culturally conditioned forms, calls into question *all* cultures, including the one in which it was originally embodied."<sup>39</sup> Newbigin posits a pattern of hermeneutical unfolding in the testimony of Christ's followers by which the revelatory encounter "involve[s] contradiction [of the culture of self], and a call for conversion" for all who have ears to hear or eyes to see it.<sup>40</sup> Without denying the atrocities committed in the name of God against the other, these thinkers maintain that true conversion centers on personal conviction, not coercion.

While he is ill at ease with the Christological particularity of Christianity, May affirms the need for "the element of vision"—the beauty of presented form—found in "narrative traditions rather than conceptual systems" to provide a context for ethics. He writes:

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<sup>37</sup> Hart, 18.

<sup>38</sup> John D'Arcy May, *Transcendence and Violence: The Encounter of Buddhist, Christian and Primal Traditions* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 147.

<sup>39</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (London: SPCK, 1986), 4 (*italics mine*).

<sup>40</sup> Newbigin, 6.

[Such vision] ensures that people *see the point* of being moral. This ‘meaning’ of morality, though immanent within the moral act itself, is in danger of not being realized if its intrinsic orientation to transcendence is not dramatized in metaphor, symbol and story. . . . Ethics has both *normative* and *visionary* dimensions.<sup>41</sup>

Hart is sharply opposed to May’s discomfort with Christianity’s assertion of the centrality of Christ in his own unapologetic description of the gospel as the rhetorical address of “a particular story, a particular Jew, a particular form” that is the truth of being. However, he and May are in agreement about the visionary component of ethics, as of faith. Reworking a phrase from Emmanuel Levinas, Hart writes:

Ethics is an aesthetics: an optics, that is, in an unequivocal sense, an order of seeing that obeys a story of being according to which the other is delineated with the radiant proportions of the other, who elicits the infinite regard of God and compels an infinite awe and even love from the one who looks on. . . . The secret of the ethical is that . . . vision obeys the aesthetics that forms it.”<sup>42</sup>

With ethics as an “order of seeing” shaped by story, Hart insists on the distinction of Christian theological aesthetics from Greek metaphysics, regardless of the borrowed formulations. The Christian vision of what is and “ought to be” is informed, not by contemplation of the Neoplatonic sublime One, but by the interpersonal and generative communication with humanity of the infinitely capacious love within the triune God that eventuated in the historical Incarnation.<sup>43</sup> Theological aesthetics asserts that the beauty of Christ is simultaneously the revelation of the transcendentals—being, the good, and the true—as facets of the Trinitarian relation, and the manifestation of the immanent *imago Dei*, humanity’s proper form.

There is within theological aesthetics, then, a correspondence to the decentering effect of beauty that Solzhenitsyn claimed for great works

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41 May, 152.

42 Hart, 343.

43 Hart, 151.

## *The Prophetic Vision of Beauty*

of world literature. Just as these latter works contain “revelations” of “secret inner light,” so theological aesthetics speaks of the “image of the invisible God,”<sup>44</sup> revealed in the face of Christ, a disturbing beauty that was anticipated by the biblical account of the prophet Isaiah’s inaugural vision.<sup>45</sup> De Gruchy writes that, as a prototype to Christian conversion, Isaiah’s “call to be a prophet of social justice . . . was an ‘aesthetic moment’ of intense vision and audition . . . of God’s holy beauty [that] enabled him to perceive reality in a totally new way.”<sup>46</sup> In the affirmation that “the whole earth is full of his glory,”<sup>47</sup> judgment is concurrently passed on humanity’s willful lack of perception and consequent moral failures. The prophet is the archetype of the poet in experiencing such embodied enlightenment and being compelled to faithfully communicate the epiphany, though to do so may come at a cost among “a people of unclean lips.” It is just this poet-prophet type of which Merton writes in his reference to artists under communist oppression and propaganda. In an observation that can be applied to Solzhenitsyn, Merton perceives that they “seem to be the most serious prophets of a genuine liberation for thought, life, and experience. They protest more articulately than anyone . . . [though] subject[ed] to all kinds of harassment.”<sup>48</sup>

Solzhenitsyn indeed struggled “in agonizing moments in camps, in columns of prisoners at night, in the freezing darkness through which the lanterns shone” to find the words that would be “successful ambassadors” for the suffering ones.<sup>49</sup> In his Nobel Prize lecture, those words fashioned in adversity are released in a powerful plea: “One world, one mankind cannot exist in the face of six, four or even two scales of values: we shall be torn apart by this disparity of rhythm, this disparity of vibrations.”<sup>50</sup> The evening news attests to the fact that we live in a world fractured by competing claims of values asserted by violent and mastering wills. Solzhenitsyn asks how the “stubborn

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44 Colossians 1.15 King James Version.

45 Isaiah 6.

46 De Gruchy, 4.

47 Isaiah 6.3 King James Version.

48 Thomas Merton, “Answers on Art and Freedom,” in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1985), 376.

49 Quoted in Malcolm Muggeridge, *The End of Christendom* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 45.

50 Solzhenitsyn, 5.

human creature” might become aware of “the distant joy and grief of others” and thus come closer to a common sense of the good. He places his hope in art’s beauty, its prophetic ability to tell the truth and unfold the good that is not merely evocative of a pleasurable experience, but one that is “shattering.”<sup>51</sup>

The role of the artist, Solzhenitsyn insists, is to remain highly perceptive to “the beauty and ugliness of the human contribution to [the world], and to communicate this acutely to his fellow-men.”<sup>52</sup> When we see ourselves in the mirror of literature—“one of the most sensitive, responsive instruments possessed by the human creature”<sup>53</sup>—we are at once affirmed and judged. But there is more. He writes: “Like that little looking-glass from the fairy-tales: look into it and you will see—not yourself—but for one second, the Inaccessible, whither no man can ride, no man fly. And . . . the soul gives a groan.”<sup>54</sup> In its aesthetic appeal to the imagination, art offers freedom from the grip of the inevitable and the malaise of the indifferent, and awakens the longing for transcendent possibilities. By the light of that vision we may reach beyond the self-identity of the Freudian ego, to realize more deeply the intersubjective awareness that began when we first looked into the face of the beautiful other. In that face, theological aesthetics seeks to persuade us, we will catch a glimpse, however darkly, of the divine beauty that empties the ego even as it enlightens and draws the “I” to itself.

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51 *Ibid.*, 2.

52 *Ibid.*, 1.

53 *Ibid.*, 1.

54 *Ibid.*, 2.

## *The Prophetic Vision of Beauty*

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## ARTICULATING RELIGIOUS CHANGE: BINI THE PROPHET, THE SEER

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### Abstract

*The transmission of Christianity among Indigenous people without the involvement of European or Euro-North American missionaries has been well documented in the North American ethnographic and historical records. In the North American West, the convergence of Christianity and Indigenous religious practices is manifest in the Indigenous prophet traditions in the early nineteenth century. Although these prophet traditions predate direct contact with Euro-North Americans, much scholarship has maintained that their growth and development is explained not by Indigenous or Christian religiosity but by more fundamental material or psychological phenomena, most often connecting the prophet tradition to the indirect effects of colonial invasion. Following the oral narratives on Bini, the Witsuwit'en prophet, collected by Marius Barbeau in the 1920s, I suggest that the prophet tradition is not only a response to colonial pressures but also serves as a powerful idiom for articulating religious change and thus is a fundamentally local means of religious transformation.*

One of the most significant and widely dispersed Indigenous prophet traditions of the Northwest Plateau was led by Bini, the Witsuwit'en prophet.<sup>1</sup> Bini's influence germinated in the northern regions of the Northwest Plateau, in the central and northern Interior of British Columbia, and spread further north

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<sup>1</sup> In the ethnographic and historical literature Bini is also called called Beeny, Peni, Kwes, the Bulkley River prophet, or the Carrier prophet.

into the Subarctic Cordillera and west to the shores of the Pacific.<sup>2</sup> Witsuwit'en and Gitksan narrators report that Bini prophesied the coming of white people, the arrival of new materials technologies, and the advent of the new religion, Christianity. Bini was said to work miracles, and to have received knowledge of Christianity through dreams and visions. He was one of many Indigenous prophets labouring in the North American West in the early nineteenth century, most of whom were interested in Christianity, which was at the time novel to them.<sup>3</sup> These prophets sought to integrate this new religion, or what was known of it and of interest, into their local religious practices.

The prophet traditions of the Northwest, like prophet traditions elsewhere, such as those of Africa and Melanesia, are movements of religious reform or revitalization that revolve around individuals whose leadership and authority stem from alleged contact or communication with supernatural agents. West of the Rocky Mountains, prophet traditions were known to most Indigenous societies, from the Witsuwit'en and Sekani of British Columbia in the north to the Paiute of Nevada and Oregon in the south. Much scholarship on these traditions has emphasized the role played by material and psychological phenomenon in their growth and development. However, the oral narratives on Bini, the Witsuwit'en prophet of north-central British Columbia, collected by Marius Barbeau in the 1920s among the Gitksan, near neighbours of the Witsuwit'en, show a slightly different perspective. I suggest that they attest to prophet activity as a fundamental means for anticipating religious change, in this case the coming of Christianity, and articulating that change in an indigenous or local idiom. Prophet traditions, then, serve as the means or the mechanism of religious transformation.

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2 The term "Northwest Plateau," and later "Northwest," is used in this paper to denote a geographical region defined by Elizabeth Vibert as follows: "In geographical terms the Plateau is that region carved out by the main trenches and tributary valleys of the Columbia and Fraser river systems of the Pacific Northwest" (Vibert, *Trader's Tales*, 23). As I read her, those boundaries incorporate both the Stuart and Nechako Rivers, Witsuwit'en territory.

3 While not elaborated by Barbeau, Jenness records that at least five prophets either preceded or were contemporary with Bini: Uzakli, Senesaiyea, Leks (older brother to Bini), Bopa and Nokskan. The latter two were female prophets suggesting the vocation was gender inclusive. The documentary evidence on these figures is, compared to Barbeau's narratives on Bini, very thin.

## *Bini the Prophet, the Seer*

In this paper I briefly overview the academic conversation on the prophet movements of the Northwest, highlighting what I take to be a basic supposition shared by these scholars: that religion is, generally speaking, epiphenomenal and that prophet movements are a response to deprivation. Focusing on the example of Bini, I then offer an interpretive venture that does not exclude deprivation as an explanatory device, but considers prophecy specifically as a local mechanism for interpreting a burgeoning Christianity in a changing religious landscape.

### *Background on Prophetic Traditions in Northwestern North America*

The touchstone for the scholarly conversation about Northwest prophetic traditions is Leslie Spier's classic study *The Prophet Dance of the Northwest*. Spier concluded that a prophetic tradition of Indigenous origin was endemic to the Plateau culture area, a region encompassing the Columbia and Fraser River basins.<sup>4</sup> According to Spier, the tradition was known to all peoples of the Northwest and was manifest in each Plateau society by a local prophet or prophetic lineage.<sup>5</sup> Spier and later commentators described the tradition as a prophetic eschatology: the central figures of the tradition were prophets who were each said to have died and travelled to the land of the dead where he or she learned of the coming of an apocalypse. Upon his or her return to the living, the prophet introduced dances and teachings that would hasten the imminent destruction and renewal of the world, which was also to be accompanied by the return of the dead. More specifically, Spier observed that the tradition was typified "by a dance based on supposed imitation of the dances of

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4 The geographical region of the Northwest Plateau roughly coincides with the anthropological culture area also termed the Plateau. The "culture area," as a heuristic device, was first introduced to American anthropology by Clark Wissler in his publication *The American Indian* (1917). Wissler identified ten different culture areas in North America; each culture area consisted of an aggregate of cultures that had similar modes of ecological adaptation. The Plateau as a culture area, however, excludes Athabaskan speaking peoples, such as the Witsuwit'en. The Athabaskan peoples living in the geographical region are included within the Subarctic culture area, but this culture area stretches across the north from Alaska to Newfoundland, so is of limited use as a descriptor in this paper.

5 Spier, *The Prophet Dance*, 7.

the dead, and a conviction that intense preoccupation with the dance would hasten the happy day.” Spier continued:

From time to time men “died” and returned to life with renewed assurances of the truth of the doctrine; at intervals cataclysms of nature occurred which were taken as portents of the end. Each of these events led to the performance of the dance with renewed fervour, only to have it fall into abeyance again when their expectations remained unfulfilled.<sup>6</sup>

Spier saw Indigenous prophet activity as primarily an effect of the contemplation of natural disasters. Spier’s thesis serves as a counterpoint to James Mooney’s claim, made some decades earlier, that prophet traditions were responses to the material and social devastation caused by the colonial invasion. Mooney identified in the Ghost Dance a dynamic germane to the growth and development of many of the so called “word religions”: prophet movements, he said, whether they be the Ghost Dance or the traditions of the ancient Israelites, are *sui generis* where conditions of material or psychological deprivation apply. Subsequent analyses have since positioned Spier and Mooney at opposite ends of a debate on the question: to what degree can prophet traditions be said to be a reaction to colonialism?

Spier’s basic premise, that a prophet tradition arose under Indigenous conditions, was further refined by the anthropologist Wayne Suttles. Working specifically on the tradition as it was manifest among the Coast Salish, Suttles argued that a Plateau prophet tradition spread among Indigenous peoples and eventually arrived at the coast where it was adopted by the Salish to deal with population depletion (caused by epidemics and famine) and an ethic of individual competition introduced by fur traders. More specifically, Suttles evinced that the severe population decimation created power vacuums in traditional Salish political institutions and created a need for new leaders. Prophets competed with each other for the vacant positions and vied to become the preferred candidates for community leadership. Because prophets emerged from within Salish society and dealt with specific Salish problems, Suttles concluded that there is reason to think that a prophet tradition was endemic to northwestern

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 5.

North America. Regardless of the source of the political disruption and discontinuity, the Indigenous prophet tradition, for Suttles, remedied the political problem.

David Aberle has argued that prophet movements are an example of the kind of “religio-magical” techniques that a people resort to when they can no longer cope with a situation of deprivation by empirical means or when practical action within the world is deemed unable to rectify a negative discrepancy between expectation and actuality.<sup>7</sup> Deward Walker built upon Aberle’s theoretical scaffolding using archaeological and documentary material to make the case that Northwest prophetic traditions were a direct response to eighteenth century crises stimulated by indirect colonial pressure, namely, epidemics, population decimation and the exposure to new wants.<sup>8</sup>

More recently, Elizabeth Vibert has appraised these theories on Indigenous prophecy, stating that the competing arguments of indigenous versus exogenous origins are both over-determined. Vibert takes a median position, arguing that “in order to understand such movements, it is essential to consider their internal logics” within the broader historical field in which they were embedded.<sup>9</sup> Providing a model for the synthesis of ethnographic and historical data, Vibert demonstrates that “the aim of prophecy was internal cleansing and renewal,” which is consistent with what she understands as the normative response of Plateau peoples to serious illness.<sup>10</sup> While prophecy was the Plateau response to any illness deemed “serious,” according to Vibert, prophecy was manifest in the early contact period as a response to a particular illness, namely, smallpox. Reminiscent of Suttles, who ultimately viewed the Salish prophet tradition more as a response to “native” problems than colonialism, Vibert observes that to link prophecies to “a contemporary epidemic is not necessarily to cast them as reactions to the colonial incursion.”<sup>11</sup> For Vibert, prophet traditions, although prompted by the effects of indirect colonial contact such as epidemics, ultimately addressed Indigenous concerns, namely, the desire for the renewal and revitalization “in an era when

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7 Aberle, “The Prophet Dance,” 81.

8 Walker, “New Light,” 252.

9 Vibert, ““The Natives Were Strong to Live,” 197-199.

10 *Ibid.*, 220.

11 *Ibid.*, 199.

the world appeared sick to the core.”<sup>12</sup>

*Religion as Epiphenomenon*

Despite the various perspectives of these scholars, there is a perspicuous point of agreement among them. All analyses connect the manifestation of a prophet tradition to dramatic and despair-inducing events. In other words, all of these scholars treat religion, in this case the prophet tradition, as epiphenomenal. Walker and Aberle posit that prophecy is a response to the deprivations induced by colonialism. For Suttles, prophecy is an Indigenous response to population decimation and an ethic of competition introduced by the fur trade. And although Spier maintains that the prophetic tradition was of Indigenous origin, he claims that it sprung from native thinking about ecological disasters, such as volcanic eruptions. Moreover, even Vibert, who writes that “it is short sighted—and one is tempted to say arrogant—to view everything that happened in the time of colonial penetration as a reaction to it,” ultimately sees the prophet activity as responses to epidemics.<sup>13</sup>

The tendency to treat religion as epiphenomenal, as the reflection of fundamental material or psychological factors, represents a rich analytical tradition in the social sciences. For example, Aberle assumed that religio-magical techniques are commonly resorted to when a people cannot cope with deprivations by empirical means and states that this is an assumption “of considerable antiquity in anthropology.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Auguste Comte writing in the first half of the nineteenth century characterized religion as the hallucinatory activity produced by an intellect “at the mercy of the passions.”<sup>15</sup> The treatment of religion as epiphenomenal continues today. Sociologist Rodney Stark offers a contemporary illustration when he cites some typical reasons that are given for the emergence of new religious movements: “change in the economic position of a particular group . . . industrialization and urbanization . . . the failure of the social system to accommodate particular age, sex and status groups [or]

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12 Ibid., 219.

13 Ibid., 220.

14 Aberle, “The Prophet Dance,” 81.

15 Comte, *The Positive Philosophy* 2, 554.

## *Bini the Prophet, the Seer*

some process of social change.”<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the suggestion that religion is epiphenomenal has long been criticized by proponents of the irreducibility of religion. However, it is not my intention to further this debate here, but rather to work within the longstanding tradition in the social sciences. Moreover, as Aberle and others have demonstrated the perspective is of useful analytical value.<sup>17</sup>

### *Bini and the Prophetic Tradition*

My interpretive venture in this essay explores the prophet tradition as a problem solving activity and as an endeavor that anticipates future change so as to prepare for it in the present and thereby serve as a means for religious transformation. To this end, I want to refine my data set by concentrating on the prophet tradition as it was manifest among the Witsuwit'en and Gitksan of north-central British Columbia.<sup>18</sup>

The Witsuwit'en and Gitksan live in the intermontane region of British Columbia along the territory defined by the lake and river tributaries of the Skeena and Fraser rivers. In the ethnographic literature the Witsuwit'en are typically known as the Carrier, a name derived from the custom of returning (“carrying”) the cremated remains of an individual to his or her former home for further mortuary rites. Linguistically, the Witsuwit'en speak a distinctive dialect of Athabaskan that differentiates them from their Gitksan neighbours to the north and west, who are speakers of the Tsimshian language. Although the Gitksan and Witsuwit'en speak entirely unrelated languages, the two peoples share a similar material culture and social organization. Historically, they lived in large cedar

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16 Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 29.

17 See Aberle, *Peyote Religion* and Jorgensen, *Sun Dance*. In *Sun Dance*, for example, Jorgensen masterfully illustrates how the Ute Sun Dance promoted Indigenous individual and community interests while also serving as a point of resistance against colonial oppression.

18 Although the prophet tradition is typically cited as a Plateau phenomenon, the practice seems a matter of convention or convenience. Most scholars have acknowledged it is an inter-culture area phenomenon. For example, Spier, cited cases of the prophet dance on the coast, the plains and in the Subarctic; Suttles, studied the prophet dance among the Coast Salish; and, relevant to this discussion, Diamond Jenness and Marius Barbeau recorded the prophet tradition among the interior Witsuwit'en.

plank houses presided over by a head chief and were sociologically organized as clans with each clan holding a number of crests and titles inherited through the matriline. It was largely these clan and kin affiliations, which are just as relevant today, that, as Antonia Mills puts it, “linked the Witsuwìten to all their neighbours.”<sup>19</sup> The social and cultural nearness of the two peoples suggests a possible reason for the spread and influence of Bini’s teachings among the neighbouring Gitksan. Indeed, Barbeau collected the majority of his oral narratives on the Witsuwìten prophet Bini in Gitksan communities. While there is no precise record of the dates of Bini’s life, the general scholarly consensus is that the Bini prophet movement started during the 1830s and possibly extended into the 1840s.<sup>20</sup>

Much of the known detail of Bini’s life can be found in the oral narratives collected by missionaries and anthropologists. Although missionaries were the first to write down narratives of the prophet’s life, their accounts tend to be quite brief. Adrien Morice (Oblate), William Collison (Anglican) and George Henry Raley (Methodist) all gave short descriptions of the origin and diffusion of the Bini movement.<sup>21</sup> In addition, a number of anthropologists collected oral narratives on Bini during the early half of the twentieth century: Diamond Jenness recorded at least three narratives among the Witsuwìten at Bulkley River, Viola Garfield collected one among the Gitksan at Hazelton, William Beynon recorded a Gitksan narrative, and Marius Barbeau, along with William Beynon, collected nineteen narratives over the period of 1921 to 1924.<sup>22</sup> As Barbeau’s collection is by far the richest—in fact, there is little detail included in the sum of all narratives that is not also found in his collection—I will rely on Barbeau’s data in the following analysis.<sup>23</sup>

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19 Mills, *Eagle Down is Our Law*, 39.

20 Neylan, *The Heavens*, 184.

21 Morice, *The History*, 235-236; Collison, *In the Wake*, 190-191; Raley, “Kitimaat Mission.”

22 Jenness, *The Carrier Indians*, 550-557; Miller, “Shamans,” 142-143; Joseph Bradley, “When the Bini Teachings Reached all Tribes,” vol. 3, no. 55, William Beynon Manuscripts, University of British Columbia Library, Vancouver; “Bini the Prophet, the Seer,” B-F-322.1-20, MSS 2101, Marius Barbeau Northwest Coast Files, British Columbia Archives, Victoria.

23 Barbeau’s narratives are found in his “Northwest Coast Files” organized under the heading “Bini the Prophet, Bini the Seer.”

## *Bini the Prophet, the Seer*

The majority of the Bini narratives are biographical but they also emphasize his prophetic revelations. The biographical material describes Bini as a shaman of chiefly lineage, a spiritually endowed, community-oriented person who is invested in traditional political and religious structures.

The narratives recount that later in life Bini had a profound and life-changing visionary experience where he was lifted into “heaven” and met with the “Chief of the Skies.”<sup>24</sup> The narratives give two different contexts for Bini’s initial vision. One is that after losing either a gambling match or a demonstration of spirit power, Bini, perhaps desiring to end his life, walked alone into the forest where he was then struck with the vision. The other is simply that Bini’s vision came to him in the course of his normative shamanic routines. Whatever the context, upon returning to his community with news of his experience, he changed his name from Kwes to Bini, meaning “mind-all-over-the-world” or “his own mind.” He spoke in a foreign language, which had to be interpreted by a “disciple,” and performed a number of songs that he said were received in a dream or vision. Bini then had subsequent dreams and each time he returned from them to the community, he shared further revelations. Teachings and practices that reoccurred in the revelations were: the sign of cross, a form of baptism (involving the bestowal of new names on those who assented to follow him), penance and confession, specific songs and dances, the seven-day week ending with one day of rest, and a set of five commandments or “the law of the five fingers.” In some accounts he is said to have received and brought back material items from the sky, specifically a prayer board and a white cloth, which were said to be instrumental in healing ceremonies.

In addition to his teachings, many narratives give detailed accounts of the miracles Bini was purported to have performed. A miracle common throughout the Bini narratives is the ripening of the Saskatoon berry bush out of season. In some accounts it is emphasized that he was able to raise himself from the dead.<sup>25</sup> The narratives also reveal Bini’s prophecies, particularly the prediction of the arrival of white people bearing new material goods, the coming of new animals (namely, cattle and horses), the construction of the telegraph line

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24 Miller, “Shamans,” 143.

25 Barbeau, *Indian Days*, 25.

and the railway, the coming of steamboats, and, assuming practical adherence to Bini's message, the probability that the dead would rise again. Most narrators emphasize that Bini's prophecies proved true; however, they lament that Bini died before he could see them come to pass.

Versions of Bini's death differ. Some maintain that his death was the result of the failure to believe in his own teachings and that after being unable to work a cure Bini, distressed at his inability, returned to the "old religion" and suffered death for his own disobedience. Other narratives attribute his death to accident, the drinking of water that was contaminated with strychnine, a commonly used poison at the time, recommended by the Hudson's Bay Company for use on wolves.<sup>26</sup>

### *Deprivations and the Prophet Tradition*

While the Bini narratives do not reveal thick historical context, they do suggest something very important about the religious landscape of the time: forms of Christian theology and practice (e.g., the commandments, the cross, and the trinity) were clearly present in the region at least as early as the 1830s at the onset of the Bini movement. And as this was decades before the first permanent mission was established at Stuart Lake by the Oblate Father Jean-Marie LeJacq in 1873, Bini had to have received his knowledge from elsewhere. A number of possibilities exist. One is that Bini was introduced to Christianity by employees working in the fur trade. The fur trade was permanently established in the area with the founding of McLeod Lake in 1805 and Ft. St. James in 1806. Fourteen years later, in 1820 Fort Kilmaurs was established on Babine Lake and Diamond Jenness suggests that an employee at Kilmaurs, William McBean, introduced the Witsuwit'en to the rosary, the cross, and Christian songs.<sup>27</sup> Another possibility is that Bini learned of Christianity from Native catechists. Barbeau, for example, hypothesized that Bini may have interacted with a group of Christianized Iroquois who had settled in the Rocky

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<sup>26</sup> Hammond, "Marketing Wildlife," 17.

<sup>27</sup> Jenness, *The Carrier Indians*, 548.

*Bini the Prophet, the Seer*

Mountains as trappers around 1810.<sup>28</sup> Leslie Spier also noted the presence of Christianized Iroquois and Métis in the Northwest in the first half of the nineteenth century. It is also possible, if we accept the later dates for the Bini movement, that Bini learned of Christianity from itinerant Catholic missionaries who visited the region in the early 1840s. The Catholic missionary Modeste Demers spent three days at Fort St. James in 1842 and three years later in 1845 Father John Nobili spent five days at the fort.<sup>29</sup>

Whatever else might be said to have influenced Bini, his teachings indicate that he was at least interested in Christianity. Such interest, however, does not rule out, as Vibert and others have suggested for the Plateau, the possibility that other elements of the colonial incursion generated a prophetic response. Indeed, a smallpox epidemic was documented in the region during the years of 1835 to 1838.<sup>30</sup> In the fall of 1835, the Tlingit had contracted smallpox from an American or British trading vessel and in the following year the contagion was reported among the Tsimshian at Fort Simpson. John Work, the trader at Fort Simpson, testified to its severity there, saying, "In ten houses there is not a man left alive only some women and children have escaped."<sup>31</sup> From Fort Simpson the Tsimshian took it with them "as far to the interior as they usually go to trade," which doubtlessly brought them into contact with the Gitksan and Witsuwit'en.<sup>32</sup> While the epidemic of the 1830s is quite possibly contemporaneous with Bini, there is little indication in Barbeau's narratives that Bini was specifically responding to smallpox, unlike some of the prophecy narratives collected by Vibert that make numerous specific references to the disease. In fact, epidemic might just as easily have stifled prophetic activity. Gibson writes, for example, that among the Tlingit the disease broke their "faith in their shamans, who, in spite of their guardian spirits perished together with those who sought their help."<sup>33</sup> The appeal to religiosity may well be a response to serious illness but

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28 M. Barbeau to L. Spier, 27 March 1933, B-F-198.9, MSS 2101, Marius Barbeau Northwest Coast Files, British Columbia Archives, Victoria.

29 McIntosh, "Ft. St. James," 15.

30 Gibson, "Smallpox," 65.

31 *Ibid.*, 73.

32 *Ibid.*, 69.

33 *Ibid.*, 79.

it need not be the only response, and it is possible for a prophecy to be contemporaneous with an epidemic without there being any causal relationship. While Bini may have lived and worked through various epidemics, there is little, if any, evidence in the narratives to support the claim that he was primarily concerned with cleansing the world of disease.

But smallpox was not the only deprivation suffered. Throughout the mid nineteenth century other diseases such as influenza and whooping cough afflicted the peoples of the region. And as the ill and dying were removed from the local economy, exploitive trading relationships that favoured the Hudson's Bay Company compounded the problems created by illnesses and consequent famine. Despite the severity of these conditions, J. C. Yerbury, in his history of the Subarctic fur trade, maintains a basically positive appraisal of years from 1821 to 1860. Referring to the time as the "trading post dependency period," Yerbury writes that it was marked by "profound peace, by monopoly control over a continental domain, and by increased stability of native populations through the formation of trading post bands and trapping parties."<sup>34</sup> Yet the bulk of the evidence of the prophet tradition can be dated to these years of "profound peace." Although the conditions of the time were doubtlessly sufficient to warrant, according to Aberle's understanding of the genesis of the prophet tradition, an appeal to "religio-magical techniques," there is no indication that the period was marked by greater deprivations than earlier or later colonial times. In any case, my argument is that based on the narrative accounts of Bini's life what seems to have concerned him was not deprivation but rather the arrival or rumoured arrival of a new power, a new religion: Christianity. To be clear, I am not arguing for an essentialized view of religion or saying that only religious explanations can explain religion. Rather, I am in basic agreement with Greg Johnson's observation that it is "analytically useful to assume that all religious claims are human and only human, emerging from the present and for the purposes of the present."<sup>35</sup> In a similar vein, I suggest that Bini's actions can

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34 Yerbury, *The Subarctic Indians*, 14. The historian Robin Fisher offers a similar appraisal of the early nineteenth century remarking that prior to 1858 (the year of the Fraser River gold rush and the beginning of the settlement period) Indigenous people adapted to the fur trade on their own terms and the fur traders had to work to accommodate them. See Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*.

35 Johnson, *Sacred Claims*, 23.

## *Bini the Prophet, the Seer*

be interpreted as addressing the religious situation of his time. His reported behaviour, his speech, and actions, indicate an interest in an emerging Christianity and, more specifically, in the articulation of its advent in a way that is consistent with Indigenous religiosity.

### *Excerpts from the Barbeau Collection: Articulating Christianity*

My contention that Bini was articulating Christianity in a way that was consistent with Indigenous religiosity, namely through the idioms of prophecy and vision, is supported by two themes that echo throughout the Barbeau collection. First, Bini is reported to have had a visionary experience in which he visited “heaven” and returned with teachings and prophecies, and the majority of the latter, it is claimed, proved true. Second, the visionary revelations were received as at least as authentic as the teachings of the later Christian missionaries. All the narratives emphasize the first point and eleven of nineteen the second.

The majority of the twenty narratives compiled by Barbeau, which range in length from one to twelve pages, date from the 1920s, a decade in which Barbeau did a total of five seasons of fieldwork among the Tsimshian and Gitksan.<sup>36</sup> The following excerpts from the oral narratives on Bini contained in Barbeau’s files indicate that Bini was articulating Christianity and illuminate the authority and authenticity of Bini’s teachings vis-à-vis Christianity.

One Gitksan narrator, Charles Martin,<sup>37</sup> remarked: “What the preachers say right today, which we hear from the preachers today, we all heard from Bini before the preacher came up here. What the preacher preach of the Bible today, Bini preached us the same way

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36 Duff, “Contributions,” 65.

37 The names of the narrators given in this paper are as they appear on the typescripts found in Barbeau’s Northwest Coast Files. In addition to names, some narratives list the date and the place of the recording, however, this is not true in each case. While Wilson Duff notes that Barbeau obtained personal names and some genealogical information from every village he visited during his fieldwork, I did not gather that data in the course of my research. See Duff, “Contributions,” 66.

before the preacher came up here.”<sup>38</sup>

In his narrative dated 1924, Isaac Tens noted: “He told them the very same things that the clergyman tells to this day.”<sup>39</sup>

Moses Sanaus remarked in a narrative recorded in 1923: “He was the first one that taught the Indians to make the sign of the cross . . . He was digging the works of heaven, he was a prophet, that is why he had the power.”<sup>40</sup>

In one of Paul Dzius’ narratives collected in 1923, Dzius noted: “Bini knew all about heaven, all about what was to happen. He told them all to be good that it would be the good ones that would go to heaven, that they would stand on God’s right hand and those that were bad were lost, they would not go anywhere.”<sup>41</sup> Jack Wimenazek, in 1923, was quoted as saying: “Bini was not a medicine man he was like a priest. He knew like them the heavens.”<sup>42</sup>

In another narrative by Moses Sanaus, which is undated but probably recorded in the 1920s at Hazelton and interpreted by Constance Cox, Sanaus remarked: “I don’t know where Bini had seen a white man because he had not heard of such a thing. He got all his knowledge through his dreams and visions. The prophecies of Bini are followed among us now because we see that they are true . . . His prophecies were very much like those of clergymen.”<sup>43</sup>

The claim made by Moses Sanaus and Constance Cox that Bini “got all his knowledge through his dreams and visions,” knowledge that cannot be explained by empirical means, testifies to the power that they ascribed to dreams and visions. Bini’s visions were considered to be authentic and authoritative not because they came from a priest but because he dreamed them.

Dream and visions are features of many religions indigenous to the Americas and have been particularly well documented among the peoples of the Plains. Lee Irwin, in his insightful discussion of the Plains dream world remarks that “dreams and visions are

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38 Charles Martin, “Bini’s death, ascent to heaven and message for Indians,” B-F-322.1, MSS 2101, Marius Barbeau Northwest Coast Files, British Columbia Archives, Victoria.

39 Isaac Tens, B-F-322.3, *ibid.*

40 Moses Sanaus, B-F-322.6, *ibid.*

41 Paul Dzius, B-F-322.7, *ibid.*

42 Jack Wimenazek, B-F-322.11, *ibid.*

43 Moses Sanaus, B-F-322.18, *ibid.*

a fundamental means for social and cultural transformation.”<sup>44</sup> Dreaming, it is implied, is a creative process, dreams and visions are a source of ingenuity and, Irwin continues, they are “essential to the healing and medicinal practices of all Plains peoples. It would be no exaggeration to say that the majority of healing techniques are received in visions and dreams.”<sup>45</sup> Moreover, in a recent and more general discussion of the significance of prophecy and visions in the Indigenous North American setting, Irwin remarks that prophecy is “a deep seated epistemological willingness to open one’s ears, to hear the words and teaching offered in dreams and visions, in order to learn what may be useful or strategic in enhancing a Native way of life.”<sup>46</sup> I do not wish to dilute the complex dynamics involved in visionary practice, and I cite Irwin only to point generally to the role that visions play with respect to religious transformation and healing. A vision has the power to effect beneficial change within a community. According to Jenness, dreams among the Witsuwit’èn bestowed upon the dreamer the power to heal, procure game, and predict future events.<sup>47</sup> Dreams were seen as a source of knowledge from which the community could stand to benefit. Bini, as a dreamer, was concerned with his community, a community that, among other things, was in the process of defining a new or rumoured religion and anticipating the arrival of its representatives, the missionaries. Perhaps Bini was articulating these burgeoning relationships on his own terms, in order to define how he, the Witsuwit’èn, and neighbouring peoples ought to relate to them.

The narratives, at least as I read them, point to both his effort at articulating Christianity and his eventual success at the task. According to the Gitksan narrators, it was through Bini’s work that the Witsuwit’èn and Gitksan successfully articulated their relationship to Christianity. Perhaps from their perspective, Christianity was another source of power or knowledge like any other—it impressed itself on the world through dreams and visions. Christianity, in their view, like many new practices and technologies, was learned through dreams. Thus, the narrators spoke of Christianity as a local development,

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44 Irwin, *The Dream Seekers*, 189.

45 *Ibid.*, 192.

46 Irwin, *Coming Down*, 9.

47 Jenness, *The Carrier Indians*, 541-543.

articulated by Bini the prophet for the Gitksan and Witsuwit'en in a traditional way. Religion, the narrators insist, is a local phenomenon; it is not exogenous. The Christian priests, the narrators suggest, were not the only individuals who had access to the power of the vision, the manner in which knowledge of religion, which now included Jesus Christ, was attained in the local idiom. Isaac Tens, cited earlier, states that Bini exclaimed: "I have also seen sesikru' . . . Seskiri said: –You tell your people to be all baptised and also to be all married in the proper way. And place sentinels over your village by day and by night to watch that all are good."<sup>48</sup> Tens adds that Bini had never heard of Seskiri before, but that "it was his own term." Whether Bini is referring to Jesus or the teachings of Jesus, Bini is the purveyor of the message, a message that he received, according to Tens, in "heaven."

If according to Jonathan Z. Smith "one of the fundamental building blocks of religion [is] its capacity for rationalization," then the effort to create new modes of significance and order in the face of change is a religious effort.<sup>49</sup> Bini drew attention to a changing and uncertain religious landscape and through that very process sought to resolve the uncertainties. Bini is remembered as successful because he articulated the arrival of Christianity in terms that valued the indigenesness of religion and that were consistent with an Indigenous understanding of the power and dynamics of the vision and the equal access that all human beings have to that power.

### *Conclusion*

While I agree with Johnson's perspective cited earlier that religious "claims emerge from the present for the purposes of the present," present concerns are also often concerns about the future. When worldviews converge, anticipation of the future—in so far as it facilitates the creation of new modes of order through raising awareness about uncertain and rumoured change—is partly the work of religion. In the case of Bini, the anticipation of Christianity entailed its articulation in the local religious idiom: the prophet tradition. This process of articulation, as reflected in the prophet tradition, seems

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48 Isaac Tens, B-F-322.3, MSS 2101, Marius Barbeau Northwest Coast Files, British Columbia Archives, Victoria.

49 Smith, "The Bare Facts," 57.

also to resonate with Walter Burkert's observation that religion is "basically optimistic."<sup>50</sup> As activity that looks toward the future, prophetic activity, while inspired by the concerns and conditions of the present, anticipates novel events and crises that may arise in the time to come. The oral narratives on Bini, the Witsuwit'en prophet, show prophetic activity as both creative and proactive, and as a local form of agency orchestrating religious transformation.

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50 Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred*, 33.

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