

Special Issue Reprint

From Dogmatism to a Public Theology

An Archeology of Theological Knowledge and
Religious Studies

Edited by
Alex Villas Boas, João Duque and Isidro Lamelas

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**From Dogmatism to a Public Theology:
An Archeology of Theological
Knowledge and Religious Studies**

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Guest Editors

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About the Editors

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Alex Villas Boas is the Principal Investigator and Executive Coordinator of the Research Centre for Theology and Religious Studies (CITER) at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa, where he also coordinates the PhD Programme in Theology. He received the Religions Young Investigator Award 2022, promoted by the journal *Religions* (Q1), based in Basel, Switzerland. Villas Boas holds a PhD in Theology from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), with a dissertation entitled “Theology and Literature as Theopatodicy: Toward a Poetic Theological Thought”, and a habilitation thesis in Theological Language and Ethics from the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo. He completed a postdoctoral fellowship in Theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

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Villas Boas has been a Visiting Professor at several institutions, including the University of Aveiro (Portugal), Université Laval (Canada), Universidade Católica de Moçambique, Universidad Nacional Arturo Jauretche (Argentina), Paracelsus Medizinische Privatuniversität (Austria), the State University of Campinas (Brazil), and the University of Silesia in Katowice (Poland). His publications and research projects explore the relationship between epistemology, ethics, and spirituality, contributing to a renewed understanding of theology as a public and transformative discipline.

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Isidro Lamelas

Isidro Lamelas is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Theology of the Universidade Católica Portuguesa in Lisbon and a researcher at the Research Centre for Theology and Religious Studies (CITER). A member of the Franciscan Order since 1985, he completed his first degree in Theology at the Faculty of Theology of the Universidade Católica Portuguesa in 1990. He specialized in Patristic Sciences at the Augustinian Patristic Institute and pursued advanced studies in Christian Archaeology at the Pontifical Institute of Christian Archaeology and at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome. In 1998, he obtained his PhD in Patristic Theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University, where he defended a dissertation entitled “Una domus et Ecclesia Dei in saeculo: A socio-anthropological reading of the project of ecclesia in St. Cyprian of Carthage”. Since 2000, Lamelas has been a faculty member at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa, where he has developed research on early Christianity and the transmission of patristic sources and thought. His academic interests include patristic theology, philosophy of religion, and the epistemological foundations of theological knowledge. His publications focus on the translation and interpretation of the Fathers of the Church and on the theological, cultural, and historical dimensions of Christian identity.

He is also the coordinator and co-author of the Portuguese translation and edition of St. Augustine’s sermons, of which three volumes have already been published. Lamelas is director of the Franciscan culture journal *Itinerarium* and a member of the scientific council of *Archivo Ibero-Americano*. Through his research and teaching, he seeks to integrate historical scholarship, theological reflection, and pastoral sensitivity, contributing to a theology rooted in the Christian tradition and open to contemporary challenges and intercultural dialogue.

Preface

This Special Issue results from a collective effort to rethink theology's epistemological, ethical, and cultural tasks in contemporary society. The contributions assembled here reveal a movement from enclosed systems of belief toward dialogical, interdisciplinary, and ethically engaged forms of theology. Each article performs, in its own way, an archeo-genealogical inquiry into theological knowledge, uncovering the historical layers, conceptual assumptions, and institutional frameworks that shape theological discourse. Yet beyond this analytical gesture, they all point toward a constructive horizon: a public theology capable of speaking meaningfully within the plural spaces of contemporary life.

The passage from dogmatism to public theology does not imply abandoning tradition but rediscovering within it the possibility of encounter. Dogma, creed, community, responsibility, friendship, ecology, and memory emerge here as living expressions of faith's capacity to generate meaning within history. In an age marked by polarization, ecological crisis, and the erosion of trust in institutions, theology's public responsibility lies in fostering discernment and dialogue.

The Guest Editors express their gratitude to all authors and reviewers who contributed to this Special Issue. Together, these essays testify that theology, when it interrogates its own conditions of possibility, can once again become a creative and critical force within the university and society.

Alex Villas Boas, João Duque, and Isidro Lamelas

Guest Editors

Editorial

From Dogmatism to a Public Theology: An Archaeology of Theological Knowledge and Religious Studies—Editorial

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The present Special Issue brings together a constellation of studies that converge around a central epistemological question: how can theology recover its public vocation without renouncing its dogmatic depth? The title *From Dogmatism to a Public Theology: An Archaeology of Theological Knowledge and Religious Studies* points to the dual movement that characterises much of contemporary theological reflection. On one hand, it expresses the need to displace theology from the self-referential closure that historically confined it to its own systems of language and meaning; on the other, it reaffirms its responsibility to engage public rationality and the social and cultural transformations of post-secular societies.

This transition from dogmatism to public theology should not be mistaken for a rejection of dogmatic thought. Rather, it calls for a hermeneutical reorientation that reclaims dogma as mediation instead of limitation, as a form of language that communicates the faith of a community within the horizon of history. What is at stake is not the abandonment of dogma but its rediscovery as an act of openness, as an expression capable of entering dialogue with other forms of knowledge. In this sense, the archaeological gesture becomes indispensable: to unveil the discursive and institutional conditions that made theology possible as a mode of truth and to identify the political and ethical dimensions that underlie its historical formations.

Michel Foucault's method of archaeology and genealogy provides the conceptual background for this transformation, together with Michel de Certeau's interpretation of religious practices as loci of meaning and invention. Through these lenses, theology appears not as an isolated discipline but as a field inscribed in complex networks of power, culture, and subjectivity. The task of an archaeology of theological knowledge thus coincides with the need to construct a genealogy of ethics, in which spirituality becomes not a private devotion but a practice of transformation and resistance. The objective of such an approach is not to replace traditional theology but to recover its critical and ethical dimension, capable of entering the university and the public sphere as a form of knowledge that contributes to the common good.

Each contribution to this volume develops this movement in a distinct way, reflecting the plurality of methods, languages, and contexts that shape the current landscape of theological research. Some articles focus on the epistemological foundations of theology, others on its ethical and political implications, while others revisit the historical figures and concepts that mediate the encounter between theology, philosophy, and culture. Taken together, they delineate a field in which theology becomes self-aware of its own discursive conditions and reorients its task toward public responsibility.

The article by Alex Villas Boas and César Candiotti establishes the theoretical framework that sustains the entire issue. Drawing on Foucault's archaeological and genealogical

tools, it examines theology's tendency toward self-referentiality and its risk of epistemic isolation. The authors argue that only by acknowledging its historical and political conditioning can theology contribute to the plural rationalities of contemporary societies. The proposed "archaeo-genealogy of theological knowledge" becomes a paradigm for rethinking theology's place within the university, enabling it to move from inward repetition to critical and public engagement.

Within the same epistemological horizon, Jelson R. de Oliveira and Grégori de Souza explore the ethical imperative of responsibility by connecting Hans Jonas's philosophy with Pope Francis's integral ecology. Their study highlights how both perspectives converge in proposing a transformation of consciousness and lifestyle as the foundation of ethical and ecological renewal. By articulating ontology, anthropology, and ethics, they show how responsibility operates as a bridge between faith and reason, revealing that theological reflection can and must participate in the public debates on ecological crisis and the future of life on Earth.

The dialogue between theology and social transformation emerges powerfully in the contribution of Jefferson Zeferino and Rudolf von Sinner, who recover the work of Richard Shaull as a precursor of Latin American public theology. By analysing Shaull's 1962 text *The New Revolutionary Mood in Latin America*, they demonstrate how his encounter with social sciences and ecumenical thought anticipated the later emergence of liberation theology. Shaull's proposal of a "theology of revolution" does not aim at ideological confrontation but at the reconstruction of human dignity and solidarity in times of social upheaval. Through this retrieval, theology is reconnected with the ethical and historical struggles that define its public vocation.

Susana Vilas Boas offers a distinct but complementary perspective by revisiting the Nicene Creed through the philosophy of language and science. Engaging Austin and Lakatos, she interprets the act of professing the Creed as performative rather than merely propositional, showing that belief is not passive assent but an enacted identity. Her reading transforms the dogmatic formula into a communicative gesture that unites rationality, faith, and community. The Creed thus becomes a living discourse that mediates between the interiority of faith and the public intelligibility of theology, an example of how dogmatic language itself can be a form of dialogue.

The critique of economic and moral structures of domination appears in the study by Douglas Ferreira Barros and Glaucio Barsalini, who interpret the notion of debt as a political-theological device that sustains the neoliberal ethos. Drawing on Foucault's analysis of power and the concept of *dispositif*, they argue that debt functions as a moral mechanism of control that internalises guilt and submission. In their rereading of *Laudato Si'*, they reveal how theology can unmask the moral economy that legitimates injustice and propose an alternative paradigm of gratuity and liberation. Their reflection situates theology within the critique of global capitalism, expanding the field of political theology beyond its classical preoccupation with sovereignty toward the ethical and spiritual dimensions of economic life.

Jacques Julien turns to the relationship between friendship, alterity, and community through a reading of Derrida and Augustine. By exploring how the Augustinian understanding of love and communion informs Derrida's *Politics of Friendship*, Julien situates friendship as a locus of theological and political transformation. Friendship, in his reading, becomes a practice of exposure to the other and a metaphor for the kind of relational openness that theology must cultivate. The movement from intimacy to community mirrors the passage from dogmatism to public theology: the recognition that truth is shared, not possessed, and that theology's vitality depends on its capacity for relationality and dialogue.

João Manuel Duque deepens the philosophical dimension of the issue by engaging Roberto Esposito's concepts of biopolitics and immunity. His analysis traces the theological genealogy of immunising structures that shape modern political thought, revealing both their protective and exclusionary functions. By introducing a Trinitarian reading of Esposito's categories, Duque proposes a reconfiguration of community that moves beyond binary logics of inside and outside. Religion, in this sense, appears as both a source of immunity and a critique of it, capable of transforming mechanisms of protection into gestures of openness. Duque's reflection exemplifies how theology can engage contemporary philosophy not through opposition but through a shared concern for the conditions of communal life.

Colby Dickinson's meditation on archaeology and hauntology returns to the methodological core of the issue. Through a dialogue between Foucault and Derrida, he interprets the persistence of spectral presences as a challenge to the modern illusion of sovereignty. To acknowledge the "haunted" dimension of history is to accept vulnerability as a constitutive element of human existence. Dickinson's reflection thus complements the archaeological method with a hauntological sensitivity: theology must listen to the voices that inhabit its silences, to the memories and traumas that resist closure. This opening to vulnerability becomes itself a form of spiritual practice, reminding theology that truth arises not from mastery but from the capacity to remember and to grieve.

The reflection initiated by Paul Gareth Weller closes the circle by returning to the institutional and methodological dimensions of theology and religious studies. His essay examines the dynamics of power, interest, and method that shape the production of knowledge within both fields. Instead of reinforcing the dichotomy between theology and the study of religion, he calls for an engaged and reflexive scholarship that acknowledges its own positionalities and commitments. Weller's emphasis on "axioanalysis," the evaluation of the values underlying academic practices, aligns with the ethical orientation of public theology, which recognises that knowledge is never neutral and that every discourse implies responsibility toward others.

Taken together, the contributions assembled in this Special Issue reveal a movement from enclosed systems of belief toward dialogical, interdisciplinary, and ethically engaged forms of theology. Each article, in its own way, performs an archaeology of theological knowledge, uncovering the historical layers, conceptual assumptions, and institutional frameworks that shape theology's discourse. Yet beyond this analytical gesture, they all point toward a constructive horizon, a public theology capable of speaking within the plural spaces of contemporary life.

The passage from dogmatism to a public theology does not mean abandoning tradition but rediscovering within it the possibility of encounter. Dogma, creed, community, responsibility, friendship, ecology, and memory are not relics of a closed past but living expressions of faith's capacity to generate meaning within history. The task of an archaeology of theology, therefore, is inseparable from the genealogy of ethics: to unveil how practices of belief can become practices of freedom.

In an age marked by polarisation, ecological crisis, and the erosion of trust in institutions, theology's public responsibility lies in fostering spaces of discernment and dialogue. The contributions gathered here suggest that this responsibility requires both methodological courage and spiritual humility. To think theologically today is to inhabit a frontier between faith and reason, tradition and critique, transcendence and immanence. It is to accept that theology's truth is not secured by authority but witnessed in the ethical and communal transformations it inspires.

The editors of this volume express gratitude to all authors and reviewers who contributed to this collective endeavour. Together, these essays testify that theology, when it dares to interrogate its own conditions of possibility, can once again become a creative and

critical force within the university and society. The archaeology of theological knowledge, when coupled with the aspiration to a public theology, opens not an end but a beginning, a renewed invitation to think, speak, and act within the shared horizon of the common good.

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Article

The Task of an Archaeo-Genealogy of Theological Knowledge: Between Self-Referentiality and Public Theology

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Abstract

This article addresses the epistemic and political problem of self-referentiality in theology within the context of post-secular societies as a demand for public relevance of faculties of theology within the 21st-century university. It focuses on the epistemological emergence of public theology as a distinct knowledge, such as human rights, and ecological thinking, contributing to the public mission of knowledge production and interdisciplinary engagement. This study applies Michel Foucault's archaeological and genealogical methods in dialogue with Michel de Certeau's insights into the archaeology of religious practices through a multi-layered analytical approach, including archaeology of knowledge, apparatuses of power, pastoral government, and spirituality as a genealogy of ethics. As a result of the analysis, it examines the historical conditions of possibility for the emergence of a public theology and how it needs to be thought synchronously with other formations of knowledge, allowing theology to move beyond its self-referential model of approaching dogma and the social practices derived from it. This article concludes programmatically that the development of public theology requires an epistemological reconfiguration to displace its self-referentiality through critical engagement with a public rationality framework as an essential task for the public relevance and contribution of theology within contemporary universities and plural societies.

Keywords: public theology; archaeo-genealogy of theological knowledge; Michel Foucault; Michel de Certeau; epistemic self-referentiality; genealogy of power; political spirituality; genealogy of ethics

1. Introduction

This article explores the need for an archaeology of theological knowledge in the face of the challenge of epistemic self-referentiality in post-secular societies, where the public presence of religion reappears in an ambiguous and contested form. In this context, theological faculties face a growing demand to justify their public and academic relevance within 21st-century universities, which are characterized by an ideal of critical, ethical, and pluralistic rationality.

The central problem addressed is that theology, when confined to its confessional and institutional self-referentiality, becomes epistemically isolated and politically ineffective, reproducing forms of identity closure and losing the ability to contribute to public debate. While self-referentiality has been described by Niklas Luhmann (1984) as a legitimate

mode of systemic functioning, the authors' position here is that this characteristic can hide the historical and political conditions that shape knowledge, contrasting at the same time with proposals for an 'outgoing theology' [*theologia in exitu*]¹ committed to listening and interdisciplinarity and social transformation. It is in this context that the task of an archaeology of theological knowledge arises, but at the same time, how this knowledge relates to power relations, and thus how relations are established with the genealogy of power in the context of theological knowledge production and the social practices that derive from or sustain it, also arises.

The aim of this article is therefore to outline elements that can contribute to the perception of the public relevance of theology based on the challenge of rethinking its epistemological foundations in dialogue with the public rationality that constitutes the basis of contemporary universities. However, this critique of self-referentiality does not imply a rejection of dogmatic theology itself. Instead, it draws attention to the dangers of theology becoming isolated within its own systems and losing the ability to address contemporary issues. In this sense, public theology is not proposed as a replacement for traditional theological approaches but as an epistemological complement to them. To this end, Michel Foucault's archaeological–genealogical method is used to analyze theological knowledge–power in order to outline the need for an epistemological reconfiguration of theology, or more precisely, an archaeo-genealogy of public theology.

Although some contributions, such as Bernauer and Carrette (2016), address Foucault's relation to religion, his reflections on religion and culture remain largely unexplored in the humanities. In this sense, there are works that correlate M. Foucault with theology, reflecting on the political positioning inherent in religious experience, not only in the formulation of an apparatus² of control but also in the genealogy of ethics and political spirituality, offering a new critical hermeneutic for theology, as was the case with Tran (2011) and Chevalier, who particularly explored the possibility of an "anarchéologie" in the relationship between Foucault and Christianity (Chevallier 2024). The publication of the volume "Histoire de la sexualité: Les aveux de la Chair" (Foucault 2018b), dedicated to the study of Christian authors, also sheds new light on research on Foucault and theology. Carrette has also compiled Foucault's writings on religion, opening up new possibilities for reading the French philosopher and the issues surrounding religion (Foucault 1999).

However, the French philosopher does not offer a precise theory of religion, but religion is intimately related to culture, and as such, its value for individuals and groups can undergo the same changes as a given culture, while elements of the religious phenomenon form part of the structures of a culture's way of being, even when secularized, as is the case with Western culture, on which Foucault focuses his archaeological and genealogical exercise (Wuthnow et al. 1984, p. 162).

Furthermore, the analysis of the epistemological implications from the perspective of Michel Foucault's archaeo-genealogical method aims to conceive a 'critical hermeneutics' of theology, as proposed by Bernauer and Carrette (2016, p. 4), and what this might become in the construction of a public theology in the context of the emergence of a commitment of theology to a public agenda.

To this end, this work operates with several facets of Foucauldian tools. The first, archaeological, describes the historical conditions that made theological knowledge possible in modernity. The second, genealogical, identifies the devices that structure the relationship between power and knowledge in their institutional practices, especially in theological faculties. The third focuses on the genealogy of pastoral power and its forms of subjectivation and how they have been used by political theology projects to legitimize political actors. Finally, the fourth level focuses on an ethical and spiritual reading of forms of resistance, proposing a 'critical spirituality' as a condition of possibility for public theology. For this

purpose, this article also revisits an ‘unfinished dialogue’ between Foucault and Michel de Certeau, whose reflections deepen the archaeological task of revealing the persistence of religion as a structure of thought in modern discursive practice (Petit 2020).

The aim is to understand how the discursive and non-discursive practices of theology have been shaped by the relations between knowledge and power and by the historical conditions of possibility, highlighting the potential of theology to become a public and critical knowledge. To this end, we propose an archaeo-genealogy of theological knowledge-power with a view to constructing a public theology, taking into account the place of theology in contemporary universities, grounded in public rationality and effective contribution to the common good. This task does not aim to replace the model of confessional or dogmatic theology but rather to propose an alternative rationality for the production of theological knowledge from the place where it is located, namely within the contemporary university and its task of producing critical and public knowledge.

2. Self-Referentiality as an Epistemological and Political Problem

Theological self-referentiality is one of the main epistemological and political challenges for the constitution of theology as a field of public relevance within contemporary universities. It is a phenomenon which, by privileging hermeneutical self-referentiality and by closing itself off to its own traditions and categories, runs the risk of confining theology to its confessional dimension, thereby compromising its ability to dialogue with public rationality and to contribute to the critical formation of plural societies.

2.1. *The Insufficiency of the Hermeneutics of Secularization*

The notion of post-secular societies highlights the insufficiency of the theory of secularization as a linear decline of religion. Rather than disappearing, the religious phenomenon is reappearing in the public sphere in new forms of expression and engagement.

This return, however, does not imply the restoration of the theocratic model, nor the permanence of religion in the private sphere. What is emerging is a pluralist scenario in which different rationalities compete for legitimacy in defining the common good, which demands a revision of the classical division between public and private (Lambert 2000).

In this context, religion reappears in an ambiguous form: sometimes as a promoter of dialogue and public agendas, such as the ecological agenda, and sometimes as a vector of exclusion and identity closure. This dualization of religion poses a challenge to the theological field to develop a language capable of critically engaging with public rationality and contributing to the construction of democratic and pluralistic societies.

2.2. *The Dualization of Religion and the Crisis of Public Rationality*

The dualization of religion refers to the coexistence of two paradoxical movements typical of so-called post-secular societies: on the one hand, openness to pluralism and commitment to universal causes, as Jürgen Habermas recognizes when he values religious traditions as sources of meaning (Habermas 2009); on the other hand, the use of religion as a tool for closing off identity and justifying exclusionary and authoritarian projects. This tendency, accentuated in advanced modernity (Campiche 2010), calls for a complex concept of religion capable of reflecting multiple articulations with different social fields (Hervieu-Léger 1999).

Based on longitudinal research on values in Europe, Yves Lambert distinguishes three basic categories: the religious (meta-empirical realities), the axiological (ethical values), and the ideological (socio-political representations). According to him, religion does not operate in isolation but in conjunction with ideology and axiology, which allows one to understand

the tensions between religion and politics not as a binary opposition but as the result of discontinuities between social structures and subjective experiences (Lambert 2000).

The notion of ‘public religion’ proposed by José Casanova (1994) helps to understand the reconfiguration of relations between religion and society. However, perhaps it proves insufficient to deal with the complexity and constitutive ambiguity of the religious presence in contemporary societies. By privileging the integrative aspect of the religious phenomenon, the category tends to mitigate the effects of its political instrumentalization and the forms of identity closure that characterize contemporary reality. By uncritically adopting this notion, theology runs the risk of reinforcing a normatively positive image of public religion without taking into account its structural ambivalences.

In this scenario, self-referential theology, when it operates as an epistemic immunity, can foster polarization and reinforce political messianism, as Carl Schmitt described in his notion of ‘state of exception’, conceived as divine intervention, and through the formulation of state sovereignty as a secular version of papal infallibility, legitimizing authoritarian power structures as ‘uniformisation’ (*Gleichschaltung*) to eliminate dissonance (Schmitt 1996, p. 42).

2.3. The Institutionalization of the Epistemic Self-Referentiality of Theological Faculties

For the most part, the presence of theological faculties in contemporary universities is not the result of full recognition as scientific knowledge on an equal footing with other academic disciplines. On the contrary, this permanence is essentially due to the concordats and diplomatic agreements signed between national states and historic churches, which guarantee the institutional protection of theology, albeit on the margins of the modern and critical epistemological model of the human sciences.

This legal and political structure has consolidated an institutionalized self-referentiality that often operates without requiring conformity to criteria of public rationality. The concordats do not exactly oblige theology to submit to the methodological, critical, and intersubjective requirements that govern the scientific field, which, in many cases, allows it to function as a transposition of seminary theology into the university space, maintaining institutional purposes, clerical formation logics, and a strictly confessional rationality.

This state of affairs is most evident in southwestern Europe, where theology has been formally excluded from public higher education systems and relegated to confessional institutions. France, Spain, and Italy exemplify this process, which resulted from liberal and secular reforms between the 19th and 20th centuries (Baubérot 2000; Chadwick 1990). The exceptions are, in particular, legal arrangements: Portugal, with the creation of the Universidade Católica Portuguesa under the 1940 Concordat (Holy See 1940); Malta, with the maintenance of the Faculty of Theology as part of the public university since the 1988 Concordat, reaffirmed in 1993 (Holy See 1993); and the Alsace–Moselle region of France, where the Napoleonic Concordat of 1801 is in force and was not revoked after the Treaty of Versailles (Baubérot 2000; Prost 1997).

The German model, adopted by the University of Strasbourg, is the most consolidated. Here, theology is recognized as a scientific discipline under the regime of the State Church Law. The Catholic and Protestant theological faculties operate as ‘res mixta’ under dual governance: state (in terms of university funding and regulation) and church (in terms of doctrinal orthodoxy and clergy training) (Wissenschaftsrat 2010). While this configuration ensures institutional stability, it also runs the institutional risk of reinforcing the self-referential logic of theology and does not necessarily make feasible its openness to public rationality, interdisciplinary critique, and wider academic debate. Moreover, this model has been the target of recurrent criticism from parts of the university and civil society, especially in a context of budgetary austerity, due to the low number of students enrolled and the high cost

of maintaining theological faculties. Such criticism calls into question their academic and financial viability and reinforces the contemporary challenge of transforming theology from a regime of confessional exception to a space of public dialogue that actively and recognizably contributes to the plural construction of knowledge. This is not a matter of the individual abilities of distinguished theologians, but rather a structural problem concerning the way theology is integrated into the contemporary scientific and university systems.

The Wissenschaftsrat's Criticism of Theological Faculties (2010–2011)

Even the most well-established models for integrating theology into public universities today face pressures related to their academic and financial sustainability. The steady decline in the number of students enrolled in theology courses, coupled with the decline in religious vocations and the low employability outside the church context, raises doubts about the viability of these programs, especially in performance and productivity-driven systems.

This situation has led to debates about the closure or merger of theological faculties with other fields, such as philosophy or religious studies, and to critical evaluations by accreditation agencies, which point to shortcomings in interdisciplinarity, internationalization, and dialogue with other scientific fields. Against this background, the German Council of Science and Humanities (*Wissenschaftsrat*)—the German government's main advisory body on science and higher education—published a report in 2010/2011 that reaffirms the importance of theological faculties for ethical education and interreligious dialogue but also offers sharp criticism of their current structure, especially on issues that may be related to the problem of epistemic self-referentiality. The main points include the following (*Wissenschaftsrat* 2010):

- The need for interdisciplinary openness, encouraging dialogue with human and social sciences such as philosophy, sociology, and the history of religions;
- The tension between academic autonomy and ecclesiastical supervision, which compromises scientific freedom in the name of doctrinal orthodoxy;
- The inclusion of Islamic theologies in the German theological academic community in recognition of the religious diversity in German society;
- Resistance to modernization, with closed corporate practices and fear of losing ecclesiastical control.

Despite their institutional role, and the excellent work carried out by various theologians, theological faculties continue to occupy a peripheral and often tolerated position, without fully integrating the epistemological principles of the public sciences. The maintenance of an operationally closed logic, legitimized by concordats or regimes of exception, perpetuates a self-referential view of the religious phenomenon that does little to confront the contemporary dualization of religion—between openness to pluralism and identity closure.

Rather than offering theology the conditions for a critical and mediating role in the pluralist public sphere, the institutionalization of self-referentiality accentuates its difficulty in positioning itself in the face of the ambivalences of the religious in contemporary society.

2.4. The Limits of Systemic Self-Referentiality in Niklas Luhmann

Niklas Luhmann (1927–1998) defines epistemic self-referentiality [*Selbstreferentialität*] as the capacity of social systems to generate meaning and validate knowledge through their own operations without recourse to external legitimation (Luhmann 1995).

From Luhmann's perspective, social systems such as science, politics, and law are operationally closed and self-referential systems. This means that each of these systems defines and organizes itself according to its own internal codes and rules and is able to

determine what is relevant or true based on its own communicative operations (Luhmann 1984). Science, for example, operates by defining the validity of knowledge on the basis of internally established criteria without the need for legitimation from outside this specific system (Luhmann 1989). This self-referential autonomy allows the system to constantly adapt, reproduce, and modify itself according to its evolutionary needs (Luhmann 1995). For science, this means that knowledge is continuously constructed through observations and theories that are internally related and that the scientific system uses its own operations to distinguish between information that is included and excluded from the field of knowledge (Luhmann 1984). Self-referentiality thus becomes the key to the self-reproduction of systems and the continuous construction of a self-validating body of knowledge.

For the German sociologist, epistemic self-referentiality does not lead to the ‘self-sufficiency’ of self-referential systems, which would imply a detachment from concrete reality and a lack of sensitivity to external influences. The point for Luhmann is not that systems cannot be influenced by the environment but that responses to external stimuli are always processed according to the system’s internal rules (Luhmann 1997) and, therefore, do not exclude the possibility of interaction with the environment but define how this interaction is understood and integrated into the system’s logic. Self-referentiality guarantees the consistency and continuity of systems, allowing them to adapt to changes in the environment without losing their functional identity (Luhmann 1995). Thus, contemporary society should be understood as functionally differentiated, where different social systems are self-referential and do not communicate with each other directly but only through ‘structural coupling’ [*Strukturelle Kopplung*] (Luhmann 1997). Self-referentiality thereby does not imply complete isolation but rather the creation of meaning from an endogenous perspective without merging their internal logics (Luhmann 1995).

Structural couplings enable systems to interact functionally while preserving their operational autonomy. Each system interprets external influences through its own internal logic without merging with others. For example, science and politics may be coupled when scientific research informs policy decisions, yet both maintain distinct criteria of validation. Such couplings are essential for coordinating differentiated systems in contemporary society, allowing interdependence without compromising specificity.

Like any other system, theology organizes itself and defines its epistemological limits through a self-referential logic. In this way, theology would be a construction that operates internally, responding to the environment in a way that is filtered through its own criteria, thus guaranteeing its continuity and consistency over time.

In this sense, in a functionally differentiated society, theology would have a specific role and would not mix directly with other systems, such as science or politics, except in structural couplings. Thus, theology is part of a differentiated system, namely the religious system, which deals with questions of ultimate meaning and offers answers to existential uncertainties that cannot be satisfactorily addressed by other social systems.

However, to the extent that theological knowledge can be found in modern universities, it is located in the university system, which functions as a link between the religious system and the scientific system of society. In addition to the procedural requirements that imply such a place, there is a fundamental element that is epistemological recognition by the scientific system, which, in terms of the modern university, implies thinking and producing theology according to the criteria of public rationality. With the rise of modern epistemology, theology was relegated to the margins of public universities due to its dependence on Revelation, as a structuring category of its discursive practice. Its institutional survival often depended on concordats with the state, which secured its formal place without guaranteeing epistemological recognition (Harrison 2015; Davie 2002). Movements such as the Enlightenment and the French Revolution promoted a vision of

education divorced from religious world view as essential to the formation of rational and free citizens (Chadwick 1990).

In this context, the historical presence of theological faculties in medieval universities and their incorporation into modern universities was only possible through these agreements with modern states, and in a number of contexts, they still suffer, to some extent, from a lack of effective epistemological recognition of the scientific fields that make up the academic community.

The question that arises, therefore, goes beyond its existence in public or private universities, which would be institutional forms of structural coupling between religious and scientific systems, but is linked to the recognition (or not) of theology as knowledge accepted by the scientific community and the consequent professionalization (or not) of its epistemic subject, namely the theologian, on an equal footing with any other researcher in terms of his contribution to the public task of producing knowledge for the common good and critical awareness.

In this case, the concept of self-referentiality is not sufficient to promote the effective integration of theology into the set of disciplines, since it favors the epistemic isolationism of theology, which reinforces the intensification of the privatization of faith, and even the actions of religious communities in public arenas, with the aim of strengthening an identity bloc logic, rather than a commitment to a pluralist project of society, as can be seen in a series of emerging radical speeches (Teixeira et al. 2022).

This is precisely where the criticism of self-referentiality comes in, from the distorting effect it can potentially have on the notion of academic autonomy, leading precisely to academic isolation, where the study of theology is limited to an internal, hermetic approach, disconnected from the “signs of the times” (Pope Francis 2017, n. 1). Francis criticizes the tendency of a theological discourse that does not engage with the challenges and needs of the contemporary world, remaining closed in intestinal discussions or in the repetition of formulas. This results not only in a pastoral disconnection but also in a lack of interdisciplinary dialogue, which translates into an approach that ignores the complexity of the contemporary world and fails to respond to the urgent questions of the present, especially the growing conviction in which the “planet is a homeland and that humanity is one people living in a common home”: “Recognizing this interdependence ‘obliges us to think of *one world with a common plan*’” (Pope Francis 2017, n. 4, d). This common plan demands a translation for a common language, which, for theology, can mean translating into a public language to foster the cross-disciplinarity between different fields of knowledge, as well as believers from different traditions and non-believers.

In this sense, Luhmann’s analysis does not take into account the relationship between the production of scientific knowledge and scientific policies, insofar as this involves analyzing the political issues involved in the formation of the university system, on the one hand, and the movement to accommodate theology through diplomatic tolerance that benefits from it, on the other.

Although Niklas Luhmann’s theory of social systems offers a sophisticated descriptive model for understanding the autopoietic and self-referential functioning of differentiated social systems, it proves inadequate for explaining the dynamics that characterize the dualization of religion in contemporary societies and its impact on theology. It does not allow the problematization of the tensions and ambiguities inherent in the public presence of religion, which oscillates between a logic of pluralistic openness and identity closure. Similarly, theological self-referentiality, conceived as a legitimate operation of systemic closure, as described by Luhmann, can become a mechanism for preserving the identity of the religious system but without offering critical instruments for assessing when such

closure ceases to be a functional condition and turn into an epistemological isolation, critical immunity, or even the basis of exclusionary and ideological practices.

2.5. The Proposal for a Theology That Goes Forth and the Problem of Self-Referentiality

The pontificate of Pope Francis has centered on the call for a “Church going forth”, which presupposes the production of a theology *going forth* [*theologia “in exitu”*] (Pope Francis 2023, n. 3). This perspective calls for a theology that renounces self-sufficiency and institutional comfort to engage with the world and its urgent challenges. Francis, as a pastor of existential and geographic peripheries, urges theologians toward an incarnate, compassionate presence. This movement unfolds *ad extra*, in ecological reflection through *Laudato si’*, and *ad intra*, through synodality as a practice of listening and unity in diversity. In both directions, theology must transcend its hermeneutical boundaries.

Francis reiterates the need for a *theologia in exitu*—a theology willing to leave its comfort zone and risk encounter. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he prefers a church “bruised and dirty” from engagement over one “sick from closure” (Pope Francis 2013, nn. 49, 20). This spirituality, rooted in the face of the other, calls theologians to “walk with the people” and respond to the concrete challenges of humanity (Pope Francis 2015b). In *Laudato si’*, theology becomes a prophetic voice for ecological conversion and human dignity, engaging in transdisciplinary dialogue toward the common good and the goals of the 2030 Agenda (Pope Francis 2015a, n. 201). The whole proposal of synodality is not only a method of governance but a true spirituality of encounter, listening, and discernment. The *Synod of the Amazon* was an example of this practice, placing the voices of traditional communities, often ignored by hegemonic speeches, at the center. The Amazon itself, as a complex reality, is presented as a *locus theologicus* (Pope Francis 2020, n. 57).

At the opening of the International Theological Congress of the Dicastery for Education and Culture in December 2024, Francis invited theologians to “help theology to rethink the way it thinks”, where rethinking is linked to “moving beyond simplification” to face the complexity of reality. This requires that theology be “fermented” by interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, which calls for theology to be an “open house” and for “theology to be accessible to all” (Pope Francis 2024).

Francis’s theology of going forth is often invoked to respond to the theoretical maturity of these commitments—to help think and discern reality and not be limited to sterile debates but closely linked to the concrete needs of humanity, embracing the complexities and contradictions of contemporary life. In this sense, for Francis, the place of the theologian is fundamentally at the frontier (Pope Francis 2015b).

In the introduction to the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties (Pope Francis 2017), these pastoral questions are given an epistemological translation and reaffirmed in the *motu proprio Ad theologiam promovendam* in which Francis stated about the transdisciplinary nature of theology:

“This relational dimension characterises and defines, from an epistemological point of view, the status of theology, which is driven not to close itself off in self-referentiality, leading to isolation and insignificance, but to see itself as part of a network of relationships, first and foremost with other disciplines and other fields of knowledge” [free translation] (Pope Francis 2023, n. 5).

Outgoing theology stands in contrast to a self-referential model that views theology as a “sacred science” concerned primarily with *Revelation*, directed to the priestly ministry, and placed above other forms of knowledge, as in *Sapientia Christiana* (Pope John Paul II 1979, III). Without ceasing to reflect its commitment to the theological tradition, an outgoing theology is called “from an epistemological point of view” to a transdisciplinary “relational dimension” to “know how to use the new categories approached by other knowledges”

and to adopt the attitude of a “courageous cultural revolution”. Theology that goes forward urges the very ‘status of theology’ not to ‘close in on itself in its self-referentiality, which leads to isolation and insignificance’ (Pope Francis 2023, n. 5). This article addresses the criticism formulated by Pope Francis in his ecclesiastical teachings, in line with the principles of Catholic social teaching. Public theology, as proposed here, is not just a reflection on public issues but a theological discourse that emerges through public interaction. From this perspective, criteria of truth are not defined solely by internal coherence or dogmatic authority but also by the capacity of theology to illuminate, interpret, and transform the world in which it is situated. As a form of contemporary public knowledge, it requires theology to engage with the emerging semantics of a body of knowledge shaped by a complex group of relations that function as a rule for the epistemological conditions of its historical context. Here, the focus of public theology is on sharing the historical and discursive conditions that led to the emergence of knowledge considered scientific in modern times.

Michel Foucault’s methodological proposal, especially in the context of the archaeology of knowledge, offers a fruitful way to face the challenge of the dualization of religion in contemporary societies. Instead of interpreting religion solely as a functionally differentiated system, as Luhmann does, Foucault offers analytical tools and hypotheses that can help analyze religious formations as historically situated discursive practices intersected by relations of knowledge and power. His approach makes it possible to show the limits of problematizing religion through the lens of ideology and axiology and to understand it from the point of view of a ‘bundle of relations’ between knowledge whose rationality can be grasped through the order of speech of a given time.

3. The Task of an Archaeo-Genealogy of Theological Knowledge

Giorgio Agamben defines archaeology as the identification of “signatures” that shape how disciplines construct and perpetuate meaning. These marks, inherited from historical tensions, continue to structure contemporary regimes of truth (Agamben 2019, p. 44). Taking up and extending the archaeology proposed by Michel Foucault, Agamben emphasizes the relevance of this method for understanding the apparatuses that organize contemporary experience and the regimes of truth that accept or exclude certain practices of knowledge. In this sense, the archaeological task is not limited to a work of historical excavation but is presented as a critical method for thinking about knowledge—such as theology—in its constitutive relationship with the exercise of power and its possibilities for re-signification in the present.

While Luhmann describes knowledge systems as self-referential, Foucault shows that knowledge is always embedded in power relations that define what can be said and thought through mechanisms of control, exclusion, and disciplining of speech (Foucault 1971). There is no knowledge that is completely autonomous, because its conditions of possibility are historically determined by the power games that determine what can be said and thought at any given time.

From this perspective, social systems cannot be understood as operationally closed in an absolute way because each system is constantly traversed by an order of speech that determines what can and cannot be legitimated as knowledge. This order is not only contingent but is structured by power relations that determine which propositions are accepted because they are “in the true” (Foucault 2010, p. 224) and which are excluded. In a Foucauldian approach, the self-referentiality of a system such as the scientific system is ultimately an illusion because all knowledge is produced in a field of forces that includes political, economic, and cultural tensions that shape its historical conditions of possibility.

Scientific practices cannot be separated from the social and political practices that allow them to operate.

In addition, Foucault pays particular attention to the discontinuities between different epochs, that is, the moments when forms of knowledge power are radically restructured by changes in discursive practices and their relationship to non-discursive practices. The production of knowledge is always traversed by practices of power and resistance, which cannot be explained solely by self-referential mechanisms that are purely internal to the systems.

In the specific case of theological knowledge, a fundamental problem in the structural coupling with modern universities lies in the divergence between two regimes of rationality: while the scientific system that governs the university is guided by a public rationality, contemporary theology remains largely referenced by a confessional rationality based on Revelation. This emphasis on Revelation as the ultimate criterion of truth can be interpreted as a symptom of the historical conditions of possibility that have shaped the place of the religious system in modern societies and partly explain its current epistemological marginality. Yet, historically, theology emerged as a public discourse intertwined with philosophy and public reason. The reduction of theology to fundamental theologies centered on Revelation reinforces epistemic self-enclosure, despite efforts to reinterpret Revelation in dialogue with modern experience (Rahner 1941, 1984; Ratzinger 1969; Latourelle 1966; Gutiérrez 1971; Libanio 1992; Tillich; Pannenberg 1961; Geffré 1972; O'Collins 2016; Theobald 2001, among others).

In their joint work *Offenbarung und Überlieferung* (Rahner and Ratzinger 1965), Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger engage in a profound theological dialogue on the relationship between Revelation and Tradition, which is necessarily mediated not only by ecclesial forms but also through historical ones. Despite their differences, both authors converged in their understanding that Revelation is not merely a repository of fixed truths but a dynamic event that unfolds through the life of the believing community. This conception of a historically mediated and dialogical process anticipates the key issues later explored in *Dei Verbum* (Pope Paul VI 1965), offering a valuable foundation for modern reflections on public theology, particularly concerning the relationship between faith, reason, and historical consciousness. It is precisely this dynamism that positions 21st-century theology within contemporary universities, where it faces the epistemological challenge of achieving recognition not just through concordats, but throughout the scientific community. Theology must be translated into the language of public rationality to contribute to citizenship and the common good without abandoning its confessional roots (Tracy 1996). However, it does demand a rigorous translation and a broadening of its epistemological understanding so that it can fit better in the mission of modern universities to promote the formation of citizens' critical conscience and contribute to the common good.

In contrast to the logic of self-referentiality, Francis used the metaphor of the polyhedron to describe theology as polyphonic—open to diversity yet united in dialogue and oriented to the common good (Pope Francis 2017, n. 3). Foucault similarly speaks of a “polyhedron of intelligibility,” where knowledge is structured by multiple, irreducible relations. The analysis of a field of knowledge requires taking into account the multiplicity of relations that make it up, forming a polyhedron whose faces are not given in advance and whose complexity cannot be completely reduced to a single point of view (Foucault 2001, p. 227).

On the same horizon, Michel de Certeau—identified by Pope Francis as a major influence (La Civiltà Cattolica 2013; IHU On-Line 2013)—proposed to think about an “archaeology of the religious” (*archéologie religieuse*) in which the religious element functions as a matrix of intelligibility. In *L'écriture de l'histoire*, he argued that modern historiography

does not entirely break with the religious but rather reinscribes the experience of alterity and absence—God, the Other—into secular modes of knowledge (Certeau 1975, p. 121).

The task of an archaeology of theological knowledge thus acquires a critical and plural character. It involves reflecting on theology's entanglement with knowledge, society, and power; identifying the multiple genealogies that shape its discourse; and overcoming epistemic self-referentiality to contribute to a public theology in dialogue with contemporary rationality—particularly as it emerges within the human sciences. As such, this article does not seek to deny the legitimacy of self-referential epistemological modes of dogmatic theology as a belief system. Instead, it highlights the epistemological risks of isolating theological discourse from broader societal dialogue, particularly when theology becomes a university discipline within a scientific system through concordats rather than epistemic consensus among various fields of knowledge, as was typical with the emergence of the human sciences. In this context, public theology is presented as an additional approach that allows theology to engage with the public sphere through epistemological openness and interdisciplinary interactions.

In this way, the archaeo-genealogical toolbox is employed here to illuminate the historical and relational conditions underlying the emergence of public theology through three complementary dimensions: (1) the archaeology of knowledge, (2) the genealogy of power apparatuses, and (3) the genealogy of ethics or processes of subjectivation—each contributing to the analysis of theology's epistemic displacement.

3.1. The Trajectory of Michel Foucault's Archaeological Method

In order to outline an archaeology of theological knowledge, it is first necessary to understand some aspects of the first moment of Foucault's analyses, corresponding to the trajectory of the archaeological method, and its relation to the second moment of his thought, when the refined elaboration of the genealogical method takes place.

In a broad sense, the archaeological analysis does not aim to search for an origin or a history of ideas but rather to systematically describe the birth of a discourse-object based on enunciative regularities between different types of knowledge in the same long period of time, which come to share an enunciative homogeneity, forming a kind of bundle of discursive relations. To understand this point of arrival for the archaeology of knowledge, it is helpful to elucidate its trajectory.

Foucault's archaeological project in the 1960s is exemplified by *History of Madness* (Foucault 1961), where he explores how different periods constructed the perception of madness as a cultural and institutional phenomenon. In *The Birth of the Clinic* (Foucault [1973] 2003), he extends this analysis to medical discourse, showing how the shift from metaphysical to empirical observation in the late 18th century transformed clinical practice. This transition—from symptom to lesion, from theory to anatomical gaze—illustrates how knowledge is shaped by institutional practices. Ultimately, Foucault links this evolution to the emergence of biopower and the modern control of bodies through medical authority.

Finally, his last archaeological exercise, known as *Opus Magnum*, led to the publication of *Les mots et les choses* (literally *words and things*)³, whose subtitle also indicates the object of its excavation, namely *An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Foucault 1966). The book deals with the discursive formation that led to the emergence of this field of knowledge in the nineteenth century, which, according to the French philosopher, consisted mainly of the social sciences, psychology, and literature—from the opening to positivity of the finitude of the human being not only as a transcendental subject in Kantian philosophy but above all as an empirical object, making it possible to grasp him not only as the subject of his reflection but also as his own object. It is here that Foucault analyzes the formation of knowledge and its historical conditions of existence and the way in which discourses

articulate words and things in modernity, no longer governed by the notion that words merely reveal and represent the already given meaning of things.

It is only in this 1966 book that the centrality of knowledge is acknowledged, through the intersection of its philosophical and empirical perspectives, between which a synchronic continuity is identified (for example, in the perspective of finitude that runs through biology, political economy, and philology in modernity) and a diachronic discontinuity (the reconfiguration of the relationship between words and things in the sphere of knowledge based on the change in the archaeological network in which they are found). The archaeology of knowledge in *Les mots et les choses* aims to identify the limits of what is thinkable in a given culture—in this case, Western European culture. To do this, Foucault turns to literature to show the extent to which an order of knowledge that does not belong to our cultural codes of apprehension provides an almost complete alienation. And yet these codes, which are completely different from those of their own, have a way of being understood in the archaeological soil in which they were built.

Foucault's decision to pursue the archaeology of the human sciences was inspired by Borges' fictional taxonomy, which revealed the self-referential nature of Western categories of thought. It refers to an entry on animals in a "certain Chinese encyclopaedia":

'animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies'. (Foucault 2008, Preface, p. XVI)

The philosopher commented on the impression the poem made on him when he realized that Western thought was in danger of thinking variations on the *same thing*. As said by the French philosopher:

"In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*." (Foucault 2008, Preface, p. XVI)

In this way, the archaeological task can be seen as a way of forming a theoretical toolbox to identify forms of self-referentiality.

Furthermore, in the preface to *The Order of Things*, Foucault makes it clear that his aim is not to tell a chronological history of the human sciences but to reveal the networks of thought that have shaped knowledge in different periods. He defines this as 'archaeology', as he digs beneath historical surfaces to find the underlying rules that organize discourses and forms of knowledge that are taken for granted by the subjects of the time. In this way, the French philosopher aims to identify the rules of speech that organize and legitimize what can be said and thought as scientific in a given period.

Michel Foucault's archaeological task, then, was to progressively understand and describe what he called the *episteme*, that is, the set of historical rules that, at a given time, establish the conditions of possibility for a field of scientific knowledge, leading to the emergence of the so-called 'human sciences'. The *episteme* is not simply a body of knowledge or a set of ideas; it is the invisible and underlying structure that determines what can be known, thought, and said at a given time, even before knowledge is organized into specific disciplines. *Episteme* can be understood as "*a priori is what, in a given period, delimits in the totality of experience a field of knowledge, defines the mode of being of the objects that appear in that field*" (Foucault 2005b, p. 158).

The archaeological method is based on the rules or historical *a priori* that define what knowledge is for each era. It is a 'network of knowledge' that connects all areas of

knowledge and influences the forms of truth that are accepted in a period. The *episteme* is not conscious, but it is the background that shapes the knowledge of an era, allowing certain concepts to make sense while others do not. Each specific piece of knowledge (*savoir*) needs to relate to this network of foundational knowledge (*connaissance*).

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault 1969), Foucault outlines a method for analyzing the historical conditions that make knowledge possible in different periods. Rather than seeking the origin of ideas or the intentions of authors, archaeology focuses on analyzing the discursive practices and regularities that govern the constitution of knowledge. This archaeology is structured around four elements—object, subject, concepts, and strategies—understood not as fixed entities but as relational functions within a discursive field. These are articulated through the statement (*énoncé*), the method's basic unit, not a sentence but a discursive function that enables something to be said meaningfully within specific institutional and historical conditions. A statement does not exist in isolation: it is situated within a set of rules that determine who can speak (subject), what may be spoken about (object), with which conceptual tools (concepts), and under what strategic conditions or power relations (strategic formulations). The statement is the intersection of these four dimensions, allowing discourse to emerge meaningfully within a given historical configuration (see Figure 1). The archaeologist's task is to describe this field of statements and to uncover the rules that govern their formation, transformation, and exclusion.

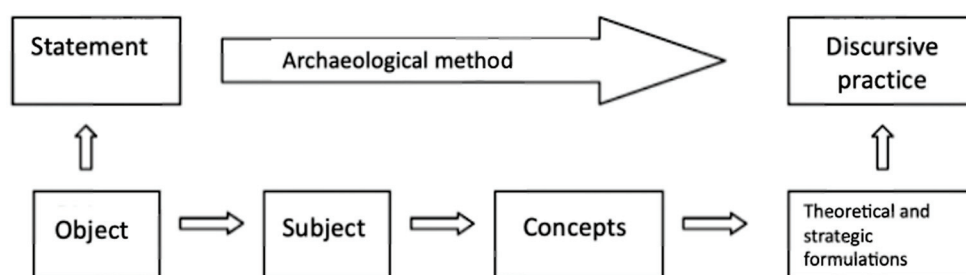


Figure 1. Archaeological method Diagram adapted by the authors based on the methodological structure described by Gonçalves (2009).⁴

The object emerges within a statement, shaped by the discursive practices that define its properties and modes of existence. The subject is likewise positioned by the statement; there is no subject prior to it, only subject positions determined by what may be said. Concepts are mobilized and structured through statements, defining fields of reference, intelligibility, and regimes of truth. Finally, strategies determine the effects of statements, assigning them a role within a field of knowledge power and situating them in ongoing struggles and relations of force.

The French philosopher emphasizes discontinuities and ruptures that allow new rules for the emergence of a new understanding of what scientific knowledge is, at least in three periods. These epistemic configurations do not follow a linear progression but rather mark historical thresholds that redefine the historical conditions of possibility of knowing. Although Foucault did not analyze theology, the emergence of a new configuration in this set of rules obviously has repercussions for theology by changing the scenario of knowledge production in an era: (1) From Antiquity to the Renaissance, knowledge was organized around the principle of *resemblance*. Words aimed to reflect the relationships between things, understood as signs inscribed in a cosmos that could be deciphered. This way of knowing can also be associated with the ancient *divination* (Foucault 2005b, pp. 36–37, 65–66), a contemplative and symbolic mode that presupposes a world animated by divine traces, where meaning is revealed through analogies, correspondences, and *signatures*, in which nature is in the form of being deciphered by the human being, a mode of knowledge

oriented toward the perception of beauty (*thaumazein*) in the order of things. It was the first theological challenge of transposing the narrative theology of the Semitic tradition into the rules of knowledge production elaborated by the ancient Greeks. Without this transposition, dialogue with the Greco-Roman world would not have been possible. (2) The Classical period (17th century until the transition to the 19th century), as named by Foucault and influenced mainly by Descartes, marks a rupture in which thought separated words from things in order to create a rational, unchanging order of *representation*. Language became a transparent medium to structure and classify reality. This period directly influences the second scholasticism, both Catholic and Protestant, in which one can identify a shift in the way the figure of God is associated with the rules of knowledge production. In this sense, God ceases to be analyzed through things and begins to inhabit the world of scholastic *eruditio* (Foucault 2005b, p. 37) characterized by a systematic and taxonomic approach to knowledge, a rationality in which erudition places the idea of God in an exercise of abstraction that aspires to universality and epistemic clarity. (3) In the *Modern period*, which replaces the classical episteme, knowledge is primarily structured by the emergence of *finitude* as a historical and epistemological condition. According to Foucault, this marks a radical shift: the archaeology of knowledge breaks with the philosophical narrative that interprets the birth of the human sciences as a progressive unfolding of the idea of human nature. Instead, the modern episteme is grounded in history itself, whereby the finitude of human nature is no longer seen negatively in contrast to the perfection of the divine infinite but rather becomes the central positive datum around which knowledge is organized. This regime is defined by the constitution of “man” as both subject and object of knowledge—a figure that arises not from the metaphysical continuity of the Enlightenment but from a series of discontinuous discourses: philosophical (notably in Kant) and empirical (philology, political economy, biology). In this configuration, empirical methods do not merely provide observational tools: they articulate the historicity and limits of human knowing. This period thus corresponds to the emergence of the modern ‘man’ as an empirical–transcendental figure, essential for the notion of *finitude* (Foucault 2005b, p. 357s). Thus, for scholastic theology, *modernitas* meant *empiria*, a challenge to think of the theological tradition beyond metaphysical *eruditio* about life, but from an analysis of finitude and its basic dimension of *empiricism* situated in the concrete conditions of human life, as a way of engaging with the positivity of finitude, the most decisive event in the modern order of knowledge (Figure 2).

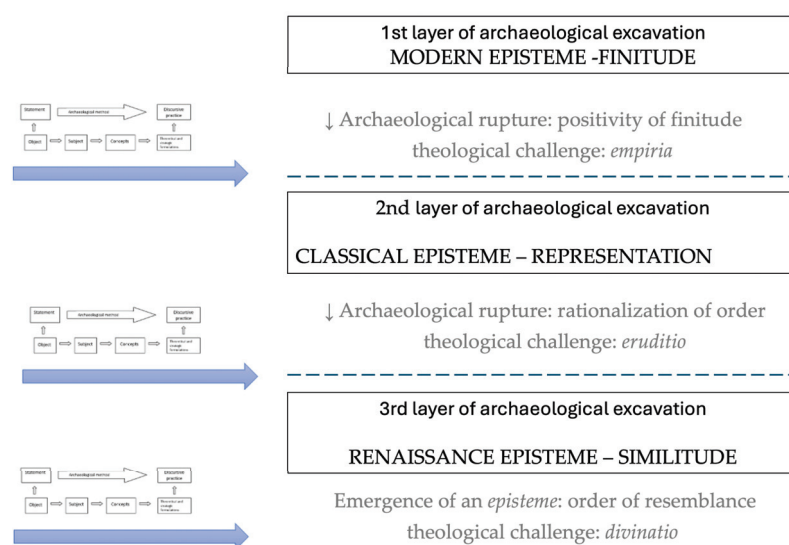


Figure 2. Archaeological excavation layers.

In this sense, the human sciences simultaneously become a specific knowledge in harmony with the set of foundational knowledges that shape the meaning of modern science. It means human sciences are scientific knowledge from their connection with the empirical basis of thought.

In other words, the human sciences emerged from the insufficient use of language from metaphysics in translating the empirical model to a cultural perspective. They were responsible for shaping the subjectivity of the modern individual. Human sciences emerged as an anthropological turn in empirical knowledge, transforming the human being not only into an object but also into a subject of their own knowledge.

If, at the empirical level, it is political economy (labor), biology (life), and philology (language) that discover finitude in a more radical manner, at the philosophical level, it is Kant's philosophy that opens the way to a "finite subject" (Figure 3). In fact, Kant creates a transcendental field in which the finite subject (because it is deprived of the intellectual intuition of metaphysics), but which is not empirical (because it is not given in experience, as in the empirical sciences), determines in its relation to any objects the formal conditions of experience in general (Foucault 2010, p. 264) and thus carries out a synthesis between representations. In contrast, and without paying attention to this Kantian distinction between the empirical and the transcendental subject, modern philosophy—especially positivism, dialectics, and phenomenology—sought to identify in the empirical subject of the sciences of life, work, and language the transcendental conditions of experience, thus inaugurating modern anthropologism through the 'confusion' between the empirical and the transcendental. Modern man is thus, from his very origins, both an empirical and transcendental object of knowledge (as one who works, lives, and speaks) and, at the same time, a condition of the possibility of this knowledge (as a transcendental subject whose finite categories of space and time make it possible to grasp the object, first through sensibility and then through the intellect, thus effecting a synthesis between representations). The human sciences are thus characterized as an anthropological turn of the empirical model of knowledge as an analytic of finitude.

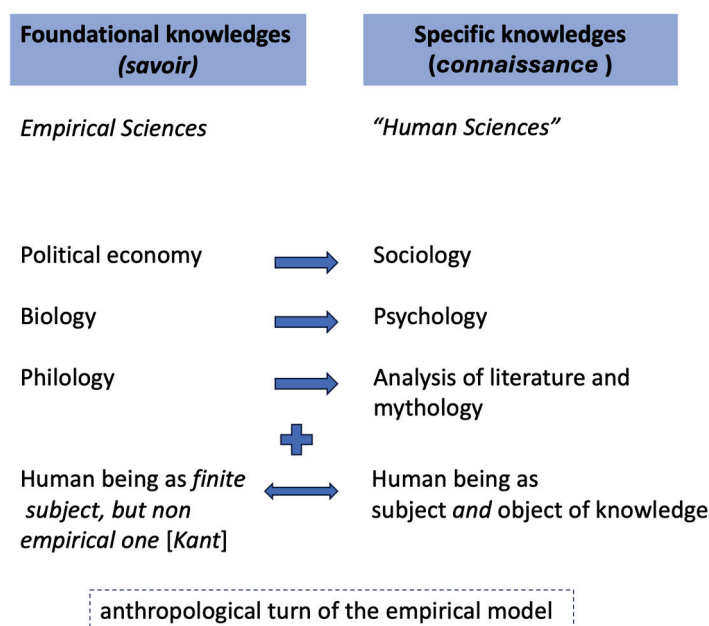


Figure 3. The formation of human sciences.

3.1.1. The Relation Between Archaeological and Genealogical Methods

The genealogical method introduced by Michel Foucault deepens rather than ruptures his analysis of the historical conditions of knowledge and its entanglement with power,

already evident in his 1970 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, published as *The Order of Discourse* (Foucault 1971). As Domingues (2023, p. 347) observes, the analytics of power was already implicit in the archaeological phase, as the emergence and legitimation of knowledge depend on external—especially political—conditions. Genealogy builds on this by tracing how truth is historically produced through such entanglements.

Foucault himself clarified this in 1984, distinguishing archaeology's concern with rules of formation from genealogy's focus on intersecting and transforming discursive practices:

"The analysis I was proposing was archaeological insofar as it was not intended to capture what was hidden, but to bring to light the play of rules that determine the appearance of statements as singular events. But it was also genealogical, in that it was not concerned with reconstituting formal successions, but with detecting discursive formations as multiple practices that intersect, repeat, transform, and sustain one another" [free translation] (Foucault 1984, p. 14).

What was previously centered on the conditions of possibility for statements and discursive formations now also incorporates the relations of force that traverse and historically constitute those formations. Foucault's metaphor of the '*polyhedron of intelligibility*' illustrates this multidimensional character of knowledge power formations. The polyhedron, with its multiple, open-ended facets, illustrates the multiplicity of relations that compose any historical formation of knowledge power. For Foucault, understanding a historical event or process does not involve recovering its unique origin or a linear cause but tracing the multiple lines of force, knowledge, and practices that intersect in its constitution (Foucault 1994, p. 24). This relates to the concept of *apparatus* (*dispositif*), a network of discourses, institutions, norms, practices, and strategies that operate as mechanisms of power and knowledge in a society.

The genealogical method, which succeeds and complements archaeology, seeks to describe the emergence and transformation of these *apparatuses*, revealing how they organize conduct and produce subjectivities. While the archaeological method analyzes the historical conditions of possibility for statements and knowledge within a discursive formation, genealogy investigates the correlations of force and strategies of power that sustain and modify such formations across knowledge fields. The polyhedron of intelligibility is thus a powerful image (Figure 4) of this complex and dynamic analysis, one that resists reduction to a homogeneous totality and remains open to the multiple genealogies and apparatuses that shape regimes of truth and social practices.

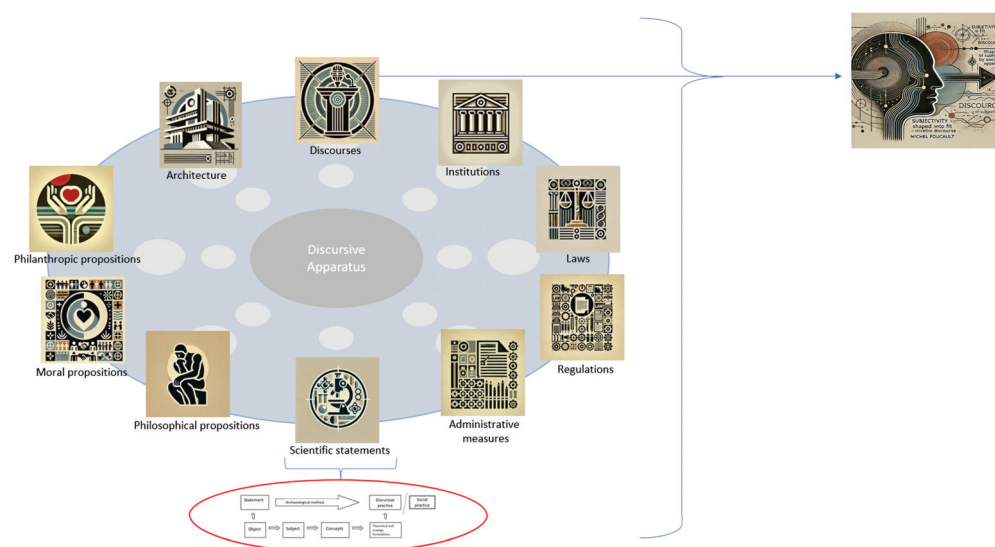


Figure 4. The metaphor of the polyhedron applied to the *apparatus*.

In the late 1970s, Foucault introduced the concept of *governmentality* (*gouvernementalité*) to analyze the emergence of modern political rationalities. Foucault aimed to analyze how the state became “governmental,” that is, how a rationality for governing others and oneself emerged (Candiotto 2008, p. 90). This shift is traced from medieval *advice to princes* literature to early modern Stoicism, where spiritual counsel gave way to the arts of government (Foucault 2008, p. 281). This governmental rationality, however, does not emerge ex nihilo. Foucault identifies its deeper roots in Christian traditions of pastoral care, where governing individuals’ conduct—spiritually and morally—prefigures modern techniques of population management. This continuity becomes visible in his genealogy of pastoral power. This situation gave rise to a deep concern over “how one wishes to be spiritually guided on this earth toward salvation”—a transcendent issue that was, however, intimately tied to the immanent order of a Christianized society. In the sixteenth century, this became a structurally sensitive problem, as it threatened the cultural–religious unity that had sustained the social body. This tension encompassed a range of political questions inherently linked to the spiritual one: “how to be governed, by whom, to what extent, to what ends, and by what means?” (Foucault 2006, p. 282).

Foucault’s genealogy of pastoral power shows how Christian techniques of spiritual direction evolved into modern technologies for governing populations, emphasizing the production of truth and the constitution of subjectivities. This transformation is rooted in the emergence of centralized states and the religious upheavals of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, which reshaped the political and spiritual question of how people are to be governed—by whom, to what end, and with what means (Foucault 2006, p. 282). Rather than recovering the Stoic ideal of government as self-mastery, Foucault traces a distinctly Christian model of pastoral government: a form of power exercised by the clergy over a mobile flock, formalized after the Council of Trent through the creation of seminaries (Foucault 2008, p. 224).

Unlike Greek and Stoic traditions, where leadership was tied to territory and self-governance, and unlike Judaism, where God alone is shepherd of his people (Foucault 2006, pp. 358–59), Christian pastoralism implies guiding individuals toward salvation through structured obedience and confession (Foucault 2008, p. 168). Two central mechanisms define this model: total obedience—requiring the renunciation of personal will—and exhaustive confession, aimed at extracting inner truths (Foucault 2008, p. 196). These mechanisms converge in the practice of spiritual direction, in which truth is produced through verbalized self-examination under the interpretative authority of a director. This dual regime of truth—Revelation and confession—is institutionalized under surveillance (Foucault 2008, p. 8), producing subjects through subjection to knowledge they come to recognize as their own (Candiotto 2010, p. 85).

Foucault contrasts this with Stoic spiritual direction, where obedience is temporary and geared toward autonomy through alignment with *logos*, without requiring inner confession. In Christianity, however, obedience becomes an end in itself, embedded in a permanent asymmetry of power. He locates the origins of this model in the fourth century, particularly in the thought of John Cassian, who formulated the principles of endless obedience, unceasing examination, and exhaustive confession (Foucault 2018a, p. 262). Cassian urged disciples to “disclose [their thoughts] to their elder as soon as they arise [...] and not rely on their own discernment” (João Cassiano 2004, Institutes, IV.9). Foucault identifies this nexus of truth production and self-renunciation as the “schema of Christian subjectivity” (Foucault 2018a, p. 280), later systematized in the Borromean model of spiritual direction, where the director becomes a “guardian angel” entrusted with the inner life of the penitent (Foucault 2001, p. 232).

3.1.2. The Relation Between the Archaeology of Knowledge and the Genealogy of Ethics

This historical configuration of subjectivity, grounded in the interplay between confession, obedience, and surveillance, prepares the ground for Foucault's subsequent inquiry into the ethical dimension of subject formation—namely, the relation between the archaeology of knowledge and the genealogy of ethics.

Building upon the relation between knowledge, power, and subjectivation explored in the genealogical analysis of pastoral power, Foucault turns toward the ethical dimension of subject formation through the concept of spirituality.

Far from being limited to a religious or mystical dimension, spirituality in its Foucauldian sense refers to concrete practices of self-transformation that enable the subject to access truth and resist historical forms of subjection. This perspective inaugurates a mode of analysis in which care of the self—drawn from ancient philosophical traditions—is reinterpreted as a field of articulation between knowledge, power, and subjectivation. It is at this intersection that spirituality and genealogy converge: both seek to understand how the ethical constitution of subjects is inscribed within the meshes of power, and how it can simultaneously open breaches of freedom and the creation of new forms of existence.

This new interest is also tied to his diagnosis of the “decline of revolutionary desire in the West” (Candiotto 2020, pp. 111–12). This concern led him to reflect on the “religious origins of modern revolutions,” especially after reading *The Principle of Hope* by Ernst Bloch and analyzing the Iranian Insurrection of 1978. This event struck Foucault because it articulated a political agenda for social transformation with a strong spiritual dimension—without mediation by the traditional forms of Western Marxism.

Foucault identified in this phenomenon what he called *political spirituality*, understood as a practice of resistance and self-transformation through which the subject breaks with the subjection imposed by power apparatuses and constitutes itself as a subject of knowledge, belief, and action. It is a process of renouncing the condition of the dominated and enacting subjective insurrection: “To become other than what one is, other than oneself” (Foucault 2006, p. 21).

Rather than a form of traditional militancy, political spirituality constitutes an interior practice of freedom through which the subject breaks social and political subjection.

Later, Foucault developed the notion of spirituality as *care of the self* in his lecture course *L'Herméneutique du sujet* (1981–1982). Here, he broadens the concept: spirituality is no longer merely a political force of resistance but a set of individual ethical practices by which the subject transforms itself in order to access truth. For Foucault, spirituality refers to the set of transformative practices that constitute the subject as a necessary condition for the apprehension of truth (Foucault 2005a, p. 19).

This *epimeleia heautou* is not a nostalgic return to ancient ethics but a secularized form of spirituality, which is expressed in contemporary practices of resistance. Drawing on Greco-Roman traditions of self-transformation—such as Stoic and Epicurean exercises—Foucault demonstrates that access to truth requires an inner metamorphosis of the subject. It is through this trajectory that he elaborates a genealogy of ethics, shifting his focus from epistemology to practices of subjectivation. Here, *care of the self* becomes a practice of freedom, a mode of constituting the self through resistance. As he puts it, the genealogy of ethics involves “an ethical work on the self” (Foucault 2006, p. 49), in which truth emerges not as a given but as the effect of a new mode of being.

Thus, political spirituality, care of the self, and the genealogy of ethics become interconnected: resistance to subjection, inner transformation, and the constitution of free subjects are three dimensions of the same movement of freedom production. As Foucault notes, “all the great political, social and cultural upheavals could only effectively take place in history from a movement that was a movement of spirituality” (Foucault 2018c, p. 23).

Therefore, the genealogy of ethics reveals the inseparability of self-transformation and world transformation.

Spirituality as care of the self may serve as the basis for a political practice that does not aim merely to reform external structures but to reshape subjectivity itself in critical relation to historical forms of power.

Given the complex and intrinsic relationship between knowledge and power, when there is an abuse of power, it calls for a genealogy of ethics—as a way of subverting knowledge and inverting power into a force of resistance. This is especially relevant when subjectivity is challenged by what wounds it historically—by the painful nature of historical processes.

To illustrate this complex dynamic, knowledge, like a river, carries evolving ideas and theories. Power, like riverbanks, shapes and channels this flow. Over time, however, knowledge erodes and reshapes power, creating new paths and possibilities. This illustrates how knowledge influences and redefines power, generating new truths that guide and transform action when rooted in a genealogy of ethics. Subjectivity arises both from adherence to norms and from the potential for resistance when faced with abuse, making it a dynamic and historical process. In other words, knowledge continually reshapes the structures that once confined it, producing new regimes of truth that reconfigure power.

This new mode of knowledge can emerge either through a spirituality conceived as a renewed consciousness that comes from caring of the self, where ethical transformation enables access to truth, or as a form of political spirituality inscribed in a collective agenda of resistance and social reconfiguration; both trajectories constitute distinct yet convergent expressions of a genealogy of ethics, in which subjectivation becomes the site of epistemic and political innovation (Figure 5).

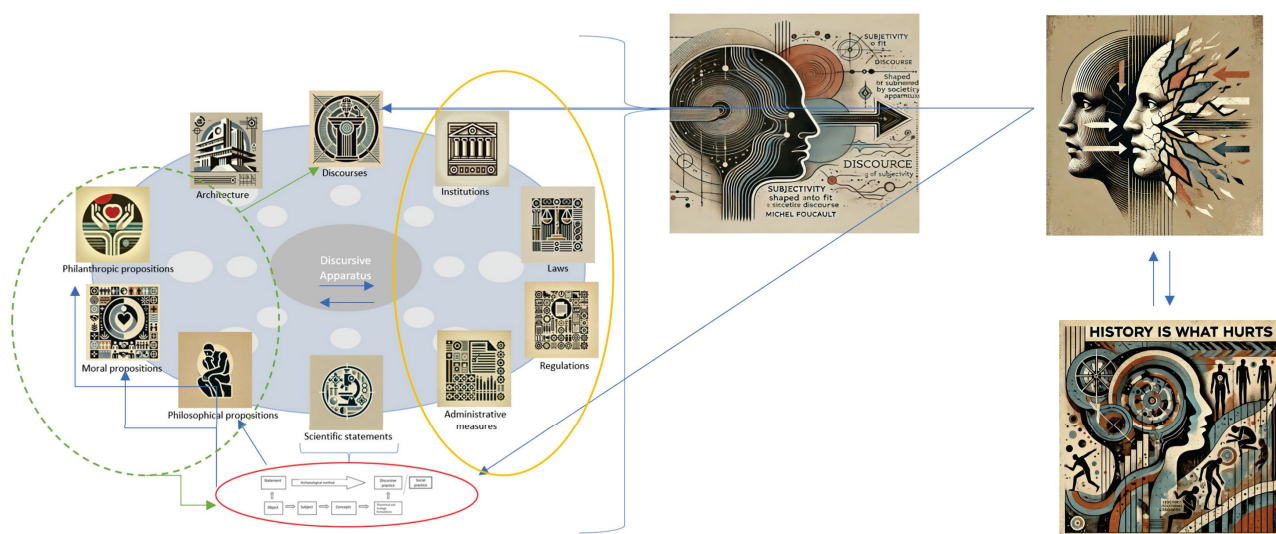


Figure 5. The metaphor of the polyhedron applied to the genealogy of ethics.

It is precisely within this relationship—between spiritual transformation and genealogical critique—that the production of theological knowledge takes place, always conceived as the second act of a first existential or spiritual experience. In dialogue with Foucault’s archaeological project, Michel de Certeau identifies spirituality as a kind of Trojan horse inserted into theological discourse: it destabilizes doctrinal closures from within and exposes their entanglement with structures of abusive power. This becomes especially urgent in the face of history’s wounds—those open traumas that, through institutional negligence or as by-products of power apparatuses, infiltrate the daily lives of individuals and communities.

3.2. *The Archaeology of the Religious and the 'Genealogy' of Ethics in Michel de Certeau*

In *Heterologies*, Michel de Certeau describes Michel Foucault's archaeology as driven by a paradoxical experience of absence and fascination with what he calls 'the black sun of language' (Certeau 1986, p. 171). This image refers to a blind spot, an opaque source of light that both generates and obscures meaning, a place where language is revealed in its radical otherness but also in its essential opacity.

For Certeau, this 'black sun' expresses the condition of Foucault's archaeological project: a language that excavates the rules of knowledge formation but finds no ultimate foundation, only a field of games, ruptures, and silences. It is a knowledge that operates without a founding subject, without a transcendental origin, but which is paradoxically structured around this central absence. Foucault, according to Certeau, becomes the 'historian of disappearance' because he explores the negativity at the heart of Western knowledge, exposes the flaws in the fabric of speech, and illuminates an absence—the death of God, the death of man, the eclipse of full meaning—that underlies modernity (Certeau 1986, pp. 171–72).

This notion has direct implications for the unfinished task of an archaeology of the religious, which would allow a theology of difference to overcome its self-referentiality. The black sun suggests that all theological language is pervaded by an original emptiness, an irreducible otherness that prevents any systematic or totalizing closure. The theology of difference inspired by this vision does not seek to fill the void with new dogmatic syntheses but to inhabit the gap and to welcome the otherness of God and the other as sources of meaning that escape attempts at totalization.

By emphasizing the black sun as an image of Foucault's archaeological language, Certeau invites theology to recognize that its own language is always in danger, always on the threshold between word and silence, between Revelation and absence. The *Mystic Fable* that Certeau explores in his later work is an expression of this tension: speech that is aware of its own inadequacy and yet continues to narrate, to invoke, and to translate the ineffable (Certeau 1995, p. 109).

Certeau thus shows how modern history does not completely break with the religious model; it transforms the religious experience of otherness and absence (God, the other) into a historiographical practice that deals with the past as an absent other. For Certeau, the historian becomes the one who replaces the theologian: someone who deals with traces and remnants and, on the basis of them, writes a narrative with an ordering and normative function. His proposal for an archaeology of the religious thus has a critical function: it makes visible this return of the repressed, that is, the persistence of an underlying theological structure in the way historical knowledge is narrated and organized.

Certeau emphasizes the question of otherness, which, as it is known, is virtually absent from Foucault. He is interested in the experience of those who write history, in the relationship between enunciation and absence, and in the symbolic processes inherited from religion, especially how the symbolic processes of recognizing otherness affect social practices despite the discursive practices of normative theology. History is a field for excavating the traces of otherness that are absent from historiography, with social practices being a privileged site for this absent presence of otherness that is repressed from the point of view of discursive practice.

Michel de Certeau does not present a systematic concept of 'genealogy' along Foucauldian lines but offers contributions that allow a genealogical reading of his historiographical method (Certeau 1975, pp. 14, 107–8, 314). In several passages, Certeau focuses on the historical shifts in ethics, religion, and knowledge, showing how discursive and institutional practices emerge, transform, or are marginalized over time. However, the French Jesuit points to the establishment of an epistemological incompatibility between

theology and the emerging human sciences in the 19th century, since the latter operated with an ethical primacy of speech, while theology remained with a dogmatic primacy, which hindered dialogue and led to the distancing.

Rather than a formal theory, Certeau address a genealogy of ethics as a shifting field of meaning in which ethical discourse emerges not from doctrine but from situated, embodied practices that function as interpretative operators of modern social life. From the 17th century onwards, Christian ethics was confronted with social and political critiques that displaced it from its normative position and replaced it with a dialectic of uses and conflicts of power, especially with regard to the control of religious behavior. Between the 17th and 18th centuries, a rupture between religion and morality was consolidated, allowing the emergence of an autonomous social ethics responsible for organizing collective practices and relativizing inherited belief systems. This autonomy culminated in the Enlightenment with the primacy of ethics over faith, strongly influenced by Rousseau, who privileged morality over dogma. In the 18th century, ethics became associated with the ideal of progress and democratization, taking on the role of guiding the improvement of societies. Religious practices were reinterpreted in terms of a new social order in which ethics determined behavior and replaced the old religious frameworks. In this context, Christian ethics was absorbed and reorganized by the logic of the 'duty of the state', which linked moral meaning to the social position held and the functions performed. This reorganization also led to a split between piety and morality: morality became a public language, while piety was relegated to the private sphere. Popular culture, in turn, is reinterpreted as an instrument of public utility, incorporating religious and social practices into the ethical language of modernity. In *The Writing of History*, Certeau presents a certain 'genealogy' of ethics in which it becomes a pragmatic linguistic device in which ethical speeches organize social meanings, legitimacies, and ways of life. It is a practical, situated, and historical ethics that functions as a key to understanding human behavior within the concrete conditions of modern society. In place of obedience to dogma, an ethics emerges as a language of practice, articulated with the apparatuses of the state, with discourses of progress, and with mechanisms of control and self-formation. This ethics replaces dogma as the epistemic axis of the human sciences and functions as a criterion of intelligibility for modern experience (Certeau 1975, p. 19, 152f).

The place of theology seems to have been left empty by the human sciences. Theology is seen as an institution for the enunciation of meaning that remains tied to a dogmatic order, a semantics that is identified either with ideology or with private convictions that are incompatible with scientific analysis. The so-called human sciences, on the other hand, are developing into forms of knowledge whose project and method, based on statutes, social tasks, and conflicts, reorganize the meaning of existence. The primacy of ethics for Certeau is not a kind of principle of moral superiority but rather an operative capacity to produce meaning from everyday life. This primacy relegates theology to a marginal or reactive position, requiring it to reconcile itself with the devices of meaning production inherent in modernity.

Certeau observes that in the context of growing secularization and religious marginalization in rural France in the 19th century, many Catholic religious congregations reorganized themselves as forms of social presence aimed at dignifying human life. These congregations, composed of consecrated women and men, developed social and educational activities in line with principles that would later be recognized as human rights, such as access to basic education, health, decent work, and child protection. In response to the decline of traditional religious structures and the spread of urban industrialization, they directed their missions to the interior of the country, where the peasant population found itself excluded from the benefits of technological progress and public education. Certeau

describes this reorganization as a ‘topography of urgencies’ in which evangelization involved the creation of schools, hospitals, charitable works, and mutual support structures in order to associate evangelization with ‘the fight against the ignorance of the masses, aid to accident victims or abandoned children, the hospitalisation of the sick, the education of girls, scholarships, etc.’ (Certeau 1975, p. 170).

In 19th-century France, religious congregations developed social practices—education, health, care—which embodied a public ethic anticipating modern human rights discourse (Villas Boas and Sienna 2018). Although based on theological categories such as salvation, charity, and grace, these practices converge with human dignity, promoting inclusion, justice, and care for the most vulnerable. It is therefore an incarnate spirituality that responds to modern exclusion through an ethic of presence, anticipating social concerns that would later be addressed in the field of human rights and in the church’s social doctrine with *Rerum Novarum* (Pope Leo XIII 1891). This phenomenon, described as a response to the urgencies of modernity, constitutes an essential genealogical field of European social Catholicism, providing the historical and practical theological background for the emergence of liberation theologies in Latin America, for example, and the origins of how the religious agenda of Catholicism intersects with the political agenda of human rights after the industrial revolution, in new forms of critical spirituality and social commitment, bridging to the 20th century and the primacy of ethics as a field for reconfiguring regimes of meaning for a public discursive practice of theology.

Michel de Certeau uses the metaphor of the Trojan horse to describe the way in which Christian spirituality, and in particular mysticism and social practices of faith, operates within the rigid and dogmatic structures of institutionalized theology. For him, spirituality does not conform to normative orthodoxy but infiltrates established systems as a foreign body, bringing with it the memory of otherness, absence, and promise. In *La Fable Mystique*, Certeau observes that Christian mysticism, as a practice that occurs in ‘deviation’ and ‘excess’ (Certeau 1995, pp. 29–30), has often imploded the mechanisms of power and control of dogmatic theology. The spirituality lived out in the social practices of Catholicism, whether through care for the sick, popular education, or involvement in social movements, acted as an internal resistance, challenging the mechanisms of doctrinal closure that sometimes legitimized or covered up social injustices. It is, as Certeau says in *La Faiblesse de Croire*, a ‘weak faith’ that acts as a *Trojan horse*: it does not seek to conquer or impose but to destabilize certainties and open spaces for difference, listening, and hospitality to the other (Certeau 1987, pp. 25–28).

Certeau understands ‘weak faith’ as a practical, everyday form of theological resistance that reconfigures social space without being bound by rigid forms of control. This weakness is not a sign of impotence but of openness to otherness and to listening to others. In *L’Invention du quotidien* (Certeau 1980), Certeau identifies the place where this faith manifests itself: in simple gestures and anonymous practices that quietly and subversively reconfigure social space. The everyday is the terrain of micro-resistance, where weak faith reinvents itself outside the great institutional narratives. In this perspective, Certeau’s *Trojan horse* is the ordinary practice of faith itself, which infiltrates institutions and doctrines as a discreet force of transformation: a mysticism that does not cry out but transforms, a spirituality that operates in the ‘low continuous’ of everyday life (Certeau 1987, pp. 25–28). By shifting attention from grand theological constructions to the dispersed and anonymous practices of everyday subjects, Certeau proposes a theology of difference capable of recognizing the dignity of the practices of subaltern subjects as producers of new subversive meanings that reconfigure the social order through the creative reinvention of everyday life as a tactic of resistance. The question of genealogy applied to the emergence of ethics can be understood from his perspective as a critical analysis of the processes by which

certain regimes of meaning are constituted and stabilized in history, especially since the 17th century. It is linked to his notions of ‘production of place’ and ‘repressed otherness’, since he focuses not only on legitimized speech but also on absences, silences, and practices that escape official narratives—such as popular, mystical, or marginalized practices.

In particular, Certeau traces the replacement of theology by ethical speech in the human sciences as a symptom of this epistemic transformation. The archaeo-genealogical question, in this sense, is linked to the task of bringing out the historicity of such displacements—not as linearity but as ruptures and reconfigurations. Thus, genealogy in Certeau is the movement of critical historicization of regimes of knowledge, with attention to the excluded and the mechanisms of exclusion that affect both language and social practices.

Michel Foucault’s archaeo-genealogy of knowledge power and its implications for the task identified by Michel de Certeau as the archaeology of the religious share a common objective: to investigate the historical conditions that make certain statements possible, though each emphasizes different dimensions of that emergence. In proposing his archaeology, Foucault seeks to describe the impersonal rules that structure the formation of knowledge in different epochs, revealing the systems of enunciability that define the field of what can be thought. Certeau appropriates and displaces Foucault’s archaeological method, applying it to reveal the underlying theological logic in historiographical forms. While Foucault traces discursive conditions, Certeau maps the interruptions introduced by social practices that do not conform to established discursive regimes—what the figure identifies as non-discursive practices with subversive effects. He showed how Western historiography, in seeking to ground itself in scientific rationality, nevertheless inherits from religious scriptures a logic of enunciation oriented toward absence and the symbolic management of alterity. Both archaeologies, therefore, offer critical and methodological tools for constructing an archaeology of theological knowledge: one capable of identifying the historical, discursive, and institutional conditions under which theological knowledge arises while also uncovering its continuities, ruptures, and specific regimes of truth. In this sense, the analysis of theological knowledge must attend equally to its non-discursive dimension: to the social practices that reinvent everyday life from within a theological horizon and that, as illustrated in Figure 6, act as Trojan horses disrupting the mechanisms of control that seek to contain theological discourse.

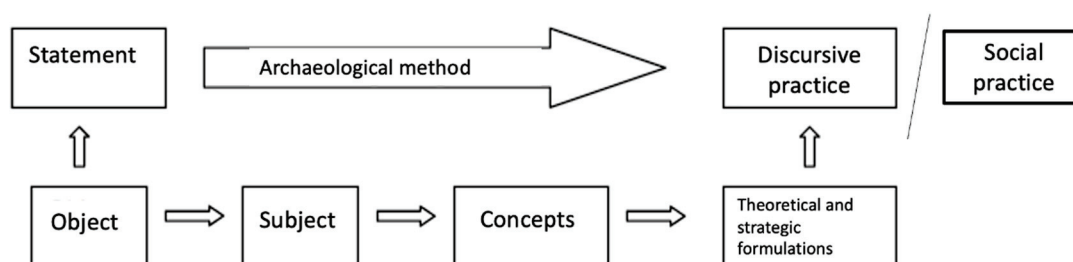


Figure 6. Non-discursive practices as a Trojan horse.

Moreover, insofar as Foucault’s archaeology is linked to his genealogical method, it proves extremely useful in identifying how religion can be understood as a complex phenomenon in which, within its theological discursive context, genealogies of power and genealogies of ethics coexist—often sustained by a silent theology revealed in the social practices it supports. As Metz pointed out, in twentieth-century contextual theologies, there is a form of Revelation that occurs precisely in concrete action directed toward the transformation of reality (Metz 1999, pp. 246–55). These practices act as Trojan horses that undermine abusive forms of power rooted in religious discourse. This dual movement of archaeology and genealogy—as visualized in Figure 6—constitutes a critical toolbox for

identifying modes of theological self-referentiality and recovering the public relevance of subaltern practices that challenge and transform the structures of discourse from within.

4. Constructing the ‘Toolbox’: An Archaeo-Genealogy Approach for Public Theology

Although Foucault did not develop an archaeology of theological knowledge, it is possible to identify, within his analysis of the human sciences, certain implications for theology—especially through his genealogical approach, which has already explored the secularized expressions of religion within culture.

This section seeks to outline a programmatic set of tasks based on the theological implications of applying archaeological and genealogical tools to the development of a public theology—one capable of overcoming self-referentiality, engaging in transdisciplinary dialogue, and responding to the demands of the public agenda. Such a theology would be structured not only by its content but also by its method: it would operate according to criteria of argumentation grounded in public rationality that is capable of addressing diverse interlocutors beyond confessional boundaries and of articulating normative claims in terms accessible within pluralistic and democratic contexts. To this end, the following subsections will be dedicated, respectively, to the four fundamental components of this methodological framework: (Section 4.1) the *Object* of theological discourse, which must be redefined in relation to the historical conditions of knowledge; (Section 4.2) the *Epistemic Subject*, whose modes of constitution and location within power-knowledge dynamics must be critically examined; (Section 4.3) the *Concepts* that articulate theological reasoning, and how they are historically shaped and strategically mobilized; and (Section 4.4) the *Theoretical or Strategic Formulations* through which theology engages its public role and contributes to the configuration of shared intelligibility and commitment to a public agenda, namely and currently, the 2030 Agenda.

In the regime of *divinatio*, divine signs are revealed in creation, with God immanent in the world and humans as *imago mundi*—capable of understanding God through the world. In the regime of *eruditio*, by contrast, God is located in the realm of ideas, often invoked to idealistically justify political projects (theodicies) and framed as divine missions by political mediators. With the rise of the human sciences, theology effectively disappears from Foucault’s archaeological project. Yet, even as knowledge becomes secularized, power structures continue to mobilize theological frameworks as technologies of power, particularly in regulating life and subjectivity, drawing on mechanisms developed as early as the 17th century.

From the modern episteme onwards, theology faces the challenge of its own self-referential condition, mirroring the broader cultural logic of knowledge production—marked by a tendency to reproduce sameness. In this scenario, knowledge is no longer defined as a reference to a revealed absolute truth but as discernment—establishing distinctions, operating classifications, and constructing meaning through the play of difference in order to identify new forms of epistemic configurations or regimes of intelligibility:

“The activity of the mind—and this is the fourth point—will therefore no longer consist in drawing things together, in setting out on a quest for everything that might reveal some sort of kinship, attraction, or secretly shared nature within them, but, on the contrary, in discriminating, that is, in establishing their identities, then the inevitability of the connections with all the successive degrees of a series” (Foucault 2005b, p. 61).

4.1. The Object of Theology After Modern 'Episteme'

This epistemological gesture of modern discernment⁵ replaces the Renaissance logic of analogy with a logic of difference that structures statements from the outset. Rather than confirming hidden metaphysical resemblances, modern discourse produces knowledge by establishing distinctions and generating new articulations of meaning. Within the modern *episteme*, discernment acquires a critical function: it interrogates the empirical–transcendental conditions of all knowledge, marks the boundary between thought and knowledge, and affirms the historical finitude of the knowing subject as both condition and limit of epistemic formation.

Foucault's metaphor of archaeology refers to a critical practice of excavation that uncovers the layers of discourse connecting past and present. In this method, a past discursive formation may leave enduring traces within a new historical context by establishing regularities in the interplay of knowledge, power, and subjectivation. Similarly, historical events may give rise to new discursive regimes—disruptive occurrences that inaugurate novel rules of formation, altering how reality is articulated and understood.

Unlike structuralist or purely linguistic approaches, Foucault conceives discourse as a historically situated system of rules and practices that produce a specific version of reality. Discourse defines the objects, concepts, and representations that are sayable, while simultaneously delimiting the conditions under which power can operate through the production of knowledge.

Within the modern *episteme*, Foucault identifies an “analytics of finitude” (Foucault 2005b, p. 346), through which “man” emerges as a discursive event marked by a dual structure: he is both an object of empirical knowledge—living, working, and speaking—and the subject who produces knowledge about life, labor, and language. In this configuration, human finitude becomes the historical condition of possibility for knowledge of an object that is, paradoxically, the human itself. For the first time since the late eighteenth century, finitude is no longer understood in opposition to divine infinity—as deficiency or fall—but rather as the positive epistemic foundation of modern knowledge.

Since the epistemic rupture of the modern age, the human being has been situated at the intersection of these three empirical domains—life, labor, and language—each giving rise to corresponding disciplines: biology, political economy, and philology. These domains define three epistemological regions that shape the object “man” as both knowable and self-reflective. Psychology emerges at the intersection of biology, extending physiological functions into symbolic and psychic representations. The social sciences arise from political economy, framing the individual as producer, consumer, and bearer of cultural norms. Literature and linguistics develop from philology, providing a field in which language structures the subject's relation to meaning, identity, and expression. In this configuration, the human sciences produce a reduplication of the subject as both object of knowledge and agent of discourse.

In Foucault's framework, the object of discourse is not a stable referent but is constituted through a network of relations with other statements. It emerges within a field of proximities, analogies, discontinuities, and transformations that define its specificity. These relations are not intrinsic to the object itself but are formed across discursive, institutional, and social structures:

“These relations are established between institutions, economic and social processes, patterns of behavior, systems of norms, techniques, forms of classification, modes of characterization; and these relations are not present in the object” (Foucault 2008, p. 50).

Within this new epistemic regime, theology encounters significant resistance in asserting itself as a scientific form of knowledge, particularly when it treats Revelation as its

immediate and absolute object. Despite recent efforts to make theology intelligible to the modern subject, the notion of Revelation as an unquestionable foundation risks sustaining genealogies of power that resist self-critique. When Revelation is upheld as a fixed datum without revisiting its historical and cultural mediations, theology may solidify into a system of belief immune to critical engagement—accessible only to those who share the same foundational experience. This leads to what Paul Ricoeur calls the “inversion function” of ideology: the substitution of concrete historical perception by idealized theodicies that claim divine legitimacy. In this logic, a self-referential understanding of Revelation can become an ideological system that disables critical thought, naturalizing belief structures that deny their own historicity and contingency (Ricoeur 2011; Villas Boas 2018, pp. 36–39).

A critical rationality does not align neatly with the dialectical polarizations of political ideology or with totalizing worldviews. As Foucault emphasizes, power relations are “complex phenomena that do not follow the Hegelian form of dialectics; power may retreat, shift, invest elsewhere. . . and the struggle continues” (Foucault 1977, p. 83). A theological understanding that remains closed within the authority of Revelation risks reproducing a dualistic worldview—polarizing subjects, knowledge, and power structures—thereby impeding the emergence of a critical rationality open to dialogue, reflexivity, and self-questioning.

Both right- and left-wing authoritarian regimes have historically instrumentalized religion as a tool of control or persecution, exposing the ideological function of non-critical theology. An archaeological analysis of theological discourses and social practices can reveal how power and resistance are configured in specific contexts. When detached from critical hermeneutics, Revelation may function as an ideological system—operating, in Fredric Jameson’s terms, as a “political unconscious” that legitimates violence and silences alternative voices (Jameson 1992, pp. 39–43).

In light of the modern *episteme* and Foucauldian thought, the contemporary task of theology is to move beyond self-referential closure and offer a critical rationality within systems of belief. Theology must position itself within the field of religion as a complex phenomenon, acknowledging that religious practices are traversed by power–knowledge relations. This requires constant ethical and epistemic discernment of their conditions of possibility, mediations, and effects—making theology capable of engaging public rationality and the plural, dynamic expressions of religiosity in contemporary society.

The central affirmation of *Laudato si’*—that “everything is interconnected” (Pope Francis 2015a, nn. 16, 138)—should not be interpreted as a return to the Renaissance *episteme*, where symbolic analogy structured the intelligibility of the world. Rather, it is situated within the horizon of the modern *episteme*, which demands critical discernment of the historical, political, and epistemic conditions that fragmented knowledge and disarticulated the relations between beings and the world. To affirm interconnection today is not to presume it as given, but to recognize it as an ethical and political task. Ecological spirituality, as proposed by the encyclical, mobilizes modern discernment, attuned to finitude, historicity, and complexity, as a form of resistance to the modern separations between subject and nature, technical knowledge and practical wisdom, and power and care. Interconnection thus becomes not a natural resemblance but a responsibility enacted through discernment and commitment.

Thus, after the modern *episteme*, the object of theology can no longer be taken as an absolute datum but must be understood as the discursive and practical negotiation of a critical rationality within a system of belief—particularly one historically shaped by the category of Revelation.

4.2. The Need to Disambiguate the Epistemic Subject of Theology

Throughout history, the epistemic subject of theology has not been confined to traditional ecclesial or academic settings. The articulation between theological knowledge and structures of power has enabled the emergence of political agents who, by appropriating the language of Revelation, have claimed the role of authorized interpreters of orthodoxy. Under this dynamic, theology has often been instrumentalized as a tool for legitimating state projects, shifting soteriological mediation from ecclesial authority to political figures. Investigating this emergence through the lens of enunciative modalities entails examining the institutional sites, discursive positions, and mechanisms of validation that define who holds epistemic authority to speak theologically in the public sphere—as a form of critical inquiry.

Disambiguating the epistemic subject of theology, therefore, requires a critical examination of the historical and institutional mechanisms through which theological authority is constructed, appropriated, and mobilized—often beyond ecclesial or academic boundaries, and frequently aligned with political projects of legitimation.

Enunciative Modalities and the Configuration of the Epistemic Subject

Epistemic subjects are embedded within enunciative modalities. To illustrate this, Foucault examines the diversity of statements in nineteenth-century medical discourse, not to reduce them to a unifying logic but to reveal the rule—or “law”—that governs their variation and origin. Foucault’s analysis of enunciative modalities invites three fundamental questions that help define the configuration of the epistemic subject within a discursive formation (Foucault 2010, p. 56):

Who speaks? This question addresses the identification of those subjects who hold the status of legitimate bearers of knowledge. Such legitimacy is grounded in criteria of competence, institutional affiliation, and adherence to discursive norms that authorize their speech. This status is not intrinsic to the individual but is defined by a relational system involving the specific field of discourse and its connections to broader social structures—such as political, juridical, and religious institutions—which assign the subject a historically and socially situated role.

What are the institutional sites of discourse? These are the spaces that structure discursive practice by defining its objects and its criteria of validation. In the case of medical discourse, for example, Foucault highlights three main sites: the hospital (as a field of observation and clinical application), the laboratory (as a space for experimentation and production of general truths), and the library (as a repository of knowledge and supporting data). In the nineteenth century, these sites became integrated through experimental norms shared across the natural sciences.

What are the positions of the speaking subject? These are defined by the relation between the subject and the objects of their discourse, according to the interpretative lens and conceptual framing applied. Such positions vary depending on the level of observation (e.g., from symptom to cell) and the subject’s role in the network of knowledge—as teacher, researcher, communicator, or analyst. These positions are also shaped by historical shifts, technological innovations, and new systems of classification, registration, and pedagogy.

Theology, as a historically embedded discourse, has produced a variety of epistemic subjects shaped by shifts in enunciative configurations. In the fourteenth century, the term *theologia* began to emerge as conceptually distinct from *sacra doctrina*, especially in humanist critiques such as those of Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457). In his *Disputationes*

Dialecticae, Valla (1541) emphasized theology as a rhetorical and experiential discourse grounded in Christian faith, distinct from ecclesiastical discourse and its institutional interests within the political regime of Christendom. This shift marks a fragmentation of theological knowledge across church and university contexts. Yet, with the rise of political theologies in early modern Europe, theological language was appropriated to legitimate state power, transferring soteriological mediation from ecclesial to political authorities.

Three paradigmatic figures exemplify this transformation. António Pereira de Figueiredo (1725–1797) served as a theologian aligned with the regalism of the Marquis of Pombal in Portugal. As head of the Royal Censorial Board, a secularized inquisition, Figueiredo helped legitimize royal authority through theological discourse, promoting a national church subordinated to the state. His epistemic legitimacy derived from his academic training, political alignment, and opposition to the Jesuits. His Portuguese Bible translation became both a religious and political instrument, redefining ecclesial authority under royal patronage (Franco and Vogel 2009; Figueiredo 1821).

Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) offers a second example. His act of self-coronation embodied a secular messianism that displaced the Church's soteriological authority. Robert Antoine de Beauterne (1806–1846) helped construct Napoleon's theological image, portraying him as a divine instrument of historical regeneration (Beauterne 1841). This narrative transferred belief in God to a "science of God," with intellectuals replacing priests as technicians of truth at the service of empire (Bowman 1990).

A third example is Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898), who, as chancellor of the Second Reich, promoted a state-based political theology grounded in Protestant pietism. His approach subordinated religion to German nationalism and prefigured Carl Schmitt's later theorization of political theology (Lacour-Gayet 1919). Nietzsche had already denounced theology as a discourse of imaginary causes driven by the will to power (Nietzsche 1888). Today, similar dynamics appear in religious discourse that denies scientific authority, exposing the limits of concordatarian arrangements and the persistence of fundamental theology as sophisticated apologetics for Revelation.

By contrast, when enunciative modalities are applied to public theology in contemporary academic contexts, the epistemic subject is no longer defined by confessional authority but by institutional recognition, methodological critique, and public responsibility. Situated within universities, theology is challenged to articulate its epistemic legitimacy before plural audiences. The subject who speaks theologically in public is not one who claims authority through ecclesial status but one who locates their discourse within a critical rationality and offers religious tradition as a meaningful resource for collective projects of justice and human dignity. Public theology thus constitutes not merely a discursive reconfiguration but the emergence of an enunciative position committed to the ethical translation of religious knowledge within plural societies—aligned with agendas such as the 2030 Agenda and human rights. In this horizon, the legitimacy of theology does not lie in asserting absolute truths but in its capacity to contribute meaningfully to the construction of the common good.

4.3. Public Ethics as First Theology: The Translation of Theological Concepts into a Public Rationality

Following Foucault's analysis of concept formation, it becomes clear that scientific discourse is structured through enunciative fields governed by rules of succession, correlation, and rhetorical organization (Foucault 2008, p. 62). These elements do not merely regulate the circulation of concepts but shape their fields of presence, simultaneity, and memory, thereby conditioning their acceptance, critique, or exclusion. Concepts emerge not from timeless truths or pure logic but from the historical inscription of discursive practices and interventions that organize knowledge and power.

In this light, theology can no longer claim Revelation as the ultimate and absolute criterion of its discourse. Such a claim often legitimizes the persistence of political theologies that absolutize specific configurations of power. As Michel de Certeau argues, there is an epistemological incompatibility between classical theology, anchored in dogmatic primacy, and the modern human sciences, which emerged around an ethical primacy as their epistemic and practical foundation (Certeau 1975, p. 156).

Nonetheless, Certeau also recognizes that, over time, theology, particularly through the tradition of Catholic social thought, began aligning itself with this ethical primacy. In post-revolutionary France, where human rights were largely restricted to urban contexts, religious congregations operating in rural areas established schools, hospitals, and social services. These practices reintroduced theology into debates on human dignity, configuring a form of political spirituality grounded in public ethics and the defense of universal dignity. This development retrieved the theological principle of the *imago Dei* as a foundation for the universality of human rights.

The notion of public ethics as an epistemic criterion for post-secular theology arises from the translation of the foundational category of theological anthropology—the human being as *imago Dei*—into the modern conception of human dignity and rights. This shift reconfigures *imago Dei* from a dogmatic affirmation to an operative principle within legal, political, and social frameworks. What was once a theological affirmation has become a normative pillar in democratic constitutions and international declarations of universal rights.

This movement continues today in the ecological field through the translation of the theological concept of the *common home* into the global ecological agenda. When reinterpreted in light of interdependence and relationality among all creatures, *imago Dei* supports a public ethic that extends beyond the human, embracing the totality of creation. A public ethic thus becomes a normative framework for socio-environmental justice and sustainability, centered on a planetary common good, as proposed by Pope Francis in *Laudato si'*.

Public ethics, therefore, imposes itself as an epistemic criterion for a post-secular theology that seeks to overcome self-referentiality and the use of Revelation as an identity-bound device. Unlike political theologies that co-opt Revelation to serve nationalist or sectarian agendas, a public ethic grounded in human dignity calls for a theology oriented toward the construction of the common good. This ethic resists reduction to dogmatic moralism and instead offers a socially engaged justice that recognizes alterity and equal dignity in every subject.

This reorientation is not foreign to the Christian tradition. In late antiquity, theology was not conceived apart from philosophy. What it is now called theology was often understood as a vocation to live the philosophical ideal. Early Christianity viewed this ideal as inherently public and ethical: “The Christian in the city (*polis*) is a citizen (*politai*)” (Anonymous 1951, *À Diognète* 5.5). This did not entail withdrawal from the world, nor submission to theocratic projects, but active ethical citizenship grounded in shared dignity. Early Christian life modeled a public ethic rooted in justice, solidarity, and mutual responsibility, expressions of a faith embodied in common life.

By submitting itself to the primacy of public ethics, post-secular theology acknowledges that its task is not to offer a final word on truth but to contribute to the construction of a plural, inclusive public rationality. Ethics as first theology does not negate its link to Revelation but reconfigures its epistemological function: human dignity becomes the hermeneutical key for theological discourse within modern regimes of knowledge. This approach derives from a hermeneutic of the ethical effects of the narrative of incarnation, itself grounded in Revelation, yet oriented toward a theology of the common, rooted in fraternity, justice, and plural recognition.

This displacement invites one to understand theological concepts not as products of an untouchable Revelation but as historically situated discursive constructions subject to critical evaluation. A public ethic redefines theology as a field of discernment and commitment to justice, common good and peace, an alternative to the logic of sovereignty that has long dominated political theologies. It reinserts theology into networks of resistance and solidarity, making possible a critical, ecological theology grounded in common dignity and care for the common home. Theology becomes the second act of an original experience: it emerges from diverse political spiritualities and gives rise to new political actors.

Saint John Chrysostom (347–407) represents one such political spirituality. His example challenges Foucault's interpretation of monastic obedience through the figure of John Cassian, who saw obedience as a means of forming subjected subjectivities. By contrast, Chrysostom embodied a form of obedience rooted in ethical fidelity to the Gospel, which refused submission to the authority of the Christian emperor Arcadius, against whom he spoke out forcefully, particularly in his homilies denouncing court corruption and imperial interference in ecclesial matters (John Chrysostom 1988). His critique of corruption at the Christian court and his refusal to conform to ecclesiastical power structures show that Revelation, when captured by institutional interests, becomes insufficient for resisting arbitrariness. His life prefigures a genealogy of Christian ethics in which mysticism is inseparable from critical engagement. This ethical stance inspired bishops in Latin America and Eastern Europe who, under different authoritarian regimes, took prophetic stands alongside the people as figures of political resistance.

In doing so, these actors reflected the ethical roots of political spiritualities, drawing on the impact of Christ's Incarnation, which affirms human dignity not only in contrast to God's transcendence but in the positive vocation of ethical protagonism, manifest in the human rights movement and the ecological agenda.

This theological perspective provided a foundational grammar for the emergence of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*. Ethics as first theology thus does not reduce theology to secular humanism but instead affirms a shared dignity that grounds all human and created life as a theological effect. The original 1789 publication of the Declaration, for instance, depicted in Figure 7 by Jean-Jacques-François Le Barbier, features God explicitly as the "Supreme Being," visually signaling the theological roots of universal human rights and the transcendent dimension of civic responsibility.

However, this theological grounding was neither uniform nor uncontested. With the rise of Napoleonic political theology, where sovereignty was recast as divinely sanctioned and centralized in the emperor, a significant shift occurred. Revolutionary narratives began to frame religion as a threat to reason and civil order. This inaugurated a tension that persists today, where theology functions both as a genealogy of ethical universality and, at times, as a genealogy of power serving identity and control.

Unlike exclusionary political theologies that instrumentalize Revelation to uphold national, racial, or confessional boundaries, the theological concept of human dignity affirms a God who transcends such divisions, a God who loves universally, beyond race, religion, and class. This vision resists the subordination of theology to sovereign power and instead fosters a public theology of coexistence: one capable of sustaining peace by affirming unity in plurality.

In this sense, the task of a post-secular theology is not to impose or replace dogmatic certainties but to contribute critically to the shaping of a public rationality, one capable of sustaining justice, peace, and the dignity of all beings as a shared ethical horizon.



Figure 7. Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen by Le Barbier (1789).⁶

4.4. Theoretical Strategies and Epistemic Simultaneity in Contemporary Research on Theology and Religious Studies

Foucault's archaeological method identifies the *episteme* of an era as a field of discursive simultaneity across disciplines. In modernity, theoretical strategies emerge from within specialized discourses, such as economics, medicine, or grammar, organizing new concepts and regrouping objects according to criteria of coherence, rigor, and internal stability (Foucault 2010, p. 73). Analyzing how these discourses are formed allows us to understand their internal systems of regularity, as well as the diffraction points where incompatibilities emerge between objects, concepts, and modes of enunciation within the same field.

Foucault's approach reveals not only points of rupture but also connections and equivalences that give rise to new discursive configurations. When applied to the study of theology and religious studies, this method shows that both fields operate within a constellation of epistemic simultaneity, shaped by theoretical reconfigurations that respond to shifts in knowledge conditions.

As illustrated in Figure 7 the empirical sciences (such as political economy, biology, and philology) provided the basis for the emergence of the human sciences (sociology, psychology, and literary analysis) through what can be called the *anthropological turn of the empirical model*. This transformation enabled the human being to be understood not only as an object of knowledge but also as its subject—an epistemic shift that reshaped entire

disciplines. This transition marked a reconfiguration of scientific paradigms toward new fields of inquiry, emphasizing experience and human subjectivity.

As represented in Figure 8, contemporary theology emerges within this epistemic constellation, repositioned between foundational human sciences and interpretive disciplines that mediate religious meaning in the public domain. Within this epistemic reorganization, *Religionswissenschaft* (science of religion) emerged as a systematic field for the academic study of religion. Unlike dogmatic theology, *Religionswissenschaft* privileges historical, sociological, psychological, and linguistic analyses of religious phenomena. It branches into subfields such as the sociology of religion, the psychology of religion, and the sciences of religious language (e.g., exegesis, hermeneutics, and literary analysis). These fields share a commitment to critique and operate within the same rational space as the modern human sciences.

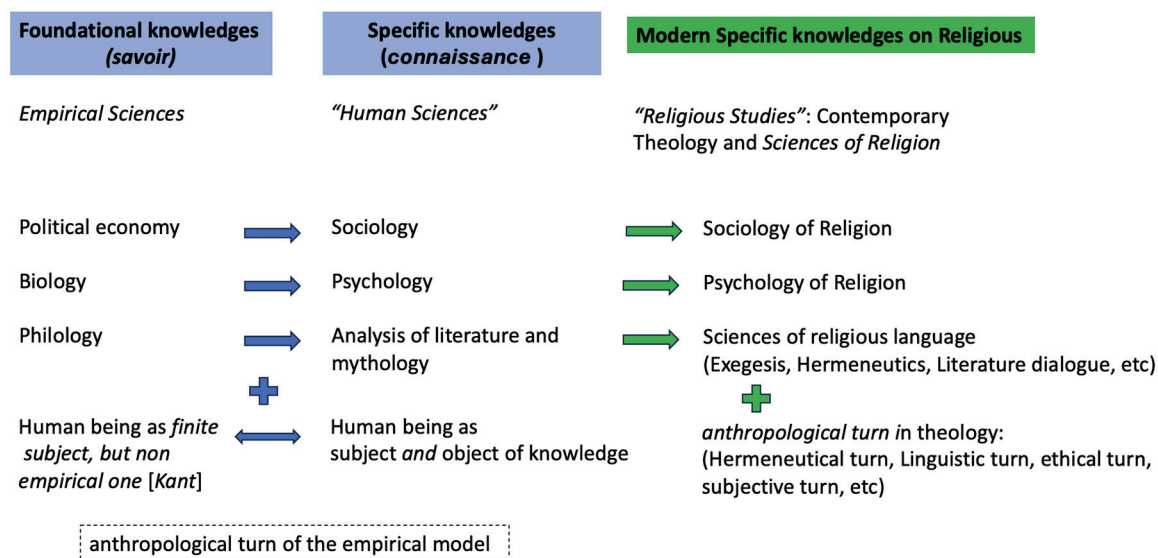


Figure 8. The formation of contemporary theology and religious studies.

Simultaneously, contemporary theology was profoundly shaped by the anthropological turn, particularly through the work of Karl Rahner. In this turn, the question of God is approached through the structure of human knowledge, resulting in a metaphysics of subjectivity rather than of being. Affective experience, historicity, and existential facticity become central theological *loci*. Theology thus moves away from a speculative mode toward a performative one, where the knowledge of God is inseparable from self-knowledge, that is, from the transcendental condition of the human person as spirit in the world. In Rahner's view, theology does not arise from direct knowledge of God as an object but from a possible knowledge grounded in the analysis of religious experience. God is not unknowable but is thinkable within the complex religious phenomenon, historically mediated, linguistically articulated, and anthropologically situated (Rahner 1964, p. 104).

Far from being a mere reception of the human sciences, this development constitutes a distinct discursive strategy of theology, one that seeks epistemic legitimacy through human experience as a *locus theologicus*. This opens the path to contextual theologies and, ultimately, to the possibility of public theology itself.

Foucault points out that every discursive formation is "essentially lacunar", it does not exhaust the field of possible knowledge but inhabits only a constellation of active relations. Thus, when situated in new discursive constellations, older formations can generate new objects, concepts, and statements. This explains how, in the 21st century, the discursive constellation that links theology and the human sciences has come to be rethought through

the paradigms of public ethics, theological anthropology, and critical theory, distancing itself from identity-based political theology.

From the perspective of epistemic simultaneity, the emergence of *Religionswissenschaft* and the anthropological turn in theology represent distinct yet converging responses within the modern study of religion. When anchored in public rationality, faith is no longer an obstacle to dialogue between theology and religious studies. This suggests that their divergences are less epistemological than political, rooted in institutional arrangements, funding structures, and conflicting visions of public engagement. One key dimension of this political tension lies in the persistent confusion between theology as a form of public, critically engaged rationality and theology as a discourse primarily oriented toward internal ecclesiastical purposes. Contemporary public rationality, ethical, ecological, and critical, provides a discursive space where theology and religious studies function not as rivals but as mutually enriching partners in a shared research horizon.

5. Conclusions

This article proposed an archaeo-genealogical approach to theological knowledge in order to address the epistemic and political problem of self-referentiality in contemporary theology. Based on Michel Foucault's archaeological and genealogical tools, and in dialogue with Michel de Certeau's reflection on the persistence of the religious within modern discourses, it was argued that theology must undergo an epistemological reconfiguration to become a form of public knowledge. The proposed analytical framework identifies the historical conditions that led theology to epistemic isolation and explores the possibility of its reintegration into the university context through a critical engagement with public rationality.

Certainly, twentieth-century liberation theologies initiated a new form of commitment to the public agenda of social transformation, however, the task raised here requires a step further, displacing Revelation as an unquestionable and absolute epistemic criterion and recognizing it instead as a historically mediated discourse subject to critique and public translation. Theology, then, is not abolished but re-situated: no longer defined by confessional closure but by its contribution to the common good, to interdisciplinary dialogue, and to the ethical discernment of plural societies.

Throughout this article, four analytical axes were developed. Section 4.1 revisits theology's object, showing how Revelation must be read in light of modern finitude and historicity. Section 4.2 examined the epistemic subject of theology, tracing how authority has shifted from confessional to public discursive positions, at least in the context of theological knowledge production within the university and scientific system of the 21st century. Section 4.3 proposes the notion of public ethics as first theology, translating theological concepts like *imago Dei* or *common home* into categories operative within plural rationalities. Finally, Section 4.4 contextualizes this transformation within broader patterns of epistemic simultaneity between theology and religious studies. Thinking about an epistemological model for theology based on criteria of public rationality implies thinking about public theology from a set of heterogeneous relationships that do not detract from its dogmatic character but open it up to new perspectives of experience and living the faith based on the historical mechanisms in which this experience is born, develops, and transforms.

In this light, a useful heuristic emerges by distinguishing between the ideological and axiological dimensions of the religious. The ideological dimension, when absolutized, sustains genealogies of power that instrumentalize religion for the reinforcement of identity, exclusion, or political control. The axiological dimension, by contrast, supports genealogies of faith grounded in ethical openness, critical discernment, and the transformation of subjectivity through practices of justice, care, and hospitality. Theology, when aligned with

this axiological field, moves away from sovereign logic and toward an active contribution to the ethical imagination of democratic societies.

Thus, an archaeo-genealogy of theological knowledge is not merely an academic exercise but a methodological commitment to distinguish and expose these genealogies, resisting theological complicity with power and recovering theology's potential to articulate a critical, ethical, and plural discourse. This shift enables theology to speak from within, but not only to itself, and, in doing so, to participate in building a world more attentive to dignity, justice, and the common home.

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Notes

- ¹ Pope Francis frequently called for a theology that participated in the dynamic of a Church that “goes forth” (*Ecclesiae «in exitu»*), as notably affirmed in *Veritatis Gaudium* (no. 3), and, therefore, indirectly applied to theology. The expression “goes forth” drew on a strong biblical and liturgical tradition, particularly in English Catholic translations such as Isaiah 55:11: “my word that goes forth from my mouth”, found in both the New American Bible (NABRE) and the Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (RSVCE). This scriptural language was echoed in the Gospels as well, where Christ himself was portrayed as one who “went forth” to heal (cf. Matthew 14:14) and to confront suffering with compassion (cf. John 18:4). However, in his *Motu Proprio Ad Theologiam Promovendam* (Pope Francis 2023), Francis introduced the Latin expression *theologia in exitu*. Although no official English translation was issued by the Holy See, the term “outgoing theology” was adopted by Catholic commentators and media outlets as a contemporary equivalent. Notably, the New Zealand theologian Christopher Evan Longhurst provided an unofficial English translation (Longhurst 2024), publicly available on the academic platform ResearchGate, in which he employed the expression as accessible manner.
- ² The term *dispositif* appears in Foucault’s original French, while *dispositive* is common in English translations and discourse studies. To avoid conflation with legal terminology, some scholars now retain the French. The term *apparatus* has circulated since the first English translations of *The History of Sexuality* and was reinforced by Agamben’s *What is an Apparatus?* (Agamben 2009, p. 14).
- ³ First published in French as *Les mots et les choses* (Foucault 1966), the book appeared in English as *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* published in 1970, a title chosen to avoid confusion with similarly named works and to highlight its focus on historical formations of knowledge. All English quotations refer to the 2005 Routledge edition.
- ⁴ Most of the figures presented in this article were created by the authors for didactic purposes, unless otherwise indicated. In the case of Figure 1, it is an adapted version of Gonçalves (2009).
- ⁵ In the original French edition, Foucault uses the word ‘discerner’ (Foucault 2005b, p. 57), but in the English translation, there is a variation between ‘discern’ and ‘discriminating’ (Foucault 2005b, pp. 61, 118, 275, 360).
- ⁶ Figure reproduced from the public domain image of “Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen” (Le Barbier 1789).

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Article

Integral Ecology as a Call to Responsibility: Approximations Between Hans Jonas and Pope Francis

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Abstract: This article aims to examine the concept of responsibility through the lens of the “integral ecology” proposed by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’*. The objective is to demonstrate how the ethics of responsibility developed by Hans Jonas in his seminal 1979 work aligns with Pope Francis’s concerns and simultaneously offers a complementary theoretical–philosophical framework. To this end, we begin by showing how responsibility occupies a central place in the papal encyclical, assuming a multidimensional perspective. From there, we analyze how the understanding of responsibility transitions from ontology (Jonas) and anthropology (Francis) to ethics, taking the biosphere as a new object of responsibility in light of the threats posed by the unchecked advance of technological powers against nature. This investigation is based on a comparative and conceptual analysis of primary texts by Hans Jonas and Pope Francis. This shift also entails the recognition of nature’s intrinsic rights and an understanding of species extinction as both an impoverishment (Jonas) and a mutilation (Francis) of creation. We conclude by demonstrating how the call for integral ecology becomes an urgent task for the present generations in the context of catastrophe prevention. In this way, integral ecology attains its radical meaning when understood as demanding two fundamental transformations: a change in consciousness and a change in lifestyle—from consumerism to frugality.

Keywords: integral ecology; responsibility; Pope Francis; nature; Hans Jonas

1. Introduction

The concept of responsibility is one of the most central themes in Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’* (Francis 2015)¹. The term appears at least seventeen times in the document, published in May 2015 to wide international acclaim, solidifying Pope Francis’s position as one of the most prominent voices in ecological advocacy. For Pope Francis, responsibility is tied to the cultivation of the common good (LS, 229) and to a deep awareness of our belonging to nature. This perspective stands in direct opposition to the anthropocentrism² prevailing in modernity, and even to certain theological currents³ that regarded the human being as the “lord” over all things—entitled to act without responsibility, respect, or care.

In this sense, responsibility takes a central place in the notion of *integral ecology*, which Francis defines as an ecology that opposes what he calls “false or superficial ecology” (LS, 59) insofar as it requires deep changes in both consciousness and lifestyle. As suggested by Meier (2024, p. 112), the concept of *integral ecology* is a kind of “new paradigm”. For him, “the concept of integral ecology can augment and strengthen a destination’s moral-ethical compass as it offers concrete moral standards and implications for treating others and nature” and “can support the positive formation of an inner compass and can

give more substance to it by bringing in strong moral and ethical reference standards". This perspective, as we intend to demonstrate below, closely aligns with the theses of the Jewish–German philosopher Hans Jonas, for whom responsibility must lie at the heart of an “ethics for the technological civilization,” as he proposes in the subtitle of his magnum opus from 1979. Although Jonas did not employ the term *integral ecology*, his theses—as we aim to show in this study—complement those defended by Francis, who adopts an ecology grounded in convivialism, in which human beings and other creatures coexist in balanced relationships within the environment, conceived as a “common home.” As Anyanwu (2024, p. 56) recalls, the idea of “human ecology involves good integration within the environment, using it as a point of contact to foster fraternal communion and relationality”. As Francis insists—and as Jonas’s writings illustrate—such an ecology cannot be conceived apart from an anthropology (LS, 118) or even an ontology⁴. It is, at once, a critique of both “misguided anthropocentrism” and of mere biocentrism (LS, 118): in both cases, the human being is removed from nature—either because he feels no commitment to the natural world or because he is no longer considered part of it. For Francis, only an *integral ecology*—one that includes the human being alongside all other living beings—is capable of addressing the environmental crisis: “Human beings cannot be expected to feel responsibility for the world unless, at the same time, their unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility are recognized and valued” (LS, 118). Because it is integral, this ecology encompasses various dimensions, environmental, economic, social, and cultural, closely aligned with everyday actions and the common good and attentive to intergenerational and environmental justice. For Jonas, in turn, this perspective would be grounded in a new type of humanism, which Frogneux (2012, p. 438), in proposing an anthropological reading of *The Imperative of Responsibility*, characterized as a “non-anthropocentric humanism” or even a “decentered humanism” (Frogneux 2012, p. 439), in which the human being participates but does not claim exclusivity.

From this concept of *integral ecology*, we thus propose to analyze the different dimensions of responsibility through a comparative study between the central theses of Pope Francis (notably in *Laudato Si’* and *Laudate Deum* (Francis 2023)⁵) and those developed by Hans Jonas (particularly in *The Imperative of Responsibility* (Jonas 1979, 1984)). This is not, of course, an attempt to erase the differences between the two perspectives—which begin with the simple fact that Jonas was a philosopher of the Jewish–German tradition, while Francis is a Pope—but rather to highlight the “common task” (Souza et al. 2023) that both have taken on as part of their concern for the continuity of life on planet Earth. What “cements this task is the ethical expression of the problem and its urgency, detected by both in their own writings” (Souza et al. 2023, p. 9).

This shared commitment becomes especially evident when we look at the lives and legacies of both voices. Just as Jonas dedicated himself to this task until his final days—as evidenced by his last lecture, *The Outcry of the Mute Things* (Jonas 1996), delivered on 30 January 1993, in Udine, Italy, just six days before his death—Pope Francis has likewise proven to be a tireless advocate for this same mission. He published the Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum* after recognizing that “our responses have not been adequate, while the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point” (LD, 2) and because “the situation is now even more pressing” (LD, 4). With this new exhortation, he sought to “clarify and complete” (LD, 4) what he had set forth eight years earlier in *Laudato Si’*.

The perceptions of these restless and vigilant men, whose reflections inspire us precisely because they express the magnitude of the mission they chose to embrace, can be succinctly summarized in *Integral Ecology as a Call to Responsibility*, as we will explore in this work. For Jonas, responsibility “is an ethical principle founded ontologically, that is,

rooted in the very meaning of human existence, the only one capable of opening itself to the horizon of the urgent care of nature, considered by him as the *novum* of ethics,” since “none of the traditional ethics (to the extent that they are limited to the anthropocentric horizon of the present) have had to face such a difficult task—including non-human life and future generations as part of ethical obligations”. For Francis, “it is a responsibility for creation, which must be cared for by the one who recognizes the greatness of the gift and, consequently, the prohibition of plundering it at will” (Souza et al. 2023, pp. 9–10). In this context, praising (*Laudato Si'* and *Laudate Deum*) is also an act of resistance against destruction. Moreover, by reminding Catholic faithful and encouraging “brothers and sisters of other religions,” Francis emphasizes the importance of the “motivations born of their faith” (LD, 61). This required change to transform human behavior toward creation demands nothing less than a complete spiritual conversion, because “we know that authentic faith not only gives strength to the human heart, but also transforms life, transfigures our goals, and sheds light on our relationship to others and with creation as a whole” (LD, 61).

Moreover, Pope Francis’s eco-theological thought and Hans Jonas’s eco-philosophical reflections converge around the idea that life, in all its forms, possesses an intrinsic value that demands ethical responsibility from human beings, who are thus called to stewardship. Drawing from the Christian tradition, Francis conceives creation as a gift from God, which bestows upon every creature its own dignity and calls for care and respect. He proposes an “integral ecology” that recognizes the profound interdependence between human beings and the environment, emphasizing that the ecological crisis demands a deep conversion of both human consciousness and action in the world. Similarly, Hans Jonas develops an ethics of responsibility based on an acute awareness of humanity’s impact on planetary life. Grounded in a biological understanding of evolution, Jonas argues that the survival of life depends on prudent and responsible use of technological power, with an eye to safeguarding the existence of future generations. Although they approach the issue from different paths—one theological, the other philosophical—secular—both denounce the logic of consumerism and advocate for the urgent need for a radical ethical transformation to ensure the continuity and dignity of life on Earth.

2. A Multidimensional Responsibility

There are at least five distinct senses in which the concept of responsibility is employed in *Laudato Si'*, and these categories reveal that the notion of responsibility in the encyclical must be understood as multidimensional—encompassing everything from public policy to personal decision-making, always with an emphasis on justice, the recognition of the value of all forms of life, sustainability, and care for our common home.

The first sense (LS, 193, 194, and 206) emphasizes personal responsibility, related to a consumerist lifestyle⁶ and to the individual’s capacity for choice and action, particularly concerning the urgency of conscious and sustainable consumption. The second (LS, 138, 229, and 220) refers to ethical and moral responsibility associated with environmental justice—not only in terms of access to and use of natural resources but also in the fair distribution of responsibilities and the principle that those who cause harm should bear the cost. A third approach is reflected in the Pope’s concerns with collective and communal responsibility—that is, the shared dimension of environmental responsibility, which involves all individuals and territories and cannot be seen as a solitary duty. In this regard, the Pope speaks of territorial responsibility (LS, 42) and of the idea of a community as an ecological subject (LS, 219) and even presents responsibility as a collective virtue (LS, 180). From this notion, a fourth perspective (LS 16, 182, 183, 196, and 197) emerges, which conceives responsibility from a political and institutional point of view⁷, as the Pope refers to the duty of governments, institutions, and political systems to promote the common

good, ensure environmental justice, and combat corruption and inertia. Finally, a fifth sense regards responsibility from an existential and intergenerational perspective, related to the commitment to future generations (LS, 161) and the awareness that human existence (LS, 160) involves the preservation of the planet—something presented as both an educational (LS, 162) and spiritual task (LS, 216).

Across these various usages, the term *responsibility* is embraced in its original etymological sense: to be responsible is to have the capacity to “respond, to promise, and to guarantee” (from the Latin *respondere*, derived from *spondere*, to promise, to commit, preceded by the intensifier *re-*, meaning “again”). To speak of *responsabilis* is to speak of someone who can be called to answer for something—or, more precisely, to answer for their actions (before the law, society, or even the divine). The idea of responsibility, therefore, implies the ability to respond to commitments undertaken or actions committed. For this reason, it only makes sense in the human case since only the human being *can* answer for his actions and fulfill the commitment he assumes when he enters the human community—or, in ecological terms, when he becomes part of the community of life on planet Earth. The concept of responsibility, however, bears a second meaning: as a “capacity” (the human being *can* take responsibility), responsibility becomes an obligation—a moral duty: if the human being can take responsibility (and, even more, if only he can), then he *must* assume it, lest he fail to fully realize himself as a human being. Theologically speaking, we might say that if God has endowed man with this capacity as “God-given abilities” (LS, 78), then he must fulfill it in order to be fully realized as part of Creation.

3. Onto-Anthropological Perspective and the Ethics of Responsibility

It is precisely at this point that Pope Francis’s use of the concept of responsibility intersects with the conceptions of the thinker known as the philosopher of responsibility, the Jewish–German philosopher Hans Jonas. Author of *Das Prinzip Verantwortung: Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, published in German in 1979 and translated into English by the author himself in 1984 as *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*⁸, Hans Jonas draws attention to the transition from “capacity” to “obligation”. For him, this implies a special theoretical stance, assumed as a kind of contravention to one of the most well-established “dogmas” of contemporary philosophy: “no ‘ought’ can be derived from ‘being’” (IR, 44), or in other words, no ethics could be founded upon an ontology. By affirming that responsibility must first be thought of as a “capacity,” Jonas draws attention to its ontological foundation (and clearly also anthropological). Then, by emphasizing that such a capacity must be recognized as power and as a duty, he transitions into the field of ethics.

This perspective, in a similar way—though marked by a religious structure—underlies the ideas of Pope Francis himself, who states that the “human ecology” he advocates implies a “relationship between human life and the moral law, which is inscribed in our nature” (LS, 155). In other words, it is in the domain of ontology (nature) that the moral law (ethics) by which human action should be guided is found. Citing Benedict XVI, Francis recalls that this occurs for a self-evident reason: the human being is also nature insofar as “our body itself establishes us in a direct relationship with the environment and with other living beings” (LS, 155). Through our body, which shares the needs common to all living things and is sustained through the metabolism present in all other organisms, there emerges a sense of human belonging that leads to the idea of the common good.

The passage from ontology to ethics, or from nature to morality, would be legitimized, for Jonas, by what he considers the first imperative of responsibility: “that humanity shall exist” (IR, 42), both now and especially in the future⁹. And it is precisely this imperative that must guide human action in daily life: “the first rule for the mandatory quality can

solely be gained from the imperative of existence,” and “all further rules are subject to its criterion” (IR, 43). Thus, because humanity must exist, it must use its capacity to be responsible as an ethical instrument to control everything that threatens its existence. In this way, Jonas draws attention to a central element of his work—as well as that of *Laudato Si'*: the problem of technology. For the philosopher, the advancement of technological powers—especially from the seventeenth century onward, with particular emphasis on the past two centuries—has placed human existence itself at risk. The initial diagnosis of his work appears in the preface to the German edition of the book: “The starting thesis of this book is that the promise of modern technology has turned into a threat or has become indissolubly bound up with it” (PV, 7¹⁰). In other words, technology has become an ethical problem to the extent that its exercise has assumed an unprecedented magnitude in terms of its impact—something that, combined with the ambivalence of its effects, lends it a truly apocalyptic potential¹¹. This is the same position taken by Francis, who addresses the “new forms of power structures based on the techno-economic paradigm” (LS, 53) and criticizes the subjugation of technology to the interests of the market, profit, and finance (LS, 54), following the logic that turns it from a form of “creativity” into an exercise of “power” (LS, 102), extending into fields as novel as biotechnology and nanotechnology. Neither Francis nor Jonas, however, maintains a technophobic stance: for them, it is necessary to limit the reach of these powers, reorienting them toward the common good—a task that falls precisely to an ethics grounded in responsibility. The issue is not only the development of technology itself but also the fact that “our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values, and conscience” (LD 24), which would ensure its proper use. Stating that “science and technology are not neutral; from the beginning to the end of a process, various intentions and possibilities are in play and can take on distinct shapes” (LS, 114), Pope Francis concurs with Jonas: if technology is not neutral, it can be reoriented in the service of the common good, which in this case means ensuring the survival conditions of humanity itself in the future.

4. The Biosphere as a (New) Object of Responsibility

Here is a second important point that brings together the thesis of responsibility advocated by Jonas and that defended by Pope Francis: both consider that human existence cannot be conceived separately from the existence of other forms of life. Both speak of a “delicate balance” (LS, 38) and a “symbiotic balance” (IR, 137) that must be recognized—and that technology itself has increasingly threatened as a source of risk and “disruption” (IR, 137). In other words, the human presence in the world, through the advancement of technology, has come to represent a dangerous presence to the extent that it disturbs this balance. For Jonas, this is due to a change in the very nature of human action provoked by technology: “Through the effects, [technology] that the nature of human action has *de facto* been changed, and that an object of an entirely new order—no less than the whole biosphere of the planet—has been added to what we must be responsible for because of our power over it.” (IR, 7). For Jonas, since technology is the cause of imbalance, ethics must assume nature itself as its object—and this is a great novelty in the recent history of ethics since traditional ethical systems were not prepared for this task. They were formulated in different contexts and in response to challenges of another age when the harmful consequences of technology were not yet detectable. The shift in today’s scenario thus demands a corresponding transformation in ethics itself: “And of what surpassing importance an object, dwarfing all previous objects of active man! Nature as a human responsibility is surely a novum to be pondered in ethical theory.” (IR, 7). In this way, the concept of responsibility must encompass this new conception of nature as an ethical object precisely because human action, through technology, now poses an unprecedented threat.

This idea of the biosphere as under human responsibility also implies the inclusion of all forms of life as part of the criteria for the preservation of human life itself. For Jonas, as for Francis, no ethics can rightly consider the good of the human being without considering the good of all other creatures with whom human life is shared on this planet. In a 1982 essay published as the second chapter of *Technology, Medicine, and Ethics: On the Practice of the Principle of Responsibility* (released in German in 1985), Jonas clearly shows how his position closely aligns with what would later be characterized by Pope Francis as “integral ecology,” in that it rejects both the merely instrumental use of other forms of life and anthropocentrism itself, by linking the human good with the good of all other living beings, as we can read in *Technik, Medizin und Ethik*¹²: “Properly understood, the inclusion of the very existence of diversity [of life] in the human good—and therefore the inclusion of its preservation in man’s duty—goes beyond the utilitarian and any anthropocentric point of view. This broadened vision ties the human good to the total cause of its life, rather than setting it in hostile opposition, and grants extra-human life its own right. Its recognition means that every arbitrary and unnecessary extinction of species becomes a crime in itself, wholly apart from the same advice of enlightened self-interest; and it becomes a transcendent duty of man to protect the least renewable and most irreplaceable of all ‘resources’: the unimaginably rich genetic pool formed over eons of evolution. It is the excess of power that imposes this duty on men; and precisely against this power—therefore, against man himself—its protection is imperative. Thus, it happens that technology, this coldly pragmatic work of human cleverness, places man in a role that only religion has at times attributed to him: that of steward and guardian of creation. By increasing its power to a point where it palpably endangers the whole scheme of things, technology extends man’s responsibility to the future of life on Earth, which now stands defenseless before the misuse of that power.” (TME, 46–47).

Note, in this passage, how Jonas seeks to demonstrate that it is precisely the expansion of technology beyond the human sphere—its effects on the equilibrium of the entire biosphere—that gives rise to the ethical obligation of preservation under the principle of responsibility. The ontological and ethical foundation of this claim, as laid out in the passage above, is the recognition of an inherent “right” of all living organisms upon which human life itself depends. In other words, to speak of a human good that is existence itself—recognized as the primary object of the imperative of responsibility—necessarily implies recognizing the intrinsic good and value of all creatures: “now the entire biosphere of the planet, with all its abundance of species, in its newly-revealed vulnerability before the excessive interventions of man, claims its share of the respect owed to all that is an end in itself—that is, to all living beings,” writes Jonas in the same passage from *Technology, Medicine, and Ethics* (TME, 46).

5. A Right Proper to Nature

This idea of a “moral right proper to nature” appears in *The Imperative of Responsibility*, where Jonas examines precisely the “new dimensions of responsibility” (IR, 7). For him, the action of technology, in contrast with the vulnerability of nature, demands that we consider not only human interests (which would limit the challenge to the anthropocentric aspect of traditional ethics): “the biosphere as a whole and in its parts, now subject to our power, has become a human trust and has something of a moral claim” (IR, 8). According to Jonas, this issue involves a revision of one of the most central theses of modern science and philosophy, namely, the denial of purpose in nature—something that, in his view, arose from the invention of the idea of pure matter, that is, devoid of any purpose and, therefore, of value. Modernity is marked, as such, by an indifference toward nature, precisely by the fact that it “denies us all conceptual means to think of Nature as something to be

honored" (IR, 8). Instead, the task of modernity has been the task of exploitation, and this necessitated the categorical denial of any recognition of right. Modernity reduced nature "to the indifference of necessity and accident and divested it of any dignity of ends" (IR, 8).

To rearticulate—along the lines inaugurated by Aristotle—end and value imply the recognition of the good and, consequently, of duty: if living beings have an end in themselves (for Jonas, associated with their self-affirmative character), then this requires that humans recognize their value, as a good to be preserved—and this is the task that must be assumed as part of responsibility. Thus, "extend the recognition of 'ends in themselves' beyond the sphere of man and make the human good include the care for them" (IR, 8) appears as a central task of the ethics of responsibility. Reflecting on the community of creatures, Jonas states, "a silent plea for its integrity seems to issue from the threatened plenitude of the living world" (IR, 8), and "should we heed this plea, should we recognize its claim as morally binding" (IR, 8). For the philosopher, this would entail a critique of the conception of science practiced throughout modernity, grounded—practically—in technicism and the exploitation of natural goods, and—theoretically—in a misunderstanding of the phenomenon of life, a victim of a mechanistic and reductionist interpretation. He writes, "we should keep ourselves open to the thought that natural sciences may not tell the whole story about Nature" (PR, 42)—a task that could be complemented, for example, by philosophy or theology.

A similar position is assumed by Pope Francis, who states, for example, that "all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another" (LS, 42). This view is characteristic of "integral humanism," which evokes the affective value of love and admiration as part of the recognition of the worth of all creatures. In one of the most striking passages on this theme, Francis declares, "We can add yet another argument for rejecting every tyrannical and irresponsible domination of human beings over other creatures. The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illuminates all things" (LS, 83). One should note the reference to a finality that transcends the merely instrumental use of creatures by human beings and, at the same time, the theological recovery of the interweaving of human destiny with that of all other creatures, which, in religious language, are advancing together toward God. Far from diminishing the value of the human being, such a position highlights his unique dignity, recognized through his responsibility toward all creatures. In other words, it is only by acknowledging this co-belonging that the human being can, ultimately, assume his responsibility before nature. Responsibility thus entails "a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures but joined in a splendid universal communion" (LS, 220). In these terms, both Jonas and Pope Francis hold that all natural beings possess a dignity that demands absolute respect as creatures of God endowed with specific identity and purpose. The Pope, for instance, speaks of the "intrinsic value of each creature" (LS, 16) and insists that we owe affection and admiration to all creatures because of their inherent worth (LS, 42) and their significance (LS, 76), each having its own proper end (LS, 83), for ultimately, "each creature reflects something of God" (LS, 221). Jonas, for his part, by reintegrating the human being into the realm of nature, affirms these same characteristics and speaks of a proper right of nature (IR, 8).

In this case, the Pope adopts the perspective that it is the very idea of ontological differences among beings that must be recognized as the foundation for respect and responsibility: it is from the diversity of life forms that the human being may come to recognize his own value as the guardian of the whole. In defending the role of researchers working on environmental issues, Francis emphasizes that "ongoing research should

also give us a better understanding of how different creatures relate to one another in making up the larger units which today we term ‘ecosystems’” (LS, 140). Ecosystems are, therefore, formations of diversity of biodiversity, which also include human presence. Any impoverishment of this diversity is likewise an impoverishment of humanity itself, as Jonas also affirmed: for him, the preservation of “generic diversity” is an ethical task of utmost importance, “whose preservation is certainly a good compared to the alternative of annihilation or impoverishment” (IR, 81), since “extra-human life, impoverished nature, also means impoverished human life” (TME, 47).

For Francis, the recognition of the inherent value and rightful claim of all living beings depends on an ability to transcend oneself, to break free from the egoism and individualism that characterize our culture. Without such capacity, the Pope argues, one cannot recognize the value of other creatures, feel moved to care for them or impose limits to avoid their suffering or the degradation of the surrounding world (LS, 208). This is the same position held by Jonas through the concept of “solidarity of interest with the organic world” (IR, 138): it is a matter of recognizing “the solidarity of fate” (IR, 104) that binds all creatures, and, furthermore, that “the care must obviously include care for the future of all nature on this planet as a necessary condition of man’s own,” especially considering, as we have seen, that “man has become dangerous not only to himself but to the whole biosphere” (IR, 136). In recovering the value of solidarity, Jonas does not do so in a romantic or abstract manner: on the contrary, for him, it is the “egoism of each species” (IR, 137) that makes the planet’s symbiotic balance possible—and it is precisely the denial of the self-interest inherent in all organisms to continue living (that is, their egoism—a biologically rooted egoism, therefore) that disrupts this balance.

6. The Extinction of Species as Impoverishment and Mutilation

The disturbance of balance, as we know, has led to an unprecedented wave of extinction in the history of life on planet Earth. For Jonas, in provoking such a process, humanity is doing nothing other than killing the “goose that lays the golden eggs” and sawing “off the branch on which we sit” (IR, 7). In his famous lecture *On Suffering*¹³, delivered on September 30, 1988, at the Hastings Center (under the number HJ 17-20-2) and first published in 2000¹⁴, Jonas analyzes the problem of animal species extinction as one that compromises the cosmic balance, before which humankind should marvel: “This is the way life is. The spider is to be admired, its web is to be admired, the fly is to be admired because it can fly, which the spider cannot. It is all wonderful.” (OS, 29). Jonas draws on Heraclitus to argue that “who regard a more of manifoldness of wealth in the tableau of creation as better than a less of it, and therefore feel now responsible, having acquired the degree of dangerous power over it which we have, feel responsible for maintaining it, of assuming a certain stewardship for it. It has accrued to us by the mere possession of our power.” (OS, 29). For the philosopher, this means that we should no longer remain “on the defensive against nature” (OS, 29) since, unlike in earlier times, “we are now the aggressors, on the offensive, our incursions are deep, we are impoverishing the richness of life on Earth at a terrible rate” (OS, 29)¹⁵. Jonas expresses concern over extinction rates because they represent the impoverishment of diversity and ecosystems to the detriment of humankind itself: “That’s happening. I have certain numbers, how many species per year become extinct owing to civilization, to human activity and so on. And so, it is not so much a moral duty, it is really a metaphysical or ontological duty.” (OS, 29).

In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis likewise expresses profound concern over the extinction of life forms. Speaking of global warming, he refers to the “vicious cycle” of carbon, which contributes to the destruction of living conditions, provoking “the extinction of part of the planet’s biodiversity” (LS, 24). The Pope does not hesitate to show how the supposed

progress of civilization has brought about such impoverishment of species: “Highways, new plantations, the facing-off of certain areas, the damming of water sources, and similar developments, crowd out natural habitats and, at times, break them up in such a way that animal populations can no longer migrate or roam freely. As a result, some species face extinction.” (LS, 35). Echoing a passage from *Evangelii Gaudium*¹⁶, the Pope is emphatic: “I would reiterate that ‘God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement’” (LS, 89). Extinction must therefore be regarded as a mutilation of creation: mutilated, the biosphere is impoverished, and the right of living beings to exist is denied. This concern, the Pope warns, should not be limited to large animals but must also extend to those less “visible” creatures that sustain the great cosmic balance: “It may well disturb us to learn of the extinction of mammals or birds, since they are more visible. But the good functioning of ecosystems also requires fungi, algae, worms, insects, reptiles and the innumerable variety of microorganisms” (LS, 34).

7. Responsibility as Prevention

For Jonas, the *principle of responsibility* is the ethical mode of acting in favor of the preservation of life conditions on the planet by limiting the advance of technological powers and expanding the idea of the dignity of ends beyond the human. At this point, his theory conceives responsibility not merely as “causal attribution of deeds done” (IR, 90) but, above all, as a “prediction from analytical-causal knowledge” (IR, 113)—that is, an anticipatory awareness of the negative and dangerous effects of scientific progress. For Jonas, prediction must be considered the central value of the ethics of responsibility, and it is intrinsically linked to the capacity to *foretell*, that is, to foresee future events. This idea is captured in the concepts of “comparative futurology” and the “heuristics of fear” (IR, 26), which he proposes as critical alternatives to the utopia of technological progress. While the latter demands the continuation of technological evolution based on the belief that the future will be produced by present actions and that it will be better than the present, Jonas’ concepts favor a futurology that prioritizes negative prognoses on the grounds that fear may awaken the “feeling of responsibility” (IR, 87).

In this sense, responsibility appeals to foresight and precaution rather than to recklessness or risk-taking. For him, “the existence of ‘man’ must never be put at stake” (IR, 37). Thus, the ethics of responsibility rests on the notion of “voluntary reins” (PV, 7) that prevent mortgaging the future for the sake of the supposed needs of the present: “We are mortgaging future life in exchange for short-term gains and current needs—most often, in fact, for self-created needs” (TME, 45). This, after all, is the irresponsible stance: “The gambler who puts his whole fortune at stake acts recklessly; when it is not his but another’s, then criminally; but when a family depends on him, then irresponsibly, even with ownership disputed, and no matter whether he loses or wins.” (IR, 93). Instead of a rule that fosters continual risk-taking, speculative hypotheses, and the unrestrained advance of humankind’s “will to unlimited power” (TME, 23), Jonas advocates for precaution: “For the community (...) given the enormous magnitude of what is at stake and the price our descendants will one day have to pay, precaution becomes the supreme virtue—before which the value of boldness must retreat and which, indeed, casts boldness among the demerits of irresponsibility” (TME, 67). It is as this “supreme virtue” that Jonas’ ethics embraces the urgency of prevention and precaution—guiding not only individual conduct, but also public policy and governmental action—thereby becoming a political virtue par excellence: “Prevention ranks foremost of the two, as the prediction in the sense of warning is naturally and rightly a stronger motive for the exertions of statecraft, surely a more compelling command to responsibility, than the call of promise.” (IR, 120).

By speaking of responsibility as prediction and prevention, Jonas contrasts it with the notion of responsibility as mere accountability for something already done—that is, *ex post facto* responsibility (IR, 80). Given the gravity of what is at stake, it falls to humanity to anticipate—to foretell and foresee—the consequences of its actions even before they occur so as to alter the unwanted outcomes embedded in present decisions.

In this light, responsibility requires values such as “modesty” (TME, 67; 71), “continence” (TME, 67), “temperance” (TME, 67), “precaution” (TME, 67), “parsimony” (TME, 67), “moderation” (TME, 69), and above all, “frugality” (TME, 67). The latter is highlighted by Jonas as an ancient yet urgent virtue to be revived specifically as an alternative to excessive consumerism, which is fueled by a new value: “gluttony,” which induces compulsive consumption. According to Jonas, “frugality is required for the sake of preserving our earthly dwelling and thus constitutes a facet of the ethics of responsibility toward the future” (TME, 67). Its urgency grows in tandem with the “coercions and incentives” that create a “general climate of indulgence” characteristic of consumer societies and their attachment to material possession. To speak of frugality, for Jonas, is to reject the value of “gluttony”—even when it is recommended as a “socioeconomic duty” by certain exploitative economic models. Against this, it is necessary to “issue a still novel appeal in favor of frugality, a renewed frugality” (TME, 68). And this must be done now, through a “voluntary consensus” (TME, 68), before it becomes necessary to impose it by “legal coercion” (TME, 68). Jonas ultimately notes that this is a “most important educational task” (TME, 72) and that education must commit itself to the world of tomorrow.

No reader of *Laudato Si'* would find such arguments surprising. On the contrary, they sound strikingly familiar since Pope Francis repeatedly expresses concern about consumerism and emphasizes the urgency of frugality as a central value in his theological, economic, and educational proposal. For the Pope, “a constant flood of new consumer goods can baffle the heart and prevent us from cherishing each thing and each moment” (LS, 222), and according to Christian tradition, the encounter with oneself and with God takes place in an atmosphere of “moderation”, which enables one to “be happy with little” (LS, 222). This sentiment—rooted in Christian spirituality—can be attained through “a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords us, to be spiritually detached from what we possess, and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack. This implies avoiding the dynamic of domination and the mere accumulation of pleasures.” (LS, 222).

8. Changing Awareness to Change Lifestyle: From Consumerism to Frugality

Francis emphasizes the importance of a change in awareness and lifestyle. Early in the encyclical, he states that “humanity is called to recognize the need for change lifestyle, production and consumption, in order to combat this warming or at least the human causes which produce or aggravate it” (LS, 23). On the one hand, he leaves no doubt regarding human responsibility in the production of the environmental crisis, rejecting any denialist perspective on the problem; on the other, he embraces the task of contributing to the two changes he calls for: a change in awareness and a change in lifestyle. If the first of these refers to the theoretical task of the human being in understanding their place in the cosmos, the second concerns their practical—indeed, ethical—task: it is necessary to abandon consumerism, which induces unrestrained production, the exhaustion of natural resources, and the disposal of waste that clutters the planet. Regarding the change in awareness, Francis insists that the root of the crisis lies in a lack of awareness of “a common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone,” and he adds, “this basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes

and forms of life” (LS, 202). In other words, the change in awareness is the foundation from which new lifestyles emerge in favor of a simpler and more frugal existence. At this point, his perspective aligns with that of Jonas, who states, “To stop the plundering, the impoverishment of species, and the pollution of the planet, which are visibly advancing, to prevent the exhaustion of its reserves, including an insane man-made shift in the global climate, a new frugality in our habits of consumption is necessary.” (TME, 67).

For Francis, caring for the planet also means letting go of the consumerism that marks a certain luxurious lifestyle promoted as the only path to a full life. For him, responsibility requires a significant shift in the course of civilization: “every effort to improve our world entails profound change in ‘lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies’” (LS, 5). For the Pope, no human progress makes sense unless it is supported by moral progress—that is, precisely, a new awareness and a new everyday lifestyle. Integral ecology, in this sense, stands in opposition to what he terms “false or superficial ecology” (LS, 59) precisely because it demands such changes, while the latter is used merely to justify evasive behavior, which “serves as a license to carry on our present lifestyles and models of production and consumption” without any real change (LS, 59). This leads us to the very heart of the task assumed by the Pope under the banner of “integral ecology”: it requires a change in awareness and a change in lifestyle. It is, therefore, a task of sacrifice, as opposed to initiatives that either deny or obscure the problem. For this reason, integral ecology is supported by a new “ecological culture” that “need to be a different way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm” (LS, 111). The Pope could not be clearer nor more complete in describing the task of integral ecology: it is a radical transformation that begins as a matter of thought and daily living but soon becomes a political task and an educational program. Without this, he says, “even the best ecological initiatives can find themselves caught up in the same globalized logic” (LS, 111), which is rooted in the technological paradigm that, in political terms, is a technocratic paradigm—one governed by the interests of the large corporations that hold technological power.

When speaking of a “lifestyle,” Francis does not fail to point out that the first step is to question the “singularity” of the current model. In other words, he insists that it is not possible to speak of a single lifestyle; on the contrary, it is necessary to acknowledge different ways of living. This is because “the imposition of a dominant lifestyle linked to a single form of production can be just as harmful as altering ecosystems” (LS, 145), as we have seen over recent decades around the world, where the capitalist model of consumption ends up harming the environment and causing the catastrophic effects of the climate crisis, while at the same time discrediting and subjugating other ways of life, such as those of traditional communities in many parts of the world. Drawing on themes from climate justice debates—especially regarding who participates in decision-making about the direction of the crisis—the Pope asserts that “special care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions”, stressing that they should become “principal dialogue partners,” (LS, 146), especially in cases where civilizational projects threaten the continuity of life on the planet.

It is important to recall, in this regard, that Hans Jonas’s theses on the care for nature and human responsibility are closely connected to the principles of respect for nature and for future generations that form part of the wisdom of the so-called Indigenous peoples. This is also the position of Pope Francis, for whom confronting the environmental crisis must involve the recognition of this ancestral wisdom. During his visit to Canada, for example, he asked forgiveness of Indigenous peoples “for the ways in which, sadly, many

Christians supported the colonizing mentality of the powers that oppressed Indigenous peoples." "I am deeply sorry," said the Pope, affirming that "in the face of this deplorable evil, the Church kneels before God and implores forgiveness for the sins of her children."¹⁷ Furthermore, in the apostolic exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, he emphasized, "wisdom of the original peoples of the Amazon region 'inspires care and respect for creation, with a clear consciousness of its limits, and prohibits its abuse. To abuse nature is to abuse our ancestors, our brothers and sisters, creation and the Creator, and to mortgage the future'." Moreover, according to the Pope, "the indigenous peoples 'remain on their land, they themselves care for it best', provided that they do not let themselves be taken in by the siren songs and the self-serving proposals of power groups." (Francis 2020, §42).

It is no coincidence that the Pope underscores how "a change in lifestyle could bring healthy pressure to bear on those who wield political, economic and social power" (LS, 206) insofar as new choices regarding consumption, for example, may prompt corporations to redefine the products they offer. The same could be said for electoral choices: candidates and parties with no commitment to the climate crisis could be pressured to revise their positions under pressure from voters. It is not by chance that the Pope calls attention to the "social responsibility on the part of consumers" (LS, 206); in continuity, we could also call attention to the "social responsibility of voters" and so on.

Recognizing the central role of education in this process, the Pope affirms that this too is an educational task. "It is wonderful," he says, "how education can bring about real changes in lifestyle" (LS, 211). But it is also a task of spirituality, which must propose "an alternative understanding of the quality of life and encourages of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption" (LS, 222). Demonstrating that this is a demand rooted in "integral ecology," the Pope writes, "an integral ecology includes taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals" (LS, 225). At its core, integral ecology is a call to responsibility insofar as the heart of this appeal is a practical attitude of lifestyle change—one capable of rejecting consumerism in favor of frugality, which is also an attitude of respect and responsibility toward all living beings. For the Pope, therefore, "care for nature is part of a lifestyle which includes the capacity for living together and communion" (LS, 228).

Lastly, we must not forget that, in a political sense, the change in lifestyle must lead to a radical critique of the idea of progress. This is the case for both Jonas and Francis. For Jonas, the notion of "progress with precaution" (PV, 337) appears as an alternative path that could lead civilization toward a process of *degrowth*¹⁸, in which wealthy countries would voluntarily impose limits on their development, allowing space for poorer countries to attain a degree of advancement that might reduce the vast inequalities to which they have been historically subjected. This is also Francis' view: for him, "that is why the time has come to accept decreased growth in some parts of the world, in order to provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth" (LS, 193). Quoting once again Benedict XVI, Francis emphasizes that technologically advanced societies should be willing "to encourage more sober lifestyles, while reducing their energy consumption and improving its efficiency" (LS, 193).

9. Conclusions

As we have demonstrated, the convergence between the ideas of Hans Jonas and Pope Francis reveals that the ethics of responsibility, in its deepest sense, transcends the boundaries of anthropocentric morality, extending to the recognition of the intrinsic value of all forms of life and of the biosphere itself. The "integral ecology" proposed by Francis, aligned with the ontology of responsibility advocated by Jonas, shows that caring for creation requires not only individual actions and structural reforms but also a

new philosophical and spiritual sensitivity rooted in a transformation of consciousness and lifestyle. As we have seen, this sensitivity acknowledges humanity's belonging to the community of life and understands that human survival is inextricably linked to the preservation of biological diversity, the limitation of technological powers, and the cultivation of lifestyles grounded in frugality and solidarity.

In this context, responsibility emerges as a key category for reflecting on the present and the future of life on the planet, both for Pope Francis and for the philosopher Hans Jonas. No longer confined to the attribution of blame for harm already done, responsibility takes shape as a preventive and anticipatory virtue, capable of guiding political decisions, individual choices, and models of development. By proposing ethics grounded in responsibility, both Jonas and Francis call upon humanity to acknowledge its role as guardian of creation, aware of the dangers of unrestrained progress and committed to building a new culture—ethical, spiritual, ecological, and political—that fosters care, balance, and justice for all forms of life. Ultimately, it is a matter of rising to the challenge of our time: to ensure a dignified future for the Earth and for those yet to come. This is an all the more formidable task when we consider the challenges posed by the current global political landscape, in which permissiveness, degradation, and deregulation are embraced by politicians aligned with billionaires who remain indifferent to the urgency of the environmental crisis.

The contrast to this, politics of destruction is found, both by the Pope and by the philosopher, in the figure of Saint Francis of Assisi. On the one hand, the Pope retrieves the figure of Saint Francis as someone who embodied the paradigm of a sustainable way of life, embracing voluntary material and spiritual poverty and fighting against unjust forms of deprivation caused by humanity. As a kind of supreme symbol of integral ecology, Saint Francis stands as the defender both of humanity (especially its most vulnerable members) and of all other creatures, through a life of simplicity. On the other hand, this is also Jonas's view, who, despite being Jewish, refers to Saint Francis twice in *The Imperative of Responsibility*: first, as a defender of humanity and one of the “great atoners” of this cause (IR, 99); and second (in a passage not found in the English translation, but only in the original German edition—Jonas 1979, p. 387), as one of those considered “unsurpassable” in greatness (a list that includes, along with Francis, Socrates, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Buddha, Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt, Euclid, and Newton), whose “splendor in history” nourishes hope for the emergence of future human beings—integral and responsible like him. The same recognition of Saint Francis's moral greatness and superiority appears in *Technik, Medizin und Ethik* (Jonas 1985, p. 127). Jonas would therefore agree with the Pope when he affirms that Saint Francis is an “attractive and compelling figure” and an “example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically” (LS, 10).

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

LS	<i>Laudato Si'</i>
IR	<i>The Imperative of Responsibility</i>
PV	<i>Das Prinzip Verantwortung</i>
TME	<i>Technik, Medizin und Ethik</i>
OS	<i>On Suffering</i>
LD	<i>Laudate Deum</i>

Notes

- ¹ In this work, we will use the acronym LS followed by the paragraph number according to the edition of the document listed in the references.
- ² As wrote Porras (2015, p. 139), “the concept of integral ecology, introduced in the encyclical, shifts the balance in a subtle but important and potentially radical way. The key is the emphasis on ‘ecology,’ rather than ‘development.’ (...) The ecological sensibility is, in a sense, anti-anthropocentric. It stands for the proposition that human beings are not autonomous but must understand themselves as part of multiple interlocking webs of ecological relationships.”
- ³ Such as those, for example, associated with the strong emphasis on the separation between spirit and matter and centered on the idea of salvation as something transcendent and independent of the physical world. This occurs both within certain currents of scholastic theology (in which nature is seen more as a backdrop than as a subject of salvation), classical reformed theology (focused on the sovereignty of God and the pursuit of redemption, viewing nature as something to be dominated and then redeemed), rationalist liberal theology (centered on the human being, with little ecological concern), and, more recently, in modern theological fundamentalism (whose focus on biblical literalism treats creation merely as a stage for salvation rather than a reality with intrinsic value). Within these currents—among others—salvation is the central focus of evangelizing action, and there persists, in general, a preference for the spiritual world over a theology that values nature as creation or ecology as a dimension of theology itself. However, as Santmire (1985) suggested, it is important to note that Christian theology has maintained an ambiguous relationship with nature, so the anthropocentric and salvation-centered perspective has never been the sole position.
- ⁴ For Jonas, the ontological capacity of human beings to assume responsibility toward nature is rooted in his understanding of the biological evolution of life on planet Earth. This understanding is articulated in his 2001 work (Jonas 2001), *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, which serves as a foundational premise for the later development of his ethics. Combining elements of Aristotelian ontology (*De Anima*, for instance) with evolutionary theories (particularly Darwinian), Jonas recounts the history of freedom as the history of need—and of the consequent openness of living forms to the surrounding world, with which they establish material exchanges. Jonas classifies these exchanges as acts of freedom, through which life chooses itself in a self-affirmative movement. These choices unfold through various stages, beginning with metabolism, passing through sensation, perception, emotion, and mobility, until reaching their highest expression (in the human case) in rationality. It is precisely at this stage that rationality branches into two paths: on the one hand, it underpins technological advancements that threaten life; on the other hand, it carries the possibility that life may be preserved through the exercise of responsibility.
- ⁵ In this work, we will use the acronym LD followed by the paragraph number according to the edition of the document listed in the references.
- ⁶ For how responsibility demands a new lifestyle, see Oliveira and Souza (2021).
- ⁷ As demonstrated by Barrett and Duns (2022) there are important organizational implications of the concept of integral ecology.
- ⁸ From here on, we will use the acronym IR followed by the page according to the edition listed in the references.
- ⁹ For Jonas, humanity’s duty to exist is not grounded in its “performance on Earth” (IR, 99)—which accounts for both marvelous achievements and countless atrocities—but is instead rooted in its very being; that is, by the mere fact of existing, human beings are obligated to assume responsibility for that existence. Although Jonas considers that individual suicide might, under certain circumstances, find some justification, humanity as a whole holds no such right for the simple reason that its existence is intrinsically tied to the ontological duty of continuing to exist, both in the present and, above all, in the future. This duty is entirely independent of the form that existence may take—a matter to be considered only afterward: “‘Existence of a mankind’ means simply that their live men on earth; that they live well is the second commandment.” (IR, 99). Thus, “the existence of mankind comes first, whether deserved on its past record and its likely continuation or not” (IR, 99). As the only form of life currently capable of annihilating all life on Earth, humanity is also the only form capable of preserving it through the exercise of responsibility. Moreover, humanity is itself a part of nature—the thinking part, the bearer of the greatest degree of interiority and spirituality, whose manifestation lies precisely in its capacity for responsibility—and, as such, must be preserved alongside all other creatures.

- 10 For citations from the German edition of the book, whose passages were not translated into English (such as the 1979 preface), we will use the abbreviation PV (*Das Prinzip Verantwortung*), followed by the page number from the German edition included in the reference list.
- 11 For the proximity between the diagnoses of Hans Jonas and Pope Francis regarding the dangers of technology, see Oliveira (2023a) and Borgoño (2023).
- 12 From here on, we will use the acronym TME followed by the page according to the German edition listed in the references.
- 13 From here on, we will use the acronym OS followed by the page according to the edition listed in the references.
- 14 The first publication was in *Ragion Pratica* 15 (2000), pp. 33–52. The version we use here is the one edited by Emidio Spinelli and published later in 2012 in *La Rassegna Mensile Di Israel* 78: 11–30 (Jonas 2012).
- 15 Here, we see how both Jonas and Pope Francis reject not only a negative view, so to speak, of nature as an aggressive force that must be dominated by human beings—who perceive themselves as threatened by violent forces against which they can do little—but also an opposite extreme position, one that embraces a romanticized vision of nature, in which such violence is overlooked. For both Jonas and Francis, nature does indeed possess violent powers (not only through fierce animals but also through extreme climatic events such as cyclones, storms, lightning, or earthquakes); however, the imbalance caused by humanity stems from another force (which, evidently, is also natural, in the sense that is a human power): the force of technology. Interpreting technology as a force of domination leads to the understanding that we must reject both a negative view of nature and a romanticized, simplistic view of its forces.
- 16 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 215: AAS 105 (2013), 1109 (Francis 2013).
- 17 Available at <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/internacional/papa-pede-desculpas-no-canada-por-mal-deploravel-causado-por-escolas-a-indigenas/> (accessed on 24 April 2025).
- 18 The term first appeared in 1979 as the title of the book by Romanian-born American mathematician and economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (2006), published by philosopher and historian of science Jacques Grinevald under the title *Demain la décroissance. Entropie, écologie, économie*, whose first edition was published in Lausanne under the direction of Pierre-Marcel Favre in 1979. For Hans Jonas's critique of the idea of progress, see Oliveira (2023b).

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Article

Theology Goes Public: Richard Shaull's Dialogue with Public Issues, Social Sciences, and Ecumenism in "The New Revolutionary Mood in Latin America" (1962)

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Abstract: Since the arrival of Protestants in Brazil, the presence of Protestant educational institutions became a reality. Seminaries were founded at the end of the 19th century, focusing on the training of clergy without much concern for dialogue with other churches or with society at large. Public issues, ecumenism—through dialogue and cooperation between Protestants and Catholics—and interdisciplinary theological approaches only became current concerns in the mid-twentieth century, especially with liberation theologies—both Protestant and Catholic. Before that, however, one of the authors who was able to grasp these dimensions in his theological endeavour was Richard Shaull, who, through his theological method, opened a dialogue with the social sciences in order to interpret the reality in which he placed Christian action and mission. Through bibliographical research and document analysis, focusing on the reading of "The New Revolutionary Mood in Latin America", a report on Latin America presented by Shaull to the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Missionary Board, the article aims to show Shaull's theology, institutionally located, as one that thinks about public issues in dialogue with social sciences and considers its implications for and within Christian churches. In the light of studies on public theology, this paper presents Richard Shaull's writings as a theological approach to the church, considering its ecumenical stance; to society, considering its most pressing issues of the time; and to academia, through the interdisciplinary dialogue he undertakes with the social sciences.

Keywords: public theology; theology of revolution; Richard Shaull; Protestantism; Brazil

1. Introduction

The history of theology in Brazil can be told as the history of the struggles to which theologians—priests, pastors, and academics—were committed. They bore certainly specific ecclesiastical concerns but were also seriously concerned about issues from public life. Their histories still need to be fully discovered and reflected upon, especially from a decolonial perspective (see Panotto and Andrade 2023)¹. It is helpful to remember the histories of already famous bulwarks of the defence of the people living south of the equator in different periods, such as the Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas (see Gutiérrez 1995) in the colonial period and bishops Helder Câmara (see Cabral 2021) and Pedro Casaldàliga (see Zeferino et al. 2020) in more recent times, but it is also a task for public theology to read history through fresh lenses that can uncover the histories that once were made and kept invisible.

To try to trace, even in a panoramic way, all these relevant actors, known and unknown, would be an undertaking that would go beyond the space and the genre of an article. Aware of our limitations, we establish a delimitation that focuses attention on the history of

theology in Brazil in the twentieth century, and more specifically on the work and trajectory of an exponent of a theoretical turn that opens theology to dialogue with the social sciences and embraces a more worldly, concrete perspective on Christian faith, the Presbyterian missionary Millard Richard Shaull (1919–2002). The article argues that he responded to the challenges of his time by producing a contextual theology in dialogue with the world and with different fields of knowledge, marking the beginning of a new theological trend that was not confined within the walls of the church, nor clinging to the historical disputes between Catholics and Protestants, but opening up the possibility of ecumenical dialogue even beyond Protestant initiatives, as well as engaging with studies on Brazilian and Latin American social and economic structures that enlightened this theological approach.

This paper situates Richard Shaull as a key figure in twentieth-century US and Latin American Protestantism in the history of public theology. Richard Shaull's propositional theology of revolution, which sought to formulate a responsible ecclesial response to the public issues of his time, namely the bold urge for revolution, makes him part of the history of other similar public theological initiatives. In addition, the image of a public theologian in dialogue with church, society, and academia, as portrayed by David Tracy (1981), also helps to understand the breadth of Shaull's work and life. This argument is developed on the basis of one private document, a report by Shaull to a missionary committee, but places it in the context of Shaull's other writings and in the light of the dynamic that the ecumenical movement was developing at the time, especially in the Brazilian context.

In order to engage with the development of this kind of theological work concerned with the issues of public life, the article presents a brief background on the history of Protestant theological formation in Brazil; the influence Shaull had on a generation of theologians and religious leaders through his writing, teaching, and ecumenical activism; and finally, it turns its attention to "The New Revolutionary Mood in Latin America," a report Shaull wrote to the Committee for Cooperation in Latin America, Department for Foreign Missions, of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. In this text it is possible to observe how public life drives Shaull's theological thinking, leading him to open dialogue with social sciences and economics, illustrating the social and ecumenical turn in Protestant theology in Brazil during the 1950s and 1960s.

2. Notes on Theological Education and Ecclesiastical Background in Brazil

Catholic congregations had been responsible for theological education since the 16th century. Protestant education only became a reality with the arrival of Protestant missionaries. The Lutherans, associated with what is now the Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession in Brazil, although they had been arriving in Brazil from as early as 1824, immigrating from German-speaking areas in Europe, did not begin their own theological pre-training in Brazil until 1921, and a proper Faculty of Theology was established only in 1946. Before that, theologians were trained in Germany. The Presbyterians, who started their presence in Brazil in 1859, founded the first Protestant theological seminary in Rio de Janeiro in 1867, which was moved to Campinas in 1907 to become the Southern Presbyterian Seminary, where Shaull taught for several years. The Methodist seminary was founded in Juiz de Fora in 1890, later moving to São Paulo and finally to São Bernardo do Campo in 1970. The Baptist seminaries of the North (Recife) and South (Rio de Janeiro) were founded in the first decade of the twentieth century. During the first half of the last century, other seminaries were created by different Protestant denominations (Villas Boas 2018, pp. 262–65).

This scenario gave a decisive impulse to an apologetic, largely anti-Protestant theological education among Catholics and an apologetic, largely anti-Catholic theological education among Protestants. The traditionally antagonistic relations between Catholics and Protestants began to change substantially only after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), when the Roman Catholic Church opened up to dialogue with the world and with other Christian confessions. At that time, an ecumenical perspective, already present in some Protestant circles, began to reverberate in Catholicism. In the Latin American context,

a continent of scandalous inequalities, theological thought began to advance through a growing contextual concern of both Protestants and Catholics, which would lead to a theological production concerned with the issue of poverty as a challenge to faith and theology. This sensitivity was already evident in the thought of M. Richard Shaull (1919–2002), an U.S.-American missionary, who reflected on the involvement of churches and theology in the transformation of society and in the engagement with the concrete life of people in their daily struggles. Shaull had already begun in the mid-1960s to reflect critically on the reality of his time in dialogue with the social sciences (cf. Huff Junior 2020, pp. 34–35). Rubem Alves (1933–2014), a student of Shaull's (Barreto 2021), in his doctoral thesis on "Towards A Theology of Liberation: An exploration of the encounter between the languages of Humanistic Messianism and Messianic Humanism" (Alves 1968; published as "A Theology of Human Hope", Alves 1971), welcomed the criticism of a political humanism of the Christian faith and considered the real problems of concrete human beings, drawing on the Christian tradition to find resources to promote human liberation (Alves 2020, p. 79). Around the same time, Gustavo Gutiérrez (1973) began to teach and write about what he would also call a theology of liberation. In the course of the 1970s and 1980s, such a contextual perspective, sensitive to the pains of the continent, was affirmed in the Latin American context.

The Seminary of Campinas occupies an important place in the history of theological education in Brazil. Invited to teach church history there, Shaull entered a well-known institution that had once been the home of an ecumenical enthusiast like Erasmo Braga (1877–1932) but had subsequently been run by fiercely orthodox (Neo-)Calvinists. When Shaull joined the seminary, it was remarkably conservative. Shaull's dissonance and appeal to students found a dire puritan and conservative soil in which his revolutionary thinking would nevertheless flourish and pollinate (see Santiago-Vendrell 2010). The Brazilian Presbyterian Church, at that time, was formed and led by very conservative leaders. Indeed, the seminary in Campinas was shaped by conservative faculty and students. Presbyterian theology was therefore deeply intertwined with conservative thinking and refused to develop any kind of relationship with liberal theological ideas (Pierson 1974, p. 202). It was, at the same time, in a politically and socially effervescent context that M. Richard Shaull arrived in Brazil and participated in the struggles of the youth and the ecumenical movements. Naturally, his theology clashed with that of the institutional Church, but it served well the aspirations of the youth, inspiring them to reflect theologically on contemporary issues and engaging thoroughly against social injustice and orthodox-fundamentalist theology, which Alves would call "Right-Doctrine Protestantism" (Alves 2007). Shaull's departure from Brazil came at a time when the youth movement within the Presbyterian Church was becoming disarticulated. Church leaders were unable to address the needs of the youth, hiding behind authoritarianism and strict orthodoxy (Pierson 1974, pp. 219–24).

Until the 1970s, theological studies were limited to the ecclesiastical sphere, especially with regard to the formation of clergy, whether Catholic or Protestant. In the Brazilian university, the predominance of positivism, averse to the possibility of treating religion as something that could be considered scientific, even created obstacles to the scientific study of religion (cf. Pieper 2018; von Sinner 2012, pp. 336–42). For a long time, theology in Brazil remained in a more private sphere. It fulfilled a function of academic support and formation for faith communities (Gross 2012, p. 13). It was liberation theology, with its new perspective on the Christian tradition, its revolutionary commitment, and its zeal for an interpretation of reality mediated by the social sciences, that would sediment an opening for theology in the academic sphere and win the sympathy of intellectuals with close concerns. An influx of theologians, well trained also in other fields of knowledge, into the universities took place during this period. This happened not least because of their dissatisfaction with religious institutions and the lack of space within them. It partly explains the academic resistance to theology in Brazil, especially when it was seen as dogmatic and ecclesiastical. This generation of intellectuals would be important for the

beginnings of religious studies departments in Brazilian universities (Gross 2012, pp. 13–16; Gmainer-Pranzl and Jacobsen 2015).

The history of theological studies in Brazil, as briefly outlined above, helps to understand the different moments of the emergence of Protestant seminaries in the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, a period that also marks a history of tensions between Catholics and Protestants. Although these tensions have not been completely overcome, dialogue and cooperation have taken root in many theological institutions, following the opening signalled by the Second Vatican Council, but also in the turn towards a more contextual theology. In this perspective, M. Richard Shaull emerges as a figure who anticipated many of these changes. His translation of his theology of the North to the needs of local congregations in Latin America found fertile ground and would, in time, even help him to criticise and overcome some of his own theological backgrounds.

3. Richard Shaull: Biographical and Theological Highlights²

In the way of becoming public, theology deals with social issues. This is well seen in Shaull's trajectory and theological work. In order to sketch contours of his thought and the type of theological endeavour he pursued, we present some aspects of Shaull's life and work, and later on, we shall concentrate on the dialogue he entailed with ecumenism, public issues, and social sciences.³

Shaull occupies a prominent place in the memory of Brazilian Protestants, especially those who have focused on the construction of theological perspectives concerned with the social dimension of the Christian faith. Born in Felton, Pennsylvania, on 24 November 1919, Millard Richard Shaull, the son of farmers of German descent, was introduced to the Presbyterian faith at an early age. His family, like many others at the time, suffered the effects of the economic crisis of 1929. In order to pursue higher education, he had to apply for a scholarship that allowed him to study humanities and sociology at Elizabethtown College, a religious institution with an Anabaptist and Pietist profile, where he spent almost all of his teenage years. In 1938, interested in becoming a pastor, he began his theological studies at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he was deeply influenced by Swiss theologian Emil Brunner (1889–1966), “who put the active and compassionate presence of God at the centre of human existence” (Barreto 2021, p. 7), John Mackay (1889–1983), a former missionary to Peru propagating a concretely active faith rather than just looking on, and the Czech theologian Josef Hromadka (1889–1969), who was in dialogue with Marxism. In this period of initial theological training, which ended in 1941, Shaull had access to the great theological discussions of the time, such as those arising from dialectical theology, the main exponent of which was Karl Barth (1886–1968) (see Zeferino and von Sinner 2022). Other relevant theologians during his formative years were Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), and Paul Tillich (1886–1965) (Huff Junior 2020; Shaull 2003; Barreto 2021).

After completing his undergraduate studies at Princeton, in 1941, Shaull worked as a pastor and soon began his career as a missionary. The period in Colombia (1942–1950), first in Barranquilla and then in Bogotá, was marked by missionary activity in poorer regions, concern for social issues, and work with young people. He and his wife Mildred lived in working-class neighbourhoods and were involved in educational initiatives, in contrast to the traditional approach of missionaries who either concentrated on schools with a more elite profile or on conversionist and individualist practises (Huff Junior 2020, pp. 45–98). Richard Shaull's missiology was characterised by the public presence of churches in the improvement of living conditions and the promotion of human rights. This was evident in his work with the working class in Colombia and Brazil, as well as in the literacy campaign he helped develop in Colombia, which aimed to give poor people the opportunity not only to learn to read and write, but also to become more self-confident (see Santiago-Vendrell 2010).

When Shaull left Colombia for a period of studies in the U.S., the time was not right to return there because of the conflict between Catholics and Protestants.⁴ So Shaull used his

sabbatical to study with Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he was one of a select group of fifteen missionaries assigned to study the impact of communism on the nations of the so-called Third World. Another professor he met at Union would become a great partner in his academic journey, Paul Lehmann (1906–1994), with whom he would develop studies focused on a more contextual theological ethics. Shaull would later return to Princeton, where Lehmann taught, to begin his doctoral studies with him, which he would not complete until 1959. Moved by the experience in Colombia, by the period of study at Union, and by the relationship with Lehmann, the theme of “revolution” already resonated as a concern of his in view of the challenge of thinking the Christian faith in relation to the contexts he faced (Huff Junior 2020, pp. 98–105; da Rosa 2020, pp. 106–8).

In 1952, already assigned to work as a missionary in Chile, he was first sent to Brazil to attend a course organised by the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF). It was there that Shaull’s involvement in the international ecumenical movement began. Inspired mainly by Bonhoeffer, Shaull made a significant impact on the young people at the event and was seen by them as someone with an innovative perspective on the church. He was then invited to work with the WSCF in Brazil and soon after received an invitation to join the faculty of the Southern Presbyterian Seminary (SPS) in Campinas, in the state of São Paulo. Shaull accepted both because of the opportunity to be involved in the training of religious leaders of the Presbyterian Church and because of the opportunity to reconcile his agenda for cooperation with the Christian Student Union of Brazil (Huff Junior 2020, pp. 107–21; da Rosa 2020, pp. 108–11).

The years in Brazil were intense and fruitful. He worked with Presbyterian and ecumenical youth, with the Brazilian Evangelical Confederation, participated in the World Council of Churches Assembly in Evanston in 1954, and participated in the creation of a sector of the Brazilian Evangelical Confederation focused on social responsibility, which was responsible for the organisation of four conferences, the most famous of which was held in Recife in 1962 under the title “Christ and the Brazilian Revolutionary Process” (see Matos and Vieira-Souza 2022; da Rosa and Adriano Filho 2012). He completed his Ph.D. at Princeton in 1959, taught church history at Campinas Seminary (1952–1959), even took on the position of vice-president of the Mackenzie Institute (today University) in São Paulo, and co-founded and served in Church and Society in Latin America (ISAL), among other activities (Faria 2002; Huff Junior 2020).

Shaull’s theological perspective was resisted to the point where he underwent a process culminating in his departure from Campinas in 1959. When he returned from a sabbatical to complete his doctorate at Princeton, he taught again for a time at Campinas but soon left the institution. The more dialogical initiatives in which Shaull was involved led to dissatisfaction on the part of the Brazilian Presbyterian Church, which eventually led to the dissolution of the Confederation of Presbyterian Youth. The conservative resurgence of the Presbyterian Church was similar to the repression the country would experience at the government level a few years later. Between 1963 and 1965, Shaull returned to Brazil at certain times but was soon banned from entering the country by the military regime. He began an exile that would last twenty years (Huff Junior 2020, pp. 188–200).

John Mackay then took Shaull to Princeton, where he taught ecumenics from 1962 to 1980. During this period, he also worked at ISAL and participated with interventions in important events of the international ecumenical movement. Of particular importance were his lecture at the Church and Society Conference of the World Council of Churches in 1966; the continuation of his work with youth and student movements; his engagement with issues from Latin American countries; and a series of publications that continued his reflections on Christianity and revolution (Huff Junior 2020, pp. 201–12, 27–44; see Faria 2002).

After retiring from Princeton in 1980, he continued his educational activities at various institutions in the United States and Latin America, including Brazil, where he worked with the Methodist University of São Paulo and other seminaries in 1993. Pentecostalism became a topic for Shaull in a study he conducted with the sociologist Waldo Csar (Shaull

and Cesar 2000). This encounter with the Pentecostal faith, according to Barreto (2003), marks a third conversion in Shaull's trajectory, in which the voice of the impoverished people who make up the Pentecostal movement should also be listened to with attention by the historic churches. He was also a pastor in Ardmore (USA) until his death on 25 October 2002 (Faria 2002; Huff Junior 2020).

Having presented this panoramic view of Shaull's life and work, it is worth noting that the struggles in which he participated were deeply connected to his theological work. The effervescence of the Latin American context since the 1940s, when Shaull worked as a missionary in Colombia, was crucial to his understanding of the need for theology to open up to social issues and the social sciences. However, this new way of thinking clashed with a more institutionalised theology, "Right-Doctrine Protestantism". Shaull's missiology, however, as Santiago-Vendrell (2010) shows, yearned for incarnation in the world, starting from the understanding that God is active in history and that Christians should therefore act accordingly. Rather than "Christian presence", a missiological category that emerged in the U.S. at the time to contemplate the rising secularisation and technological revolution, Shaull opted for "revolution", as the latter seemed too passive for what was needed in Latin America. This perspective can be seen in his observations of the revolutionary mood in Latin America in the early 1960s.

4. Theology in Conversation: Ecumenism, Public Issues, and the Dialogue with Social Sciences

In the history of the Latin American churches, the opening of theological reflection to dialogue with different fields of knowledge, apart from philosophy, is something that gained importance in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, with approaches that recognised the reality of the suffering of a large part of the Latin American population as a task to be thought of in the light of its social causes and implications. The mediation of the social sciences, as Clodovis Boff (2009) would systematise in his doctoral thesis defended in Louvain in 1976, became crucial for theology in its attempt to become more relevant in real contexts. "How are we to be Christians in a world of destitution?" is the initial provocation that Boff and Boff (1987, p. 7) launched in their famous "Introducing Liberation Theology", where they also assert the need for a "public and prophetic theology" (Boff and Boff 1987, pp. 85–87). The conclusions that have been the starting point for generations of Latin American theologians have been that it is not possible to think theologically about the world by not engaging with the concrete reality of the misery and suffering in which people live daily. The personal stories that open this chapter are heartbreaking. A woman who participates in the Lord's Supper without confessing first because she is too hungry, the mother who cannot feed her baby because she is so weak and in dire need of care and nourishment, the local church where people are too hungry to join and participate. So, it is not difficult to understand why hunger and poverty are vivid themes for this first generation of liberation theologians.

Years earlier, however, the call for human liberation and social transformation had already been addressed by theologians such as Richard Shaull and Rubem Alves. The U.S. missionary believed that it was important to approach the social sciences in order to better understand the world in relation to which one was trying to make theology. The period of the 1950s was well perceived in his "Encounter with Revolution" (Shaull 1955), where, before developing theological accounts, Shaull drew attention to the social context to which his homeland should pay more attention. The geopolitical context was particularly significant, as the Cold War tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and thus between capitalism and communism, directly influenced and challenged theology. Crisis, revolution, and communism are at the centre of Shaull's attention throughout the first part of his book. Only after this contextualisation does he go on to present a specific Christian perspective on revolution. In later writings, Shaull opens a dialogue with the Brazilian context and scholars from politics, sociology, and economics (Huff Junior 2020, pp. 155–56).

In order to better understand Shaull's public theological commitment and method, attention is now given to a text in which social aspects play a central role. Published in 1962, it is the result of a paper presented by Shaull, then Professor of Ecumenics at Princeton, to the Study Conference of the Committee on Cooperation in Latin America. "The New Revolutionary Mood in Latin America" dealt with sensitive issues such as social injustice, Marxism, and the role of Christian churches in the task of revolution.⁵

The "revolutionary mood" to which Richard Shaull drew attention was spreading across the continent and highlighted the differences between older and younger generations, between left and right political positions, and between Latin American and US interests.⁶ Since the audience for his presentation was the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, and more specifically the Latin America Cooperation Committee of the Foreign Missions Division, it is important to bear in mind that his reading of the Latin American context is informed by a strong commitment to an active, transformative Christian faith. The aim was to offer subsidies to the US churches in their understanding and action in relation to the ecumenical movement and, especially, their understanding of mission (Santiago-Vendrell 2010). Shaull (1962, p. 1), at that moment, understood that there was hope for the future; however, history was to dash these expectations with the military coups in countries such as Brazil (1964), Argentina (1966), and Chile (1973). Shaull himself was prevented from returning to Brazil for some twenty years.

The text's structure, after an introductory paragraph, follows eleven topics: 1. "Peasants and Industrial Workers Worse Off Than Before"; 2. "New Nationalism Demands Change in U.S. Relationship"; 3. "Christian Involvement in Revolution"; 4. "Little Hope of Painless Transition"; 5. "The Role of Marxism"; 6. "Marxist Ideals Likely to be Important"; 7. "The First Error"; 8. "The Second Error"; 9. "The Dilemmas of the Latin American Christian Community"; 10. "Dilemmas of the Mission Boards"; 11. "U.S. Policy in Latin America".

On the reality of peasants and industrial workers, Shaull (1962) points to the great inequalities and injustices they faced, with gradual change becoming something difficult to wait for, sparking interest in revolution. Two factors contributed to this: the realisation that economic growth did not mean a less unequal or unjust society and a growing sense of nationalism in an anti-colonial perspective. The discrepancy between economic growth and improved living conditions sounds strange to an American, especially after the New Deal, who would expect the countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America to become more prosperous with rapid economic development. Because of Brazil's economic organisation, economic growth was not felt by the masses, as political and economic power was concentrated in a few families (see Schwarcz and Starling 2018). Shaull quotes Celso Furtado, a Brazilian economist who acted as Minister of Development and was one of the speakers at the Northeast Conference promoted by the Brazilian Church and Society Department associated with the Brazilian Evangelical Confederation (see Furtado 1962), to inform his audience that peasants and industrial workers could be considered in a worse position than before, compared to other social classes. In addition, industrial development in Brazil brought a significant number of people to the cities, where they often lived in precarious conditions but also longed for greater participation in public life. Both peasants and industrial workers became aware of the injustice that was being imposed on them and of the need to do something to change this reality. Making society better for the people would also mean changing the social structures towards more just policies on land, taxation, housing, and education, for example. According to Shaull (1962, pp. 1–3), the little hope of changing the reality under the ruling classes greatly increased the revolutionary mood.

Nationalism, despite its risks—and Shaull mentions them—was seen in this context as a creative force capable of uniting people around common causes, as there was a growing sense of national self-consciousness. This nationalism was also perceived in its anti-colonial perspective against North American and European domination and exploitation. This awareness was translated into action and participation in social groups such as peasant leagues. Young people, even from the more privileged classes, could no longer ignore

social injustice and suffering. Some became fiercely committed to revolution. The focus of Shaull's argument here is the spread of a revolutionary hope that sparked concrete initiatives and demanded a new approach from the US in its relations with these countries (Shaull 1962, pp. 3–7).

Regarding the involvement of Christians in the process of revolution, according to Shaull, both Catholics and Protestants were not intensively committed to the issues of public life; however, that started to change as they became more closely exposed to people's concerns and struggles. It became visible, for instance, in the Catholic Action from the Catholic side and in the preoccupation of Protestants, Pentecostals included, laypeople, pastors, workers, and, especially, young people, with public issues. Shaull quotes Brazilian students who, struck by the reality of the vulnerability of their people, issued a statement in 1962 in which they understood that their role was either to participate in the revolutionary struggle or to support this state of oppression, and that as Christians they should choose the former. Shaull understands that this position makes clear an understanding that siding with the gospel meant siding with the struggle for revolution and entering into dialogue with Marxists. However, Shaull notes that there were people who did not want to be part of the Marxist endeavour and were unaware of any other alternative, and that Christians were then challenged to meet these expectations (Shaull 1962, pp. 7–9).

Although Shaull was hopeful about the transformation of the social environment in Latin America at the time, he pointed out that the transition was unlikely to be painless because of the resistance of old structures and the inability of governments to respond adequately to the challenges of the time. In addition, ideologies and political parties imported from Europe and North America were unable to provide adequate solutions to local problems. Shaull also noted an anti-U.S. American sentiment and that the transitions he believed would soon happen would require new definitions of the relationship between the US and Latin America (Shaull 1962, pp. 9–11).

In writing his text, Shaull was confident of the revolutionary mood in Latin America to transform the realities of injustice and inequality. According to him, Marxism had a significant appeal because of its ability to interpret the structural situations in Latin America, to explain why injustice and suffering existed as they did. As a philosophy, it offered hope and means for a possible solution, which also acted as a critique of US positions (Shaull 1962, pp. 11–13). According to Shaull

We North Americans talk of freedom where that word connotes the freedom of a privileged few to exploit the masses; we speak of democracy where democracy suggests the continuation of the intolerable status quo. We urge reforms but with apparently little recognition of how they can come about (Shaull 1962, p. 12).

On the other hand, Marxism, in its utopian dimension, pointed to a possible hope for the future that also appealed to the younger generations on spiritual and emotional grounds. However, Shaull understands that there were non-Marxist forces in the revolutionary process who were confronted with the whole Latin American scenario and were then forced to rethink their own responsibilities within it. In particular, Shaull reflects on the responses of the Christian faith to a context of inequality, and that, stemming from the critique of Marxism, it should be able to propose an alternative (Shaull 1962, pp. 14–15).

According to Shaull (1962, pp. 15–17), the attempt to understand the Latin American economic-political field as divided between conservative landowners and industrialists, a subservient communist left, and a democratic centre, with the latter being the one Christians should side with, was not a faithful representation of the context. Misreading social reality would lead to irresponsible action. Two errors should be considered: 1. given Latin American reality and needs, the political centre would not be able to deal with the uprising social situations as one would expect based on North American history; 2. the understanding that the left could be subsumed into international communism: The Left "[...] is now a spontaneous and dynamic movement of workers, peasants, students and others who have been caught in the struggle for national development and for greater justice in Latin American society" (Shaull 1962, p. 16). To define them generically as

communists would be a misrepresentation. Christians, however, were confronted with this reality, and Shaull tries to imagine the practical consequences of this social interpretation for Christian communities and mission boards. The weakness of the centre and a radical polarisation between left and right, according to Shaull (1963, p. 46), could leave space for military dictatorships to emerge to maintain the *status quo* and to implement their own reforms.

For Christians who wanted to take part in the revolutionary struggle, this context was full of tensions because churches were not used to equipping believers with the resources necessary to fight these battles. Shaull detected a need for orientation that institutional churches lacked. It was the organised Christian students' movement and the Latin American Commission of Church and Society that took part in these efforts of action and study. Older generations of religious leaders who did not know how to deal with the urge for change had lost their authority among younger generations and were then compelled to react and, as Shaull puts it, ended up fighting the wrong battles (Shaull 1962, pp. 17–18).

After all this social explanation and reflection, and considering the place of Christians in it, Shaull turns directly to the missionary committee for which he had provided the report and challenges them with the following provocation:

As this is a meeting of mission board executives, I cannot resist the temptation to say that the dilemmas which you face in the light of these developments are even more acute. You dare not ignore the growing nationalism with the intense anti-American feeling which accompanies it. If you are interested in the American church finding the way to make any contribution in this crisis, then you must seriously concern yourselves with the question of how a progressive policy of disengagement can be carried out. By this I mean that the sooner mission organisations, programmes and institutions disappear, the better (Shaull 1962, pp. 18–19).

Shaull's understanding was that the missionary presence in Latin America should be that of people willing to sympathetically join the revolutionary struggle of the local churches. This would require a disposition to understand and creatively engage with the revolution, something that most missionaries would not even be able to relate to, given their standards of Christian faith (Shaull 1962, pp. 19–20). According to Shaull, this new type of missionary should be given

[...] the freedom simply to share the life and concerns of the people and the church to which they go, and in this relationship discover how their efforts can be used in a meaningful way. Through the work of the Holy Spirit they may discover how their participation may be of service at this time; they will almost certainly learn much more than they contribute (Shaull 1962, p. 20).

After this report, Shaull makes some remarks on U.S. policy in Latin America, where he comments on public political relations. He lets his fellow countrymen know that not a few people in Latin America viewed Cold War issues from a different perspective than the United States, feeling more threatened by the North Americans than by other countries (Shaull 1962, p. 20). Among the elements that US policy should take into account in this context, Shaull mentions understanding the role of the US in the growing anti-American sentiment: "If our relationships with Latin America are to be strengthened in the future, we must be much more sensitive to their feelings and much more careful in our use of our political and economic power" (Shaull 1962, p. 21); recognising the need for social change in Latin America and working towards it; and the urge to make a distinction between the threat of international communism and Marxism as an appealing ideology of revolution.

5. Theology Goes Public: A Synthesis of Shaull's Thinking Under the Light of Public Theology

Once presented with the content of Richard Shaull's report for the aforementioned missionary committee, we now attempt to systematise it in the light of its historical and

ecclesiastical background, which helps us to understand Shaull's theology as innovative in terms of interdisciplinary dialogue, ecumenical engagement with society, and theological openness.

The argumentation developed by Shaull is inscribed in a Christian discursive regime and, as such, shares a common basis with the theologies he criticises. This becomes clear in his more diaconal, locally based take on mission, which marks a rupture with the European/North American-orientated paradigm of mission, preoccupied with proselytism. For him, the aim is not to plant American-shaped churches in Latin America but to become part of local churches and of assistance in their own struggles. In a reality of injustice, inequality, and social sufferings, this would mean taking part in the transformation of such realities. To be able to address such challenges properly, Shaull is aware of the need for dialogue with economics and social sciences⁷. In another paper, Shaull states that

To reflect on history and on the human person is to reflect on a concrete and dynamic reality, which must be studied and known through the tools appropriate to this task, especially the social and historical sciences. The authentic context for theological reflection is therefore dialogue. It is through this medium that specialists in the knowledge of different aspects of reality seek to correlate their knowledge in the search for meaning and direction. The theologian is convinced that dialogue offers the best conditions for achieving this goal. What he brings to the dialogue is, in particular, an understanding of those issues which are present in the Bible and in the thought of those who, at different times, have sought to relate the biblical perspective to the historical situation in which they lived (Shaull [1965] 1985, pp. 101–2).

In dialogue with social sciences, Shaull presents a Latin American setting of injustice, inequality, and suffering, vividly felt by peasants and industrial workers who were aware of their condition and yearned for change and were spiritually moved by a strong national consciousness. Faced with this reality, young Christians understood that they had to side with the urge for revolutionary change. Because of the rigidity of Latin American social structures and the unwillingness of the ruling classes to change them, there was little hope of social transformation without pain. Marxism played two important roles: the ability to interpret social reality and its tensions and the utopian commitment that provided a philosophy of hope and change. Marxism should not be reduced to communism, and the emerging left should be considered in its legitimate claims for social transformation, including workers and students, Shaull argued. Christian faith and mission boards should take the revolutionary mood seriously and understand the need to equip young Christians to participate in the revolution creatively and on a Christian basis. But not in old-fashioned responses, but vibrantly embracing an innovative way of being Christian in the face of revolution. American churches and governments should understand the need for social transformation in Latin America.

Methodologically, Shaull's argument starts from an understanding of the social and ideological elements that shaped the Latin American context, a result of the two decades he spent as a missionary in Colombia and Brazil. In doing so, he not only relied on his own experience but also engaged in an interdisciplinary dialogue with social, historical, and economic experts. Only after explaining what he saw as the main themes of the Latin American situation—the challenges of the local churches, the struggles of the working classes, and the significant role of the student's movement in the revolution—does he reflect on the practical implications for Christian churches and mission boards. He does so by reaffirming the need for social transformation, emphasising the importance of local culture and struggles, and criticising the hegemonic North American approach to Latin America.

Shaull's agency must be read in the light of his ecclesial context, in which he worked as one of the leading protagonists of ecumenism in Brazil. Shaull questions ecclesiastical structures by pushing the borders and influencing students and pastors into a more responsible stance towards public issues. The ecumenical movement embraced social responsibility

in the 1950s as an impulse from the World Council of Churches, which reverberated in Brazil, especially considering the social reality of the country (see Zeferino 2024). The Department of Church and Society of the Brazilian Evangelical Confederation was a response to the Evanston Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1954. Thus, in 1955, with Benjamim Moraes and Waldo Cesar as its president and vice-president, respectively, the department had the task of promoting Christian witness in three areas: 1. preparing evangelicals for political participation and action; 2. understanding how to relate with Communism and with the Roman Catholic Church; and 3. generating Protestant social action among industrial and rural workers. The activities of the department represented a broadening of Brazilian Protestant ethics at that time (Pierson 1974, pp. 224–25).

Shaull is influenced by this turn and influences the local churches, but not without conflict. Consolidated power structures resisted and managed to disarticulate youth and ecumenical efforts within the Brazilian Presbyterian Church. Before that, however, the most important event in Brazilian Protestant ecumenism took place in the city of Recife in July 1962. The Conference of the Northeast launched a discussion of the same concerns outlined by Shaull in his text. Church leaders and scholars from social and economic sciences were invited to speak. The outcome was a strong material that reflected about Brazilian society in the beginning of the 1960s and set out a number of courses of action in relation to economic and cultural borders, highlighting the interaction with industrial and peasant workers, the youth, and the arts (see Cesar 1962).

6. Concluding Remarks

The relationship between theology and public life is alive in Richard Shaull's writings and life testimony. As a missionary in Colombia and Brazil, he did not conform to mainstream missionary standards but considered the lives of people on the margins of faith, education, dignity, and prosperity. In "The New Revolutionary Mood in Latin America", three aspects that in later decades would be central to the contextual theologies produced in the Global South are already present and play a significant role in his argumentative logic: the need to interpret the context in social and economic terms, the exigence for interdisciplinary dialogue, and the openness to ecumenical dialogue. As a matter of fact, these fronts are adherent to the publics of theology as described by David Tracy. In this sense, Richard Shaull could be understood as a public theologian who embraced dialogue as a central aspect of his life and work. As a professor, Shaull had an important impact in the academy, but he did not restrict his readings to the field of theology, becoming one of the first theologians to engage with social sciences in the Brazilian context, as we demonstrated. As a missionary, he wrought on the frontiers, opening ecumenical dialogue, getting involved in youth movements, and engaging in social responsibility. Social issues became central to all his concerns, which led him to be active in the public sphere, with particular attention to rural and urban workers.

From Shaull, one could learn that public issues move theological thinking but acknowledging that this does not happen isolated from the approaches that other fields of knowledge may have to them. Dialogue with other sciences and with other faiths is imperative. Even before the Second Vatican Council and liberation theologies, Richard Shaull echoed the call for openness to dialogue and for service to others. As a result, we can affirm that in Brazil, Protestant theology goes public with the influence of an American missionary that learnt how to participate in the struggles of local communities. This sense of concreteness, which is also present in some of Shaull's theological influences, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth, calls for a theological approach that embraces public issues not as fringe concerns but as central questions that put theological thinking in motion. In Shaull's context, this commitment would create tensions with ecclesiastical power but would also inspire generations of young theologians and church leaders.

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Notes

- ¹ Up to this moment of the research we do not understand Shaull’s heritage as decolonial; however, his struggle as an American that allowed himself to be self-critical and to criticise some of the U.S. policies regarding Latin America is worth of attention, considering that he developed this perspective already around the 1950s. His history, as this article aims to show, is worth telling from the perspective of a public theology.
- ² A version in Portuguese of this topic was published in “O estudo crítico da história do protestantismo nas Ciências da Religião: reflexões a partir da trajetória de Richard Shaull no Brasil” (Zeferino 2024).
- ³ Shaull’s social relevance to theology and his theological work have been focus of attention of a variety of authors in different countries. Some of the most relevant are the works of Santiago-Vendrell (2010), emphasising Shaull’s misology; Barreto’s PhD dissertation (2006), published in Portuguese (Barreto 2019) and in English (Barreto 2023) with an emphasis on protestant responses to poverty in the Brazilian context, also his articles (Barreto 2003, 2021); Grenholm’s work on Christian social ethics (Grenholm 1973); Huff Junior’s work, in a historical perspective, that drew attention to Shaull’s theology of revolution (Huff Junior 2020).
- ⁴ For more details on the period of Shaull in Colombia see Santiago-Vendrell (2010).
- ⁵ An edited, shorter, version, was published by Shaull (1963) in the Christian progressive magazine, especially during the 1950s and 1960s, “Christianity and Crisis” (see Hulsether 2001). Ideas are synthesized and reorganised, but it does not add much to what is already present in the text we take as primary source.
- ⁶ The context of revolutions that took place in Latin America was addressed by Shaull in the two versions of his text on the revolutionary mood he detected in Latin America: “Latin America has produced an unusual number of great revolutionaries. The first social revolution of modern times occurred not in Russia but in Mexico in 1910 and since that time revolutionary movements have appeared frequently on the southern continent. But now something new is happening” (Shaull 1962, p. 1); a revised version reads “Latin America has produced an unusual number of great revolutionaries—from Simon Bolivar to Haya de la Torre and Fidel Castro. The first social revolution of modern times occurred not in Russia but in Mexico in 1910, and since that time revolutionary movements have appeared frequently on the southern continent. But now something new is happening” (Shaull 1963, p. 44). In his reflection, Shaull gives attention to social and political context, so the Cuban revolution, for instance, impacted significantly the revolutionary mood he describes; however, his emphasis is in social movements as the ones headed by peasant and industrial workers, and the youth.
- ⁷ In “The New Revolutionary Mood in Latin America”, Shaull engages, for instance, with the works of Celso Furtado, Egbert de Vries, Adolf Berle, among other references with more social and economic concerns that are not explicitly indicated.

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Article

The Importance of the Nicene Creed for Christian Identity: A Theological–Pastoral Reading from the Philosophy of Austin and Lakatos

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Abstract: The act of believing implies an inner assent, but it is neither limited to a blind acceptance of certain arguments nor to an empty repetition, without practical consequences, of a set of concepts that one claims to defend. This article, allied with the philosophy of language (Austin) and the philosophy of science (Lakatos) will aim, on the one hand, to present a philosophical–theological reading of believing and, on the other hand, an understanding of the implications of the assent of faith regarding the Nicene Creed for Christian identity. The research briefly presented here will refer to the firm core of Christianity, as well as the arguments that aid its defence and understanding vis-à-vis believers and non-believers.

Keywords: Nicea; creed; Imre Lakatos; philosophy of science; hard core; protective belt; John L. Austin; philosophy of language

1. Introduction

Talking about the Council of Nicaea today can lead us into a sea of questions about history and about how Christianity became the faith of the Empire. From this perspective, we would face inevitable problems about Constantine's conversion and whether it can be considered a conversion or simply a political strategy. Alongside this, there is also a tangle of misunderstandings and ambiguities that have given rise to more or less violent forms of proselytising discourse and action. While it is true that to think of Nicaea in the fourth century is to open the door to discussing details that have become the subject of discussion and attack, especially with regard to the motivation, interest and acceptance of the Christian religion by the imperial system, it is also true that thinking about the Council of 325 cannot be reduced to these questions. In fact, it is urgent to understand the Council in terms of its specific message, not as an isolated milestone in history, the fruit of the Emperor's individual will, but as an event that followed multiple theological discussions and controversies about the norms that should govern the behaviour of the laity and clergy.

It should be noted that the Council of Nicaea followed the Edict of Milan (313), which already established tolerance towards the Christian faith. This edict meant that Christians were no longer persecuted for their faith, but could worship freely, like all other citizens of the Roman Empire. This law allowed the faith to spread and, combined with the freedom that now existed, the faith became the subject of interpretation and dispute even among those who professed the Christian faith. The Council was called by Constantine precisely to try to put an end to the internal divisions among Christians, seeking to establish a certain hierarchical order within the spheres of the Church and, at the same time, to recover the essence of the Christian faith (cf. Cacanaska and Maja 2014). While it is true that Constantine was also concerned with the effective relationship between Church and State and with the place that the Church and its clergy would occupy in social terms, especially with regard to tax exemptions and practical legal prescriptions, he also sought to create stability for an Empire which, in addition to suffering from a certain political instability,

was still suffering from the aftermath of periods of real massacres and persecutions against Christians (cf. Della Torre 2011, p. 61).

Despite the countless controversies and perspectives on the politicoreligious and social context surrounding the Council, for the purpose of this article it is important to understand, above all, some aspects that seem very similar to what we are experiencing today. As in the third century, Christians are not—objectively and numerically speaking—a minority group, and expressions of the Christian faith can be found in most countries and, above all, in most regions of the Western world. In some ways, as in Constantine's time, Christians have assumed positions of power, and, although there are places where persecution of the Christian faith is felt violently, the West enjoys a degree of tolerance, if not objective then camouflaged by society. The motivations that led to the convening of the Council also seem topical, given the plurality of religions and, in particular, given the great diversity of Churches of Christian confession.

In this sense, this article will try to find connections between the reality of the fourth century and the reality of today. In a certain way, the proposed reading of Nicaea, rather than analysing each of the canons established therein, will be a pastoral and social call to learning: a historical apprenticeship, but one that must be understood, above all, as a theological, doctrinal and religious teaching. Starting from the lived experience of the Christians of the first centuries, it will draw on both the contents of the professed faith and areas of knowledge, particularly philosophy, which will elucidate it and make it intelligible for our time. This is not a philosophical–theological treaty on the Council of Nicaea, but a proposal to recover the meaning and the consequent theological–pastoral and ecumenical possibilities presented by the experiences lived before, during and after the Council convened by Constantine.

To achieve this goal, it is necessary to go beyond historical disputes and recover the meaning of basic concepts that have lost importance over time in the socioreligious sphere. To do so, I will start with a philosophical–theological analysis of the notion of believing and the concrete and objective implications that underlie the act of believing. Thus, this reflection aims to bring together the very meaning of the concept and the way in which the creed appears as inescapable for a Christian to be considered as such. To this end, we will turn not only to Sacred Scripture and theological and magisterial writings, but also to the philosophies of Austin and Lakatos in search for a philosophical foundation capable of generating theology around the Nicene Creed. Through an understanding of belief based on the philosophy of language and the philosophy of science, a reflection on the place and centrality of Nicaea for Christian identity will be proposed.

To follow this path towards a more objective understanding of the truths of faith expressed in the Christian Creed and their implications for the life of believers, we will start from the very concept of believing. Here, using philosophy, we will understand the dynamism implicit in the act of believing and, consequently, from a theological reading of these arguments, we will recover the reasons that led to the formulation of the Nicene Creed (325) and its relevance for believers and non-believers of the time. Once this reading of the faith professed by Christianity has been carried out, reflection on a theological and pastoral understanding of believing in the face of today's reality will be opened up.

The conclusions will echo the philosophical–theological arguments presented on the act of believing and its concrete implications for contemporary Christianity. Furthermore, with a view to a contemporary understanding of what was advocated at the Council of Nicea, avenues will be opened for further development of the topic at the level of theological praxis, in particular, in the field of missionary and ecumenical pastoral care.

2. The Sense of Believing

One of the fundamental points that come to mind when thinking of Nicea is the creed, the systematisation of faith, what was established as necessary for someone to be defined as a Christian. While this was a very objective question in the context of the council, it certainly requires deeper reflection today, starting from the very meaning of believing. Belief has

been characterised by a dichotomy: sometimes as something to be devalued, given its subjective and/or imaginary character, and sometimes as the principle of all knowledge, religious or otherwise. It is important to note that, in a very progressive principle, Nicea rejects the radical separation between believers and non-believers. There is a full awareness “that we are all on board, each conditioned by his or her belief. It is not that the religious is a believer and the irreligious is a non-believer, but that they believe in different things” (Corominas 2023, p. 27).

Far from abstractionism, what we have to remember is that belief, rather than being the result of something (life experiences and/or scientific research), is the starting point of something. In a way, belief is not the result of an elaborate process of seeking knowledge; rather, it is the reason for living and thinking in a certain way. Adherence to certain ideas predisposes us to a specific way of life and a specific way of developing and progressing in (scientific or religious) knowledge (cf. Corominas 2023, p. 28). The inherent depth of the act of believing derives from its intimate relationship with life. This is expressed from the very etymological root of the concept, since “*to believe* derives from the Latin *credere*—composed of a double Indo-European root, *kerd*, from which come heart, cordiality, courage -, and *dheh* (to put, to give, to surrender, to leave). *Believe* alludes fundamentally to that for which we give our heart, that is, to the centre or ultimate core of our being”.¹

From this point of view, the act of believing presupposes some fundamental premises that must be taken into account in order to better understand the impact of the Nicene Creed for its time and for our own day. The first premise is that the act of believing is not a point of arrival and therefore cannot be confused with the end of a rational or empirical process. On the contrary, although rooted in lived experience and logical–rational knowledge, belief points to action, to the direct consequences inherent in the act of believing. This internal dynamism inherent in the act of believing leads to a second premise. This is the realisation that belief is not reduced to a response or analysis of the past, but a way of understanding the present and looking to the future. This does not mean an understanding of belief detached from the past. Rather, it points to the dynamic nature of the act of believing. A dynamism that is intrinsic to it and that, for that very reason, allows for the evolution of belief and the consequent reconfiguration of the arguments that support it.

In a way, the third premise to be taken into account as a presupposition of the act of believing is a point of union or articulation between these two premises. The philosopher John Austin offers us a systematic way of understanding this by speaking of the profession of faith—saying “I believe”—as something more than a concept. For Austin, saying “I believe” is not a verbal act, but an action; for it is *not something I say*, but *something I do* (cf. Austin 1961, pp. 221–22). In this case, to affirm that one believes implies, in itself, the action of believing, the concrete act proper/inherent to believing. If this were not so, we would only be dealing with the utterance of words, the affirmation of something completely extrinsic to the essence of the self. To do so would be to misrepresent the concept itself, since its etymology would not express the *word in act* (the word as action), but only the *act of speaking* (the word as a verbalisation of concepts).

To better understand Austin’s proposal, which in my view is the third premise for *Believing*, it will be important to think about and distinguish the profession of faith—“I believe”—from the affirmation of believing—expressed, for example, in the statement “you believe” or “he believes”. In the first case, saying “I believe” is already “believing”/the “act of believing”. In the second case, it is the simple (conceptual and non-action) assertion that another believes (that another performs the action of believing) (cf. Austin 1961, p. 226). This philosophical reflection helps us to enter into the problem of believing and to think of the *creed* beyond a formulation capable of expressing the Christian faith. Consequently, Nicea can affirm itself as more than a doctrinal systematisation and lead to a renewed perspective, both on how the Church of the first centuries thought and lived belief and on how today we can discern and shape a way of life, starting from the act of believing in the light of the signs of the times.

Believing does not derive from an illusory desire that exists to fill gaps in knowledge and that may be dispensable once we know something that was previously incomprehensible. On the contrary, as the creed of faith shows us, believing “is not temporary, but constant, quite variable or flexible, and also a fragile and problematic process, requiring care, attention and even a certain ethic” (Oviedo Torró 2023). It is in this dynamism inherent in the act of believing, where culture, knowledge and ethical–religious values come together, that the identity of the believer is forged, making it possible for believing to be an action and for the believer to understand and live his faith as an identity, not as an external and dispensable value. In this sense, the act of believing is first and foremost an act of being and therefore, has a concrete expression both on the level of personal life and in the forms of community life.

Once the act of believing is understood, it is important to reflect on the “what” or “who” is the object of belief. By separating and distinguishing the essential from the “accessory” in the act of believing, one will better understand what can and cannot be changed and what is or is not required for a believer to remain attached to a certain group of believers, even if he or she lives or understands differently the arguments that support his or her belief. It should be noted that belief in essence, as a rule, inherently carries with it a belief in the arguments surrounding it. However, in order to bring more clarity to the reflection, and specifically to the Nicene Creed, I think it may be pertinent to think about the act of believing using the pillars of the methodology of scientific research programmes proposed by Imre Lakatos.

For Lakatos, all scientific research is based on pillars that underpin the entire research programme. This is a structured set of theories and methodological rules that guide the research and are developed throughout the study. At the centre of this structure is the hard core of the hypotheses or theories. It is a universal statement, or a set of universal statements, which cannot be renounced. To do so would be to abandon scientific research and any link to the hypothesis/theory it is intended to prove and defend. For example, when Newton presented the laws of motion and the principle of gravitation, both ways of protecting the theory from attack and ways of developing this “hard core” without compromising its essence were simultaneously developed (cf. Lakatos 1989, pp. 47–89).

Thus, while Lakatos speaks of the hard core of an investigation as the set of fundamental theses, the negation of which implies an automatic departure from the thesis, he also defends the creation and subsequent existence of a negative heuristic and a positive heuristic. Negative heuristics imply anything that explicitly or implicitly forbids questioning the hard core. Positive heuristics involve making explicit, extending and concretising the truths contained in the hard core. These forms of heuristics are combined with what the philosopher calls the “protective belt”, i.e., the set of hypotheses and theories created to protect the hard core from external attacks on the research. These are auxiliary hypotheses that make it possible not only to safeguard the truths of the hard core, but also to arrive at a more fundamental understanding of its essence.

If we apply the pillars of the methodology of Lakatos’ scientific research programmes to the truths of faith proper to Christian belief, we will be in a better position to understand and clarify what Nicaea contributed anew to the development and enlargement of the hard core of professed faith. At the same time, Lakatos’ proposal will also enable us to reach into the Nicene protective belt, safeguarding and discerning what may or may not be the essence of the faith, that is what appears in the creed as an inescapable identity for every Christian and the supporting arguments that may be susceptible to change and/or pastoral development.

3. The Nicene Creed

The Council of Nicaea is an inescapable historical and religious landmark, both for understanding the fundamental truths of Christianity and for realising how society, culture and politics can influence the way we profess our faith. If the Roman Empire had been determining ways of living the faith, often marked by martyrdom and torture, with

Constantine, we see another point of reflection. It was no longer just a matter of trying to live the faith professed to the end; it was a matter of finding a theological–doctrinal formulation that would be the criterion for adherence to Christianity. It could almost be said that, rather than the need to find a universal formula to express Christian belief, it was necessary to respond to the currents outside the faith, namely the arguments linked to the Arian controversy² and to make Constantine the hero of the faith, without whom it would not have expanded as it did (cf. Corbin 2009, p. 50).

It is true that it was Constantine who convened the Council, but he did so abruptly and unilaterally. It was because of the close relationship between the Emperor and the bishops that the latter wanted Constantine “to interfere in some way in their internal affairs and if, at first, they tried to resolve the conflicts between them consensually, the resistance they encountered soon led them to take severe measures against the dissidents: Donatists and, later, Arians” (Corbin 2009, p. 59). The Nicene Creed arose primarily as a response to heretical attacks. However, there were practical disputes, especially concerning the fixing of dates for the celebration of Easter, the punishments for those who did not respect the rules of worship and the determination of the rules governing the action and articulation of functions among the members of the episcopate. In this sense, in addition to the desire for a formulation that synthesised the faith, it was hoped that the meeting called by the Emperor would put an end to the quarrels between the bishops and inaugurate an era of concord within the Church (cf. Rubenstein 1999, p. 98).

It is necessary to weigh these two aspects in order to better understand that the desire for unity in the Church arises and develops alongside the foundation of the core of the creed. Thus, an approach to the creed proclaimed at Nicaea involves first of all taking into account the most fundamental principles underlying it and then understanding the formulation of the faith from the specific context surrounding the Council of 325. Here there are countless examples of clear narratives and expressions of faith. Take the examples of the Gospels, which sometimes begin with messianic narratives (Mk 1:1; Lk 1:35) and sometimes integrate narratives that echo and express the words of Peter when he pronounces his first creed: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16). All Christian faith seems to derive from this formula, however it is presented, whether through professions of faith like Peter’s, or through concrete actions that manifest the “act of Believing” as “Believing in act” (see, for example, Mary’s yes to the Angel’s announcement, Joseph’s yes, the yes of each of the apostles at the most diverse moments of Jesus’ life, the yes of the women who followed Him, etc.).

However, I believe that it is in the book of the Acts of the Apostles that we find the clearest expressions of faith that say the most about Christianity in the first centuries and, consequently, about Christianity today. I say this because these professions of faith appear in the mouths of non-believers and non-Jews, giving a unique meaning and timeliness to the formulas with which Christianity, in Nicea and in contemporary times, is confronted when it thinks of the creed as a consensual and lived expression of faith. In some ways, like the Gospels, the Book of Acts is full of simple expressions of faith, linked to baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit. They are no longer the fruit of living directly with the person of Jesus Christ, but of a relational experience that goes beyond the biological and empirical dimension.

Examples of profession of faith are also abundant in the Book of Acts, and, in my opinion, in a way, it could be said that these simple formulations of profession of faith could constitute its hard core, as they appear as “necessary and sufficient” for the action of the Holy Spirit and the acknowledged incorporation into the believing community. Despite the innumerable situations in which they are narrated, perhaps the one that raises the most questions, both for the Nicene context and for today, is the example of Philip’s dialogue with the Ethiopian eunuch. After Philip has explained and announced the Good News of Jesus Christ, Philip responds to the Ethiopian eunuch’s desire to be baptised—to enter the believing community—by appealing to his faith in what had been announced to him.

The eunuch responds by formulating the essential and indispensable creed for baptism: “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (Acts 8:37).

This is one of the most striking and simple examples that make the expression and profession of faith inescapable, and it is curious that the clarity of the Christian faith appears in Scripture formulated through the mouth of a non-believer, a pagan who, not being a Jew, seeks understanding and the foundations of the Christian faith. At the same time, it is equally significant that this figure picks up on another problematic issue addressed by the Council of Nicea: the questioning of castration and the place of eunuchs, which was precisely the first of the Council’s Canons. The profession of faith “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (Acts 8:37) thus reveals the breadth of Christianity, underlining both the openness to universality, allowing pagans to enter into this dynamism of faith and salvation and the possibility of integrating and/or linking to this hard core of faith, a clear response to the heretical currents defended in the paganism of the time.

Belief in Jesus as the Christ, *the* Son of God, seems to be the deepest core of the Christian faith. That is why it seems so obvious that one cannot be a Christian without Christ and without assuming his divine status as the Son of God. However, the Nicene Creed seems to go further in its formulation, given the context of its time. From the outset, there is a concern to make explicit what it means to be the Christ and to be *the* Son of God. Firstly, through a historically rooted formulation, which links the person of Jesus with the accounts of His Passion and death described in the Gospels. It also states categorically and clearly that this man, being in fact God, could only rise from the dead to the extent that He is also truly God (divine Sonship). Secondly, by explaining and incorporating into the hard core the essential and intrinsic presence and relationship of the person of Jesus Christ in the Trinity.

Taking up the guiding principle of the first letter of Peter (1 Pet 1:2), the Nicene Creed formulates the Trinitarian mystery. By this formulation it seeks, on the one hand, to realise that the Person of Jesus Christ cannot be understood, and therefore believed, apart from the intrinsic union of the Persons of the Trinity, and, on the other hand, to answer the questions and currents that sometimes saw Christianity as polytheism and sometimes saw Jesus Christ as someone extraordinary, but who was only a human being. From these two principles, we can understand the development that took place at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, where the expression “hypostatic union” gained strength and meaning, becoming one of the most solid foundations of the protective belt of the Christian Creed (cf. International Theological Commission 1979, §221).

It is a hard core that has been present in the most varied expressions of faith and has taken shape in various documents of the Magisterium. It is not by chance that, for example, in the Year of Faith, the Apostolic Letter begins precisely by referring to what is inescapable in the Christian faith, and it is unthinkable to think of it outside this hard core. Here it is clearly stated that “to profess faith in the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is to believe in one God who is Love: the Father, who in the fullness of time sent his Son for our salvation; Jesus Christ, who in the mystery of his death and resurrection redeemed the world; the Holy Spirit, who guides the Church through the centuries in the expectation of the Lord’s glorious return” (Benedict XVI 2011).

One might think that a simple formulation of faith is sufficient and that, in a sense, everything else in the Nicene Creed is incidental and of no real relevance. However, to think in this way is to distort the deeper meaning of the council and to reduce the formulation of the faith to arguments which, without being rooted in reality and theological understanding, can be hollow and meaningless for the life of the believer. This was precisely the novelty of Nicaea, from which we must learn if we are to have greater coherence of faith today. The hard core of Christian belief cannot do without a growing understanding of it and, consequently, a reflection on its protective arguments, for “we cannot live without beliefs, and that axiom also includes ultimate and transcendent beliefs, with which we motivate our decisions and project meaning into our lives” (Oviedo Torró 2023, p. 269).

The Nicene reflection on the essence of the faith was therefore not reduced to a better understanding and enlargement of the hard core, i.e., to affirming more explicitly and concretely the meaning of “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (Acts 8:37). Along with the enlargement of the hard core, many arguments were added, seeking more to respond to the heresies and doctrinal deviations of the time than to increase the core of the Christian faith. In my opinion, Nicaea was the starting point both for enlarging the core of the creed and for creating a protective belt for it, based both on historical principles (Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of the prophecies foretold, as the one who was crucified by Pontius Pilate, suffered death and was buried) and on principles of faith based on the biblical accounts and on the message of Jesus Christ described in the Gospels (he was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, he rose from the dead; he will return in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end) (cf. John Paul II 1994).

At the same time, a positive heuristic is introduced linking faith in the hard core to faith in a holy, Catholic and apostolic Church. In a sense, Nicea adds something that helps to protect and maintain the hard core within its own argumentation and understanding, although it may fall into a certain fallacy of generalisation. To some extent, Nicea is faithful to the Scriptures and to the faith professed there as a consequence of the descent of the Holy Spirit or as a starting point for his coming. However, it seems to leave out other biblical narratives, such as the story of Cornelius, in which the Holy Spirit and faith in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God are at work even outside the sphere of the community of apostles and before the reception of baptism (cf. Acts 10).

The history of the Church up to the present day shows how merging the arguments of faith in the Church with the hard core of the Christian faith can lead to ambiguities and deviations which, instead of protecting the essence of believing, alienate it and lead to its denial. By this I do not mean to argue that “belief in a holy, catholic and apostolic Church” is secondary or ancillary to the Christian faith. Rather, I want to safeguard that this is a truth of faith that is not part of the hard core of Christianity, for if it were, we would be opening the door to arguing that God and salvation are limited to ecclesial mediation. While it is true that the Church is mediator par excellence, it cannot arrogate to itself an exclusive place for God’s action, nor can faith in the Church be equated with or be as fundamental as faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It will be important to understand these nuances of the Nicene Creed in order to distinguish and not confuse what is essence from what is a response to a particular historical moment. Moreover, to understand the faith from its foundations and not so much from the arguments of its protective belt is to allow a rational understanding, which improves adherence to the faith, even for non-believers. It is a path that is no longer travelled as a hostage of the protective belt, but from the hard core. This is also the starting point for understanding the arguments of the shelterbelt and not the other way around (as the Nicene formulation might have intended).

This understanding leads to a better understanding of the so-called “Apostles’ Creed”. This, dated around 215, contains the most developed sense of Jesus Christ as a Trinitarian Person and the consequent clearest sense of believing in Jesus as Christ and Son of God. Here, rather than the desire to respond to heresies or doctrinal interpretations, is the desire to be clear about what one believes. Perhaps because of this, there is little or no “protective belt”, which means that to this day, in general, the various Christian Churches do not feel constrained or blocked by this formulation of faith. Nicaea was a breakthrough in a particular context and still makes sense today for a considerable part of Christianity (especially Catholicism), but in my opinion it is in the “Apostles’ Creed” that faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, acquires the greatest nuclear force. This is the basis for an ecumenical dialogue capable of generating new possibilities of doctrinal and theological understanding and, consequently, of discovering belts of protection across the plurality of Christian identity (cf. Wolff 2023).

4. What Creed for Christianity Today?

Austin and Lakatos, drawing on philosophy, help us to better understand the truths of faith and the very act of Christian belief. However, the professed faith goes far beyond this objective understanding, and, consequently, the Nicene Creed can also be understood beyond its biblical roots and its sociopolitical and religious context. For this very reason, it is possible to develop an ecumenical argumentation of faith and to experience a faith that is not only spoken, but lived from the essential unity between the objectivity of revelation and the subjectivity of believing. In a single act of profession of faith we have, “on the one hand, the believer’s own attitude [. . .], in trusting God who reveals himself and admitting the content of revelation as true (*fides qua creditur*); on the other hand, the very content of faith which is accepted by the believer [. . .], in a single act (*fides quæ creditur*)” (Sueiro 2022).

This dynamism makes it possible to converge both the revealed truth present in the hard core of the faith and the arguments that each Christian expression or confession assumes as fundamental to the protective belt of that core. From this perspective, the essence of the faith is safeguarded, without being confined or circumscribed by circumstances and historical–temporal events. In other words, it is possible to reflect on the Apostles’ Creed today, taking into account new heresies and new ways of believing, without in any way defrauding or denying what was defended at Nicea. On the contrary, it is by following the example of Nicea that we can find theological and pastoral ways of saying and living the faith today. As at Nicea, we must recover the deepest meaning and truth of Christianity—belief in Jesus Christ, the Son of God—seeking, in the light of our times, to answer the questions by strengthening the protective belt.

It must be borne in mind that, since Nicaea, there have been many formulations and reformulations of the Christian Creed, taking into account those who participated in the various councils and the various Christian Churches which, in a way, constructed different protective belts according to the way they received and perceived revelation and the very core of the faith. It is therefore understandable that no single formulation has “replaced” the previous one. Rather, it has “updated” the protective belt arguments. This way of believing has often been viewed with suspicion and even as a certain trivialisation of faith. However, the hard core remains unchanged, creating possibilities for ecumenical, pastoral, theological and even extra-religious dialogue.

In this sense, neither the different approaches to the hard core of faith appear as possible attacks (they are protection belts specific to a given time and historical context), nor are culture and society assumed, *prima facie*, to be enemies of belief. On the contrary, all this can be read and contribute to more solid arguments that, in addition to protecting the essential truths of faith, improve its understanding. For example, today we seem to be witnessing a widespread trivialisation of belief, linked to the way culture has become individualistic and increasingly subjective. However, this can be a unique pastoral and theological opportunity to realise that “such a context has helped to rediscover the importance of belief as a personal act, with the conviction that the personal experience of the religious becomes a criterion of authenticity, showing that faith is a biographical and salvific affair rather than a theoretical and metaphysical one” (Sueiro 2022, p. 533).

With this contribution of today’s culture, especially in the Western context, it seems more possible and pertinent to rethink certain pastoral dynamics and sacramental formulations. It is not a question of postulating a new formula for the creed, for if this were the case, it would have to be thought out and implemented in its own ecclesial and ecumenical context. It is rather a matter of thinking, on the liturgical level, of ways of updating the protective belt of faith, safeguarding and focusing attention on the core while enhancing the distinction between it and the arguments that are ancillary to it. In a way, distinguishing between the essence of faith, the truths we perceive as derived from it, and its mediations will allow it to be lived more clearly and authentically (cf. Fisichella 2012, p. 86).

I am thinking, for example, of the credal formulae that take the form of a question–answer in the context of the sacrament of baptism (often used in the context of other sacraments as well). In these questions, there is, in a way, a negative heuristic (“Do you

renounce...?") and a positive heuristic ("Do you believe in...?") that goes step-by-step towards the different affirmations of faith present in the Nicene Creed. However, even today, everything seems to remain at the same level, with no distinction between the core and the protective belt. Moreover, the basic principle that led to the Nicene formulation has been circumvented: it no longer takes into account the current reality, but remains in the realm of heresies and doctrinal interpretations that characterised the first centuries of Christianity. Today, however, theological and doctrinal developments and the way of conceiving "Jesus as Christ and Son of God" feed new approaches, new heresies and, consequently, new needs for a response and formulation of the truths of faith.

It is not a question of abandoning the Nicene Creed or of forgetting the road travelled so far. It is rather a question of keeping the faith alive, in its dynamism and its continuing relevance for human beings, both as individuals and as members of a believing community. Nicaea is an inescapable milestone in the history of Christianity, not because it responded to and solved all the problems of the time in terms of formulating and living the faith, but because it was a mirror and a reference for how to formulate belief. In it, the hard core of the faith was maintained, taking into account the Scriptures and the different formulations that, in a way, expanded this core (see the example of the "Apostles' Creed", mentioned above). However, Nicaea did not remain stagnant. On the contrary, it updated its protective belt in the light of today's reality.

5. Concerns and Provocations of Nicaea for Our Time

The pastoral call of today is similar to that of the first centuries. The hard core of the faith seems clear, but there is an urgent need to revise and update the protective girdle that envelops it and to rethink and reformulate the arguments of the protective girdle presented in the Nicene faith formula in a way that is audible to our time. Not to do so could lead to a sense of "archaic faith", in which the protective girdle no longer protects and is already interpreted as the core and, being outdated, corrupts the possibility of getting to the very essence of faith in Jesus Christ, Son of God. In a certain sense, this is a point of convergence between the various Christian Churches, and, in this sense, it becomes a propitious moment to return to the origins and, with the teachings of Nicaea, open the doors to a new understanding and living of the Christian faith.

The Council of Nicaea is considered the first great ecumenical council. After it, ecumenism seems to have been diluted from the scope of conciliar reflection. This is a lesson to be learned and to rethink ecumenical dialogue at this level in a new way. As Pope Francis warned in 2014 in his address to Karekin II, ecumenism cannot be just about words. It is also about suffering, martyrdom and blood. If this is so, "it means that the ecumenical path is travelled in different ways, but the goal is the same: communion in faith and misión" (Wolff 2023, p. 510), and this seems to be a unique opportunity for a profession of Christian faith, a creed capable of uniting beyond the particularities and specificities of the interpretations and ways of life of each of the Christian Churches/confessions.

Recovering an ecumenical sense of the Christian Creed would open up new paths and, as in Constantine's time, would allow us to tell the world the reasons for the faith, shaping and transfiguring—now without violence—the reality in which we live. In fact, it would not only be a matter of joint reflection or a common understanding of the formulation of faith; above all, it would be about a unity in which all those who call themselves Christians meet, since what would be at stake would not be "words", but what a Christian is obliged to believe in order to be able to affirm that he or she is a Christian. On the basis of this understanding, it would be possible to go further, making ecumenical connections and dialogues authentic Christian relationships, with all the propriety of the term "Christian". A return to a common creed would open the way to greater unity in diversity, as a visible sign of the faith professed.

As I have already mentioned, the Council of Nicaea was not intended solely to stipulate a formula for Christian belief, nor simply to regulate the mission of the laity and clergy within the ecclesiastical structures. It was "negotiated" by the bishops and the Emperor

with a view to regulating the members of the episcopate. To some extent, the regulations for the laity and clergy have helped in this task, but it seems inevitable to think that the creed, which is the result of conciliar reflection and shapes the creed professed by Christians today, has an advantage over the other regulations. What makes us think directly of this Council—the creed—is both the point of departure and the point of arrival for unity among the episcopate and among Christians. Something that seems to challenge us today and to provoke new forms of rapprochement within the ecumenical and Christian movement: starting from the hard core of faith seems to be the way to a working ecclesial peace, to a tolerance that is not indifference and to a joint action that derives from the profession of faith and not from convictions about ecclesial structures or ways of thinking about doctrine and theology.

Within Christianity, the learning of the Nicene lessons, left as a common heritage, would also be a path and an opportunity to rethink the protective belts, which in this case could be different or thought of differently, of the various Christian Churches, turning them also into means of dialogue, but without circumscribing the hard core of faith to the protective belts of each one. The creed would become operative and life-shaping, appearing as a way of peace within and outside the Christian religious spheres. It would be an example to the world: the human capacity to see beyond particular perspectives, to value and prioritise what is essential, leaving free the specifics of one's identity. If the great institutions, such as the Christian Churches, were an example of peace and unity in spite of differences, this would be a living image of the action of believing (Tertullian 1908, Apology 19).

Moreover, on a practical level, Christian Belief could also give rise to different forms of religious expression, namely through the updating of liturgical rites and theological reflection. Similar to what happened during the reign of Constantine, a rethinking of the rites and the way of living the faith liturgically and sacramentally is necessary today. As in the first centuries of Christianity, it seems fundamental and decisive that faith should be operative, that it should lead to a path in which the faith professed and lived today finds expression in personal and communal reality. If the voice and action of the Emperor were crucial for the convocation of the Council of 325, it is also necessary today to read the signs of the times and find the way to summon and unite different perspectives towards the same hard core of Christian faith.

6. Conclusions

The proposed philosophical–theological reading of the Nicene Creed that I present here could run the risk of being misinterpreted, so it is important to underline that nothing should be forbidden in its formulation. What is at issue is how it can—and, in my opinion, must—be updated and revised in the light of what is essential to the Christian faith. Heresies are not perceived in the same way today. However, responding to them is essential for a greater clarity of the faith we profess. It is not just a matter of looking for new heresies, but of realising that those which were in force in the first centuries have been updated and, in their generality and essence, are still valid today. It is therefore necessary to follow a path similar to that which culminated in the Council of Nicea, responding in an updated way to today's reality, with the advantage of a path that has also been travelled along that line.

Something else must also be taken into account. Indeed, today there seem to be different questions and different ways of understanding the principle of believing that emerges from Nicaea. Those who profess the faith, living and praying the same creed, often have different understandings of the different arguments to which they give their assent of faith, and even of the meaning of believing. This seems to be a reality that troubles and provokes ecclesial and social life today. In my opinion, it seems clear that, even more than in the early days of Christianity, there is an urgent need to recover the meaning of believing, both for Christians and non-Christians, both in terms of the understanding of faith in the hard core of Christianity and in terms of the reasons and arguments for believing. It

has to be kept in mind that while at the beginning of Christianity the faith professed was the faith—visibly—lived, today, this is not so evident. Non-believers and non-Christian believers can no longer see what distinguishes Christian life and faith from other ways of living or believing. Professed faith no longer seems to shape the way believers think or act from within.

In this sense, the urgency of updating Nicaea for a more authentic Christianity today seems clear. For Christians, this could be the starting point for a purifying re-encounter with the fundamentals of faith. From here, we can follow the theological, ecclesial and pastoral path of moving from a faith *that is said* to a faith that is authentically *professed/lived*. The act of believing in the person of Jesus Christ—true God and true man—will lead to a rediscovery of the face of God and the essence of human nature. In this way, it is possible to think of “God” beyond a certain theorisation, as if it were an empty concept and outside any discussion of the proof of his existence.

More than that, it will be the opportunity to think of God beyond a conceptual dimension: the God revealed in Jesus Christ is not just “a God” *to be spoken of*, but *to be spoken to*. This is the nature of believing. An interconnectedness in which to speak of what is believed—to speak of the One in whom the believer’s faith rests—reveals also the essence and nature of the believer. Nicaea reveals this dynamism and offers new horizons for the human being to understand himself in the fullness of his humanity. The “true man” presents itself as a provocative and disturbing point of reference for those who profess the Christian faith and for those who seek a greater meaning to human existence.

If it is true that testimonies of martyrdom for the faith are no longer news in today’s society, it is no less true that a life lived on the basis of the values that emerge from the faith professed reflects that man called Jesus who lives his humanity on the basis of an intimate relationship of love with God and with the world. A man who, being truly God, reveals by his word and action both the excellence of human nature and the way in which human beings can be reconfigured and transfigured, making their lives a permanent profession of faith, making visible the image and likeness of God that constitutes them (Gen 1:27).

It is important to remember how much the religious reality has changed since Nicaea. The persecuted religion has progressively become the persecuting and dominant religion. If faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, implied a believing maturity and a responsible and communally recognised adherence, after Nicaea it became “presupposed” and, consequently, trivialised. After Nicaea, there was a gradual distancing between professed faith and lived faith: it was no longer necessary to struggle, to know and to recognise the hard core of the truth of the faith in order to be baptised and to be part of the believing community. On the contrary, one begins to be “born a Christian”, to live according to a path of faith, or of traditionalism, of family and society, instead of following a path of discovery and assent to life. Questioning Jesus Christ is no longer the concern that opens the door to faith and the subsequent proclamation of the creed. There is an inversion: first one receives baptism and *says* the creed. Then there seems to be a restlessness that either leads to a distancing (feeling that faith is imposed and not a free assent) or leads to true faith, where the creed *is professed* (cf. Bidar 2013).

It is true that, given the cultural and religious plurality present in the contemporary world, unlike Nicaea, it is not possible today to create a creed that responds to all the heresies of our time, to all theological interpretations or even to all the desires of Christian believers. But, as we have seen, this will not be the aim of the creed either. The roots and core of the faith remain unshakable (this is the great challenge of Christianity today!), it is the “protective belt” that must be strengthened and adjusted to the demands and needs of our time. As the 1700th anniversary of Nicaea approaches, a new council is urgently needed, not to create a new creed, but to reflect on how to do it and to make it come alive. From this “revisiting” of the hard core, the doctrinal, sacramental and ecclesial development and updating that needs to take place will become clearer.

By making clear what the “hard core” of belief and what the “protective belt” are, as at Nicaea, it will be possible to take steps towards action, shaped by professed faith,

for today's world; it will be easier to abandon doctrines more concerned with salvific theories or structures than with the truth inherent in the core of Christian faith. And it will undoubtedly be the best way to do justice to the spirit of Nicea, both at the level of Christian identity (because of its ecumenical dimension and its proximity to the Christ event), and at the level of the very path of hope, unity and ecclesiology that today, as in Nicea, must be opened and travelled.

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Notes

- ¹ (Corominas 2023, p. 44). On the etymology of believing, cf. also Ress et al. (2021).
- ² Briefly, Arianism, named after its leader Arius, preached the hierarchy of the persons of the Holy Trinity, and, according to this view, Jesus Christ was inferior to the Father. This controversy led to a general schism among Christians and, in particular, to the opening of disputes with Bishop Alexander of Alexandria. On the Arian controversy, (cf. Papandrea 2012; Noll 2012).

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Article

Debt: A Political–Theological Device Acting in Favor of the Neoliberal Ethos

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Abstract: This article intends to examine debt as a basilar political–theological device acting in favor of the neoliberal *ethos*. The Papal Encyclical *Laudato Si* affirms in paragraph 52 that debt today serves the control over the poor peoples in the world. In this article we demonstrate how debt can be seen as a political–theological device that works as an instrument of this specific *ethos*, aligned with neoliberal principles. We intend to show how these elements are related using three analytical movements. In the first, we present how we understand political theology as a critical reflection about the forms of political power. We observe that power, in its form and in the way it operates, replicates the theological–political power *status* prior to modernity, operating an excluding inclusion machinery. In the second movement, we analyze the political theology machinery that impacts individuals in the operation of an “excluding inclusion”. Under the political–theological machinery, individuals, groups, or populations are considered as a part of the machinery; they are included because they are incorporated in the new organism as they are excluded from their original content—language, *ethos*, culture, and their constitution as subjects. Then, in the third, we present the notion of the device, explicitly, a device constituted by a web of odd components and flexible relations that, when isolated as independent elements, act in the subject’s formation. In these terms, debt as a device of the political–theological machinery works to form individuals; it is a device that operates the excluding inclusion to make subjects more and more adapted to the market rules and habits. The very sense of debt in the post-productive era is challenged. We present how the possible exits from this machinery involve not only the debate on the forgiveness of foreign debts, but also how they are intrinsically linked to the creation of a new *ethos*, new ways of life created by relations outside the orbit of debt control. The conclusion intends to show how necessary it is to restore to people new forms of control over a way of life that is not regulated and ruled by debt. The methodology employed analyzes arguments that originated from works and articles concerning this theme.

Keywords: debt; device; political theology; political–theological machine; neoliberal *ethos*

1. Introduction: The Political–Theological Machine

Debt is not usually associated with political theology. In its core meaning, the word is related to an obligation, a bond certificate, a deed, or verbal agreement to be executed, to be paid. A debt is a promise with no full guarantee; it is a binding instrument between debtor and creditor that projects their relationship over an unpredictable scenario, over a term whose extension and end cannot be established a priori.

The Papal Encyclical *Laudato Si* affirms in paragraph 52: “The foreign debt of poor countries has become a way of controlling them, yet this is not the case where ecological debt is concerned” (Francis 2015). As an instrument of control, in the papal text, debt operates on countries to maintain over them a kind of manipulation, of regulating authority that goes beyond the payment of a debt. In this case, debt is understood as an instrument

of power over States and over politics in a larger sense. In the article, we start from the hypothesis that debt is also an instrument of control of a specific *ethos* in capitalist societies. It operates as a device of the political–theological machine. How can debt be thought of as a political–theological device related, among other aspects, to the neoliberal *ethos*?

This article aims at presenting debt as a device in political theology; it is a device that operates the excluding inclusion to make subjects more and more adapted to the market rules and habits, which ultimately means to make them more and more adapted to neoliberal *ethos*.

First, the definition of political theology in our starting point must be clarified. It is not the case here to reconstruct the genealogical path of the concept's occurrences. Augustine established, with reference to Varran, that theology is divided into the mythical, natural, and civil (Augustine 1984, L.VI, 5, p. 234). Later, politics appeared in Catholic religious texts and other texts identified with Christianity, in general, (a) as a branch of theology; (b) understanding theology as a dominant knowledge that establishes and determines how politics work; (c) as an empirical and historically verifiable complicity between these two domains (Aurélio 2003, p. XLV).

There are many interpretations of the political theology concept (Kirwan 2008). One of the most accepted is that political theology constitutes a field of study that deciphers “how political concepts, discourses and institutions—particularly sovereignty—are influenced, shaped and underpinned by religious categories” (Newman 2019, p. 5). Some scholars classify political theology by functions. Cavanaugh and Scott (2019), for example, propose and explore three: (a) it relates religious beliefs; (b) it is a critical reflection on the political; (c) it establishes that theology and politics are similar activities. Scattola prefers to analyze political theology from three possible relationships between the two terms: (a) the politics of theology; (b) when the two terms have equal force, there is a reflection on the theological core of politics and on the philosophical political sense, implicitly organizing the meaning of all theologies; (c) a theology of politics, a civil.

In this article, political theology is considered as a critical investigative field that draws on philosophy, theology, and aspects of the economy to understand how debt becomes a propelling element of habits, an *ethos* of the entrepreneurial individual perfectly adjusted to neoliberalism. In this scope, its critical investigation (Rasch 2016) suits political theology, for this area of study has both a normative–prescriptive and a genealogic–descriptive dimension to explain the relationship between what is theological and what is political (Wurts 2021).

In the first analytical movement of this article, Roberto Esposito's comprehension of political theology is examined under the light of the excluding inclusion context, and this is the reason why the way it works is seen as a machine with its assembled parts, as in *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought* (Esposito 2015). In the second movement, we present debt in the common field of political theology and economic theology, as a part in the political–theological machinery. Then, in the third movement, we show how debt as a device, neoliberalism, and political theology are interrelated. We expose debt as a crafty device in speeches, practices, and implicit and explicit rules as controlling systems that produce an *ethos* that is responsible for setting the excluding inclusion. We re-establish the debate started by critical perspectives of political theology's excluding machine and of debt as one of its parts. Finally, in the conclusion, we demonstrate that to overcome debt as a controlling device presupposes the changing not only of financial institutions, but also of the *ethos* that sees debt as a form of control over human life, over governments and over politics, over new ways of economic exchange, and over new forms of life.

2. Excluding Inclusion in the Political Theology Machinery

The concept of political theology has been impervious to critical analyses for a rather long while, stated Roberto Esposito (2015). The difficulty in finding a stable and univocal definition may be explained by factors such as the varied contexts in which political–

theological activities take place. Also, even though reactions against such activities have been observed since early modernity, from free thinkers to scholars, we have been immersed in one context or another, contributing to the spreading of the many gray areas in the concept.¹

Our aim here is not to observe political theology from the religious influence over modern and contemporary political concepts (Kantorowicz 1997), even though this is an important aspect to understand the extension to which debt works on human subjectivity. Our investigation is aligned with Schmitt's thesis (2006), according to which the modern concepts of the State mirror those in medieval theology, to highlight the operatory hub of the political–theological machinery.

Examining Esposito's analysis, it is evident that one of the elements of this hub is the person as a dispositive. Both in the theological formulation and in the juridic Roman law, we see unity and separation being conjugated in the same notion of the person. In theological terminology, the person unifies the Two, regarding that, though they are separated, they cannot have a distinct nature (Esposito 2015, p. 90). In the juridic Roman terminology-spinning dynamics of this machine, separating what divides and unifying what separates is also completed in the unity at a personal level. The notion of the person applied to a body allows the classification of people according to their hierarchy level and, at the same time, it marks their separation in relation to things. Among themselves, people are distinct. Only the servants remain in limbo; they are not people, nor things. The study of the different meanings of this concept across history shows that “the person statute becomes the operator of a depersonalization that can even relegate a certain kind of man to the regime of thing” (Esposito 2015, p. 7). The legal entity according to Gaius—by the *summa divisio*—is a general category that embraces several person levels, distinctions that separate the ones more deserving of this attribute, such as the landowners, who are free—*sui iuris*—and even those in lower levels in this hierarchy with no autonomy—*alieni iuris*. Those who have no qualities are at the lowest classification level: the *persona servi*. In fact, it is considered an anomaly to use the two words—*persona* and *servi*—to describe an individual. The servants, the enslaved, belonged to an indefinite zone: neither in the realm of the person, nor in the realm of the thing. Nevertheless, they were closer to things than any other being. Esposito considers the attribution of the qualifying term “person” as a mask that may be applied to different bodies. Such a reflection about the distinction between people and things, starting off from ancient Rome until modern and contemporary times, could provide an exuberant number of semantic particularities. The genealogic exhibit of the matrixes of this distinction allows, nevertheless, for the identification of a political theology operation that perform the movement of what disunites and unites (Esposito 2015).

The political theology machine exposes dualities: it operates different kinds of exclusion on distinct agents seen as enemies, in the Schmittian terminology. The excluding assimilation is the fundamental operation of the “political- theological machine” (Esposito 2015, p. 3).² Political theology is, in this sense, the machine producing the exclusion that results from an including act. Among the contemporary philosophers, Schmitt brings a key reading of the violent, conflicting, encounter of the “Two inside the One” (Esposito 2015).

The two as a numerical figure is seen as a rupture factor in the unit. When this distinct element—the different one—is pointed out, the binding strength of the unit increases, with the cancelation of the other, the expelling of the other that is different. The theme of the conflicting relationship between unit and exclusion inside the political body defines the political (Schmitt 2007). The rift reflects this movement through which the sovereign's survival, or the integrity of the State, occurs at the cost of its separation from the element that threatens to break the unit of the body—the enemy. In this clash, the mutual exclusion between the two poles prevails; however, as long as the other excludes himself from his original configuration, he may be included in the sovereign's unit. When the other's existential condition is identified as that of the unit's represented by the sovereign, the

enemy no longer exists. The other excludes himself from his original condition in favor of his own inclusion in the sovereign's unit.

By observing this “antimonic nucleus”—an expression by Esposito (2015)—in modern and contemporary history, the governments' political-theological action describes different conflict neutralization and nullification strategies. Each power reaction to refrain from a circumstantial enemy reveals previous resistance, rebellion, and insurgence, claiming movements against the *status quo*. The neutralization that follows intends to drive the enemy away, to make his combat unviable, and to exclude him from the confrontation orbit against the sovereign, the established power. Esposito observes that, instead of peace, the modern political elites emulated conflicts, stimulated confrontations in relation to the people and the interests that opposed the order in place. Since the 19th century, the prime technique to neutralize rupture movements has been crystalized in the neutral sphere, where fights are placated, and the interests of divergent groups diluted until they reach complete stagnation.

Esposito understands the expulsion movement as an act that is completed also by the sovereign's attempt to include. By capturing the groups and movements that confront the established power, the enemy power is annulated; more than just neutralized, the one captured by the sovereign is included in his circle. The enemy is brought into the friendly zone and loses his identity as the enemy, even though he is still regarded as the one who is different (Esposito 2015, p. 29).³ The excluding inclusion, as the simple exclusion, reiterates the upfront denial of the universalist idea of the indivisibility of the human gender, of the universalist comprehension of a political order that shelters human beings as an indivisible unit.⁴

In the operativity of a political theology within which the machine performs the excluding inclusion, in the distinction of hierarchical levels, the people identified as threats are excluded. To distinguish people and things is another function of the machine-like operation. Between people and things, in the downgrading of the so-called people into the condition of things, the change of a political theology into an economic theology may be observed; the distinctions that permeate the friend-foe conflict are not limited to the existential political opposition, but incorporate elements of the economy.

3. From Political Theology to the Faith in the Market: The Neoliberal Device

Walter Benjamin's categorical statement—“Capitalism must be seen as a religion” (Benjamin 1996)—is another view that inaugurates a new possibility to understand political theology today.⁵ The association between the two phenomena—capitalism and religion—could be explained by the fact that the first serves the fulfilment of the same “worries, afflictions, and restlessness” as the latter. This is not a conclusion drawn from a simple analogy between the two. The innovative aspect of Benjamin's thesis is the defense of a solid argument: capitalism incorporates a religious structure. Regarding Schmitt again, we see that the form of the earthly theological power is replicated in the secular political form of the modern State, originating the secularized political theology. In Benjamin, the advanced economy or capitalism forms incorporate many elements of religion. Thus, capitalism as a religion would make room for an economic theology. However, according to Benjamin's perspective, capitalism is destitute of theology. He states so considering theology in its traditional constitution related to the sacred and the transcendent. Yet, capitalism is a cult religion. The insisting permanence of the cult denotes a singularity of capitalism: religion as form—the exaltation, the furor, the rapture—but without dogmas and theology.

Capitalism in its religious form does not work on strengthening the hierarchical structures of traditionalistic rituals. The structure that shapes it is the cult that engenders and instils guilt, an incurable lack sided by the desire to accumulate. While in traditional religions the expiatory moments are the beginning of purification, precisely because of our flaws, because of what we lack, in capitalism the opposite happens: the adoration ritual nurtures despair through the attribution of guilt. Penitence is reserved for those who do

not reach victory; those who do not accumulate are guilty of the incurable lack. For those who seek redemption through the religious ceremony, the capitalist cult gives them an extra burden tied to the chains of guilt. This network knows no limits: the guilt infusion is prolonged to the brim of human despair, and that is the reason why holy infinitude is lowered to the level of human existence (Benjamin 1996). Benjamin marks an *ethos* that derives from the fall of the absolute into immanence: God loses his omnipotence to an earthly power that drags everything: men, things, nature. It is an *ethos* that, according to the thinker, had a place in Nietzsche's writing, and that springs from the human sensation of despair for the loss of the transcending absolute. In the feeling of loss, we experience an emptiness that is immanent to the experience of a guilt that is never rewarded or satisfied, a flaw that follows us, questioning, attacking us: the "passage of the planet 'Human' through the house of despair in the absolute loneliness of his trajectory. . ." (Benjamin 1996, p. 289).

The premonitory tone of the brief article *Capitalism as Religion* (1921) approximates it to the political-economic dynamics spread across the globe after WW2 and projects it over the scenario of the devastating capitalism post-1980. In fact, the faith in the market (Stimilli 2019a) became synonymous with new global politics, in favor of the complete change of the relationship between work and capital, rendering the State absent from its role as a regulatory agent of social and political dynamics, and gradually less and less the sponsor of citizens' rights. The State in neoliberalism once had the role of a guarantor of the economic activity operated by the capital owners. Launched into the market, the citizens become free individuals to trade their work force as if they had bargain power equivalent to the company owners'. Liberal democracy itself has been at stake. A new semantic universe was built—concepts, terms, and signs—new justice principles, citizenship habits, and, above all, a political imaginarieness.⁶ According to Brown, this imaginarieness would be so specific that we could say it is a special way of thinking. Even if neoliberalism's ideals advocate for the absence of restraining rules of individual freedom, they also have a moral system, they are justified by the production of an *ethos*, and they are a way to produce subjectivities, "a value system" (Brown 2015, pp. 17–8). They seek to involve all spheres of existence. Even in relation to social and political organization, according to Brown, neoliberalism shows itself as a case of entrepreneurship, of management, of administration and control of the chain links that aim for the maximization of processes and the fulfilment of ends bonded to profit and accumulation.

Agamben amplifies this thought over an aspect that differs from Benjamin's thesis—he does not recognize a theology in capitalism. He qualifies the religious form of capitalism as a new type of government: The theological genealogy helps us understand the relationship between God and the government. The economic theology constitutes a device through which divine intervention is verified in the form of a government that articulates itself from the Trinity unit—the father, son, and holy ghost—to the ordination of particularities, with the universality of providence. This unitary link—the Trinity and the ordination of particularities—has as a strategic function "reconciling the sovereignty and generality of the law with the public economy and the effective government of individuals" (Agamben 2011, p. 276). Economic theology mirrors, on the secular plan, the form of the universal sovereign government, which encompasses laws and involves all particulars. Economy and government are, thus, understood as synonyms because they articulate one another in the control over life and its social aspects. Democracy itself—the government shared among varied peoples—does not escape the economic control net. Instead of embracing one economic form among others, the economic theology confers it a specific form.

Looking at Foucault's passage in which a device is a heterogeneous set involving "speeches, institutions, architectural organizations, reglementary decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, philanthropic propositions" (Foucault 2000, p. 244), what is said and what is unsaid are articulated in the device, including what is apparent and what is subliminal, and the explicit and the implied rules. Several elements are related in the device. A speech in an institution, a way to structure spaces, and the definitions of their use in a specific place, moral propositions that shape

conducts, are all elements of the device. The specific relations of these components mask practices, draw new rationality vectors that alter the positions of individuals, and modify the functions occupied by the hostages of this regulation action of individual practices.

The device's ultimate strategy is adjusted to a "certain historical moment". Foucault stresses the existence of strategic domination imperatives aimed at controlling specific populations in early modernity: "a controlling device to dominate madness, mental illness, neurosis" (Foucault 2000, p. 245). In any historical time, the device acts in terms of manipulating relations of power; it rationally guides the relationships of power to "block them, stabilize them, use them". The device configures a certain game of power and shapes positions inside the relationships of power. Be it discursive, moral, institutional, or even the relationship among all these domains, the device acts to condition, deter, and rule powers.

In *The Birth of Biopolitics* (Foucault 2008), the genealogic reflection of this socio-economic phenomenon is not limited to the investigation of its historical matrixes and the observation of reflexes over political institutions. Among the most painful effects of the neoliberal influence are the changes in our conceptions of justice, values, and morality, and in the understanding of the very individuals as subjects and their relationship with rules and the law. The consequences may be observed in their life, in the way they act, and how they become entangled in the jumbled dimensions of neoliberalism as a device. In the next paragraphs, we highlight three moments in which Foucault refers to this influence in human life.

The first moment is the analysis of the concept of human capital. Foucault shows that this notion is aligned with the view of human life framed by a company. Human life is seen as an extension of, and inserted in, the economic dynamics, and it is understood according to strictly economic criteria (Foucault 2008). The economic model—the offer and demand law and investments—becomes a reference, the standard in social relationships and even of a person's existence: "a form of relationship of the individual to himself, time, those around him, the group, and the family" (Foucault 2008, p. 242). The extension of this business imprint spreads over all dimensions of human life.

The *Vitalpolitik*, the second moment, proposes that all dimensions of social experience be organized, as well as politics and its institutions—the very social body—according to the market economy rules. In moral terms, the competition spirit is based on parameters and criteria of social recognition attribution. Neoliberalism is not limited to a semantic field; it spreads over a grammar of social and individual ordination.

Thus, we reach the *Homo oeconomicus*, the third moment, the synthesis of the inclusion of all dimensions of human experience in the scope of economy, of business. The self-entrepreneur supposedly understands individual and collective life according to the utility logic. Needs dictate how life must be organized, and efforts are justified according to utilities. Like the self-entrepreneur, the *Homo oeconomicus* is solely responsible for the conservation and expansion of his own life.⁷

The complete depoliticization of relationships among individuals and the consequent reduction in social relationships in the market model and in the company structure have advanced even over eminent political scopes. The expression "debt sovereign", says Esposito, indicates the transfer of the national government sovereignty to global finance (Esposito 2015, p. 204). Even the structuring concept of political power in the modern State is converted into the financial market semantics. The reference to the term "debt sovereign" denotes this reduction in sovereignty to the scope of the economy and, in another way, puts the economy in connection with modern political theology's most fundamental term: debt. Thus, the political theology movement towards the market and an economic theology is completed. It would happen, as Esposito believes, not as a declaration of the end of political theology, but as its transformation into an economic theology: "and they should not be ordered in a chronological sequence but integrated into a single meaningful block" (Esposito 2015, p. 204).

The economic matrix of the political-theological language is found as early as in Schmitt and in Benjamin. Both the biological and the moral life, and surely the world of

labor, as well as the social and the political institutions are all involved in, and understood by, the semantics of the market analytical models. The question about “neoliberalism’s profound political theology” (Raschke 2019) leads to the understanding of how the notion of debt escapes the strictly economic boundaries and is seen in an overlapping “theological” zone of the economy and politics as an element of the political device, namely: sovereignty.

4. Debt as a Political–Theological Device Acting in Favor of Neoliberalism

Debt has been considered an indispensable component to understand neoliberalism as a dominant economic phenomenon. More than a part of the neoliberal machine (Raschke 2019), what we defend here is that debt is a component of the economic theology: among other factors, it operates the excluding inclusion of political theology. In the context of societies structured according to the neoliberal order, debt constitutes the base for social life (Lazzarato 2012). In at least two vortexes, it may be observed how debt has been a propelling element—but not the only one—of the neoliberal machinery since the 1970s. In this respect, Balibar denominates the intensive aspect of the “the debt economy”, which involves both the individualized experiences and the global dimension of financial operations (Balibar 2013).

In the wider scope of social life, the development of the national debt, or of the State, has backed up the justifications for neoliberal policies, aiming at transforming the Welfare State’s expenditure-financing structures. Policies such as State shrinking—“Central bank Independence”—are equivalent to making the State and its public policies dependent on the markets. Better than the idea of financing, the *debt economy* would translate what is politically at stake in the context of the economy today. Balibar highlights the fact that at least two different circuits are articulated in the reproduction of money: the bank circuit irrigates the economy with credit and liquidity; the fiscal circuit drains the contributions appropriated by the State.

Debt is present in both circuits as a kind of shadow at the feet of money circulation: on one hand lies the economic debt, finite and measurable; on the other, the “symbolic or anthropologic” debt, in which citizens perceive themselves as owing to the State the benefits that protect them—what used to be their rights in the past. Such circuits involve social and political institutions. Nothing escapes the ordination, the organization of the financial world: it is structured as an economic theology. The traditional and eminently political forms of sovereignty are transformed into a near-sovereignty, into pseudo-sovereignty. The sovereign’s supreme political power yields to economic decisions, adaptations, and ordering: “. . . all States are, one way or another, dependent on the credit available on the Global Financial Market. . .” (Balibar 2013). In traditional sovereignties, the decision was made by the one sitting in the place of utmost political power; in the contemporary pseudo-sovereignties, the decision makers of the political power are the market operators. In the past, it was clear who held the power, who made the decisions; in the fake sovereignties, authority is impersonal, anonymous, and ambivalent.

In the scope of individual experience, which constitutes the subject, it is worth marking that, as in the economy, citizens are agents. In this condition, commitments, agreements, and obligations are less important than contracts, which bind subjects to a succession of debts. Existence permanently wrapped in debt—to people and to institutions—puts individuals in a permanent situation of dependence and, consequently, inability to pay the acquired debts, be them monetary or otherwise (Agamben 2022).

As absurd as it seems, the mechanisms that make it difficult, or even impossible, to pay a debt are inherent to the dynamics that produce this permanent condition of engagement with the very debt. Lazzarato points out that the permanent debt seeks to instill in individuals the moral condition of one who owes, who is incapable, who is guilty (Lazzarato 2012). The subject becomes vulnerable to the demands of his creditors, who are not interested in the payment. The creditors, in turn, are backed up by credit mechanisms, laws, and institutional and judicial apparatuses that stimulate and promote the prolonging of the indebted condition. Thus, the indebted subjects are forced into a situation in which their consumption pattern, their form of life, and their interests and objectives are controlled.

The logic of the permanence in debt aims at promoting the submission of the indebted subjects as well as their aspirations.

Debt acts as a ‘capture’, ‘predation’, and ‘extraction’ machine on the whole of society, as an instrument for macroeconomic prescription and management, and as a mechanism for income redistribution. It also functions as a mechanism for the production and ‘government’ of collective and individual subjectivities. (Lazzarato 2012, p. 29)

The production of subjectivity is the second vortex through which debt is understood as an element of the neoliberal device. As in the overview, the device alters power relationships between individuals and social institutions; debt contributes to individuals to change their form of life. Debt is not only a title or promise of payment, but it is imposed as a deceiving factor to control and redirect the form of life of the indebted (Lazzarato 2012, p. 33). The creditor–debtor relationship is not restricted to market negotiation, a deal about the exchange of values. It involves power, because in the terms of neoliberalism, debt is a moral element: it introduces unworthiness in the condition of the debtor. The indebted subject, unworthy of note, has a lower humanity rank in the neoliberal value scale for the classification of individuals. The “effort–reward” pair of the labor world unfolds into “morality of the promise (to honor one’s debt) and the fault (of having entered into it)”: the debtor’s behavior is constrained “to the limits defined by the debt he has entered into” (Lazzarato 2012, p. 33). Debt is a way through which the debtor is forced to adhere to the wills, intentions, and forms of life the creditors want him to have (Graeber 2011).

The analyses that deepened the financial–economic investigation into the bottom of debt’s moral level (Graeber 2011; Lazzarato 2012; Raschke 2019) allowed for a complete perception of neoliberalism itself: an economic model, a machine that interferes in the State’s priorities, and a platform of moral reversion and neoliberal individualism radicalization. The studies about the moral level of debt and its use as an instrument for value reversion and forms of life in favor of neoliberalism show that we are dealing here with an indispensable element of this device. Thus, debt is an instrument among others—a specific dispositive. It is a relevant factor that influences individuals, and social and political power relationships in a decisive way, as established in Foucault’s formulation. However, debt is a deceiving element of neoliberalism as a device that reconfigures such relationships and produces subjectivities and forms of life perfectly adapted to the most inhuman life conditions.

More than an economic problem in a technical sense, debt is, therefore, a political operator of control over subjects. This political–moral dimension of debt surpasses the meaning conferred by modernity: that of a discipline, the repression and the feeling of guilt. Debt as an element of the device operates in liaison with other blaming devices in law and regulating institutional structures “capable of administering the libidinal economy at the foundation of human life. They do so not in repressive ways, but through the continuous reproduction of conditions that create debt” (Stimilli 2019b, p. 157). More than guilt, debt creates in the individuals the conditions for its own reproduction.

The comprehension of debt as a part in a device is, thus, beyond the Foucaultian analysis of the primitive Christianity, according to which monks regarded themselves as free from the laws but chose to follow the collective norms of the monasteries (Foucault 2009), obeying a much sterner regime. The tension between *oikos* and *nomos* can be observed there. In the case of debt as a neoliberal device, there is no trace of tension or fracture in the general normativity: *oikos* and *nomos* work in harmony. It is in this sense that debt is a power operator, not of the sovereign power politically constituted, as referred to above, but of a sovereignty captured by the markets and its immediate interests. However, debt itself is not a power; not even neoliberalism takes a role in the established political powers. Debt is an operator of the neoliberal device, the latter serving the sovereign power captured by economic theology.

Debt controls, restricts and orients specific subjectivities; it works on the person. At the same time, it operates the separation of people, turning them into competitors, isolated and disputing the best positions in the market. Debt unites them under the same socioeconomic

law. In so doing, it includes everyone individually in a totalizing order. At the same time, as indebted individuals, they are excluded from the benefits and enjoyments of this economic order. Debt is a dispositive that operates the excluding inclusion of the political–theological machine, which unifies by separating. Also, as observed by Esposito:

we are joined by a debt that separates us even from ourselves, by suspending us from a model of development that produces loss. Since everyone is included in it, we are at the same time also all excluded. The point of arrival for economic–political theology is identity, with no remainders, between inside and outside, whole and part, One and Two. (Esposito 2015, p. 208)

The debt common ground in the global market, which comes from the direct incidence of the political–theological machinery, cannot be easily changed. The destruction of such a machine would imply a shift in the way we interpret life. It is also nearly impossible to deter this machine because of the long tradition of the “conceptual language we have inherited”. In the face of this limitation, this author proposes that we focus on converting the meaning of debt. In this sense, he states that it was not the crisis that generated debt, but debt itself has “determine the crisis and its effects”. The formula he finds is:

What we can do, as far as sovereign debt is concerned, is reverse its meaning. Instead of trying to stop what is by now an unstoppable dynamic, we can speed it up, pushing it to its limit point, until it implodes. The fact that we are all debtors, or are becoming ones, means that there are no more real creditors. Every creditor is a debtor to another, in a chain whose first link has been lost. The problem we are facing is to transform this oppressive chain into a circuit of solidarity. This is only possible in two ways: either by making insolvency no longer a declaration of servitude but an option for freedom; or by socializing debt—raising the demand for socially useful goods with a radical change to the current development model. In this case, rather than disappearing, its sign would flip, rejoining the *munus commune*—of each toward the other—which was the original meaning of the term *communitas*. (Esposito 2015, p. 208–9)

Esposito proposes the restoration of the archaic meaning of *munus*, in which debt, gift, and trade are “mutually linked in a collective practice that does not envisage subjugation and enslavement” (Esposito 2015, p. 209). With this proposal, he wishes to transfer the sovereign debt to the common debt and, thus, to overcome the immunitary grip in which the world is suffocating (Esposito 2015, p. 209).

Going back to Butler (1997)’s argument about the relationship between power and psychic life, Stimilli asks how far this articulation can go. It was really surprising to see populations’ contrary reactions to debt’s moral rhetoric in favor of the imposition of sacrifices by the indebted peoples in creditors’ favor. Germany’s leadership, in the name of *troika*,⁸ on Greece’s, Cyprus’, Portugal’s, and Ireland’s *defaults*, between 2007–2008, engendered huge demonstrations of opposition and resistance. The matter that seems intriguing to Stimilli is whether the relationship between debt and guilt may “illuminate an opaque relationship between power and life, which is therefore even more dangerous than the merely punitive relation highlighted in the critique of austerity” (Stimilli 2017; 2019b, p. 132). Could the demonstrations indicate a new existence condition? Would that be an “anthropological mutation” hypothesis?

Stimilli calls attention to possible pacts established between individuals and institutions, aiming at confronting the frustrating indebted condition and the prospect of never getting out of it. Would this be an anthropological change or a resistance reaction that involves the mobilization of psychic defenses? On one hand, we may think that self-criticism in guilty feelings leads to consumption and to debt retro-feedback, rendering null any attempt to get out of debt, of guilt, and away from the creditor. On the other hand, the new forms of human resistance, including the possibility of new forms of life, are not totally interdicted a priori. It is worth asking: What factors could block this transformation and the creation of new forms of life?

5. In Search of Exits

In Francis (2015), paragraph 52, Pope criticizes the character of debt in the present.⁹ This cry has a sociological character that seeks to correct the social and environmental distortions that the concentration of wealth and imperialism generate,¹⁰ and his cry resonates with the movements conducted by contemporary political leaders in the international scene.¹¹ It is an affirmative political process.

In *The Abandoned Being* (Stimilli 2011), the author highlights the debate on the ethical dimension of government over life in order to rethink the meaning of community and the insertion of individuals into it. She anticipates the need to think about the construction of the common and new forms of life in which relations among individuals and among the powers are not mediated, regulated, or stimulated by debt in various forms. She recovers the many perspectives about freedom in Jean-Luc Nancy, Roberto Esposito, and Giorgio Agamben. Stimilli stresses that, Nancy, retrieving Maurice Blanchot's expression, calls the implicit change in the whole community "inoperability" (Stimilli 2011, p. 198), and follows:

The community, Nancy writes, occurs necessarily in what Blanchot calls inoperability—below or beyond work, what is retracted from work, what is not related to the production or finishing anymore, but finds interruption, fragmentation, suspension. The community is formed by the interruption of singularities or by the suspension of what singular beings *are*. The community is not its work, neither does it belong to itself as its works; likewise, communion is not a work, it is not even an operation of the singular beings, for it is simply its being—its being suspended over its limit. Communication is the operability of the social, economic, technical, institutional work. (Nancy *apud* Stimilli 2011, p. 198—our translation)

The community, therefore, according to Nancy, "is not a work", it is not "a function nor is it a finality", it itself "assumes and inscribes anyway [...] the impossibility of community" (Nancy *apud* Stimilli 2011, pp. 198, 199—our translation).

Stimilli evokes the dialogue between Esposito and Nancy¹², in which the first sheds light on the concept of *munus*, the obligation everyone has in relation to what is common, "a gift you give and do not receive" (Esposito 2010, p. 4), "a loss" (Esposito *apud* Stimilli 2011, p. 199), to which Stimilli adds: "To Esposito, this 'loss' is exactly what we have in common. It is "the speech, the trauma, the gap where we come from. It is not the Origin, but the absence, its withdrawal"; its abandonment" (Stimilli 2011, p. 199—our translation).

In the association he establishes between the excluding inclusion of the sovereign power's machinery and the sacred, Giorgio Agamben evokes Nancy's reflection. Agamben notes that Nancy revealed the ambiguity of Bataille's thought about the affirmed sacrifice: he "strongly affirmed the concept of an "unsacrificeable existence" against every sacrificial temptation" (Agamben 1998, p. 113), and adds:

The relation of abandonment is so ambiguous that nothing could be harder than breaking from it. The ban is essentially the power of delivering something over to itself, which is to say, the power of maintaining itself in relation to something presupposed as nonrelational. What has been banned is delivered over to its own separateness and, at the same time, consigned to the mercy of the one who abandons it at once, excluded and included, removed and at the same time captured [...]. (Agamben 1998, pp. 109–10)

Also:

Now it is possible to understand the semantic ambiguity [...] in which "banned" in Romance languages originally meant both "at the mercy of" and "out of free will, freely", both "excluded, banned" and "open to all, free". The ban is the force of simultaneous attraction and repulsion that ties together the two poles of the sovereign exception: bare life and power, *homo sacer* and the sovereign. Because of this alone the ban can signify both the insignia of sovereignty [...] and expulsion from the community. (Agamben 1998, pp. 110–11)

Seeking to comprehend sovereignty, community, and abandonment, Nancy, Esposito, and Agamben are connected in some aspects. Stating that “sovereignty is nothing” (Nancy *apud* Stimilli 2011, p. 199), Nancy relates it to the inoperable community, “from which the ‘being is abandoned’”¹³ (Nancy *apud* Stimilli 2011, p. 199). Understanding sovereignty as a divide that separates one from another, creating the excluding inclusion, Esposito seeks in the community the comprehension of a sense of lack, in which abandonment may reveal a libertarian power.¹⁴ Interpreting sovereignty as the ground where power is made sacred and where the excluding inclusion springs from, Agamben identifies the *homo sacer* with the idea of abandonment, which, on one hand, restrains, and on the other, may set free.¹⁵ An outcome of negativity, the inoperability is here understood as a way out of the dominance device and, thus, out of debt. About this, Stimilli says: At the bottom of Nancy’s speech—also in Esposito’s and Agamben’s—lies the need to break up from the sacrificial paradigm with which western culture has asserted the custody of the meaning of community and the assurance of the same freedom (Stimilli 2011, p. 202).

In the face of all political effort and all conceptual endeavor in the search for exits from the excluding inclusion scheme, it is worth asking: What factors prevented this transformation and the creation of new forms of life? Stimilli’s diagnosis is not positive. She writes:

However, maybe it is worth asking whether the critique—legitimate, as it may be—of the sacrificial paradigm could even be adequate in the globalized post-production era, when politics are definitively dissolved in economy, and a deliberately chosen form of coercion adherent to wealth and consumption results in more resources for the power in place. The economic mechanisms that move the “global market” properly deposit trust in non-productive elements of the existence, such as flexibility, creativity, qualities linked to language and communication, in short, in all those aspects that characterize the essential ‘inoperability’ of human life, its freedom, its modality of being-in-common. Thus, introduced in the economic process, the inoperability of existence does not come much ‘sacrificed’ or ‘immunized’, as in Esposito’s view; or exclusively reduced to the “naked life” put in a gang and separated from its quality, but, instead, it sometimes results in Agamben’s speech; if not, first of all, radically exposed, for example, in the perverse and disquieting form of ‘human capital’. It is a control over the same inoperable modality out of which existence is essentially constituted. (Stimilli 2011, p. 202—our translation; 2019a)

6. Conclusions

The political theology machine implements a rather specific type of exclusion. Among the difficulties that have made it impervious to understanding—besides the number of contexts and meanings it carries—is the fact that it has been considered and interpreted from its very core. Esposito (2015) affirms that such factors render it inaccessible for a critique through which we understand that the overlapping of political and economic elements project a type of theological power that involves, ordines, and structures the world we live in, that governs and affects the singular life of each living creature.

The debt problem—that of the indebted subject and of generalized debt—resides in the fact that it is directly linked to the new forms of political-economic coercion. It deals with sophisticated forms of exploitation that let go of the physical imprisonment, but force individuals to abandon their original form of life and transform what is most singular about them to be adjusted to the aspirations and interests of economic institutions. Involved in a social net that obeys the economic power logic, which involves and ordines everything the same way it used to govern a sovereign political power, individuals are found in a constant indebted state.¹⁶

At the service of a political-economic theology, debt acts precisely to counterfeit in the indebted subject the feeling of his inclusion in the machinery dynamics. The excluding inclusion that it operates, to include people in the universe and the perverse logic of debt,

is also to exclude them from everything that they could have autonomously wished for and chosen for themselves. The cost of inclusion in the permanent debt logic is the loss of one's original condition. Debt is the instrument through which individuals are excluded and absorbed into the machinery's dynamics. Esposito affirms: "By appropriating what is initially the other, the latter remains at the same time included and excluded: included because it is incorporated into the new body; but excluded because it is deprived of its content, which is no longer usable as such" (Esposito 2015, p. 29).

The same way debt is an instrument that creates new forms of life adapted to the neoliberal machinery, the interruption of this process shall happen with the invention of new forms of existence. The creation of forms of life outside the state of permanent debt puts us in front of a problem beyond the economic matter. Inside the neoliberal machinery, any movement to mitigate the process ends up somehow feeding debt's offspring as well as other components of the device. The way out may come from some movement that is not illuded by the forgeries of the economic theology machinery: the problem has always been political. The creation of new power relations and of political powers outside the neoliberal orbit are still somehow related to the review and the transformation of the material production and reproduction conditions of every one of us as individuals. There is an ethical dimension to be understood and somehow revised. To oppose the economic political theology machinery is and shall be a political and ethical confrontation. This confrontation demands a new type of exchange and circulation of moral values among individuals, a new ethical horizon needs to be created. What is certain is that this cannot orbit the power structure in which debt is the instrument for capturing, imprisoning, and reproducing government over life.¹⁷ These new ways of life need to create a new relational *ethos* where debt is not a gateway for individuals to participate in a specific kind of community, individualistically experienced as an endless race to pay off the next debt.

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Notes

- ¹ Esposito affirms: "Just as when we are inside an environment to the point of being confused with its elements or when we look at an object from too close, it is impossible to make out its contours. To do so—to grasp the overall meaning of political theology—we need to look at it from the outside, expressing ourselves in a different language from its own. But this is exactly what its excessive proximity stops us from doing, by crushing us up against its interior walls" (Esposito 2015, p. 1).
- ² Esposito interprets the political-theological machine under Gestell's notion, in Heidegger's terms, specifically, as a tool for production. The machine's activity comes to effect in a way that makes it incomprehensible for those it submits to. He states: "What human beings do not see, or see in inverted terms, is their own position in relation to Gestell" (Esposito 2015, p. 19). Thus, the individuals' relationship with the dispositive is such that they see themselves in the position of those who "govern, manage, and direct, [the image] is reflected upside down in their eyes: in reality, they are governed, managed, and directed by it according to a logic that eludes their capacity to understand" (Esposito 2015, p. 19). The machine inverts the individuals' actual position through the dispositive (debt). It is a grammar that engenders ordinations, and nothing can break the ordinating chain it begins and keeps on going.
- ³ It is worth observing that the secularization as a phenomenon of modernity is bound to political theology. Differently from the theses that comprehend secularization as an event that ends the presence of religion in politics, or through which religion is

expelled from State institutions, Esposito points out that they are contrasting phenomena: “as two conflicting powers, trapped within each other in a contradictory fashion. The theological, from this perspective, is neither the origin nor the limit of secularization but rather a fragment, or a splinter, that at a certain moment, when its entropy has grown, wedges itself inside it, tearing its close-knit fabric” (Esposito 2015, p. 36).

4 Carl Schmitt formulates, in his work of 1922, the ultimate phrase: “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts. . .” (Schmitt 2006). It is not the case of considering that the contemporary States faithfully reproduce the political form of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages; however, the State substitutes the form of the Church, preserving the structure of the sovereign power, the power above all others, the secularized power.

5 Brown’s study presents not only the faith in the market but, particularly, money as one of the main causes of the degradation of contemporary democracies. Governmental institutions, political powers, and the very political world have been more and more invaded by money and democracy is being transformed into plutocracy—the rule of the rich. The alert against the neoliberal mind averts the extension of this phenomenon. Education, jurisprudence, culture, and health are fields colonized by the neoliberal ideal: the political and essentially democratic elements are reduced exclusively to the economic sphere of comprehension (Brown 2016, p. 17).

6 Dardot and Laval summarize the self-entrepreneur thesis as: “The pure dimension of entrepreneurship – alertness to business opportunities—is a relationship of self to self, which underlies the critique of interference. We are all entrepreneurs, or, rather, we all learn to be; we train ourselves exclusively through the play of the market to govern ourselves as entrepreneurs. This also means that, if the market is regarded as a free space for entrepreneurs, all human relations can be affected by the entrepreneurial dimension, which is constitutive of the human” (Dardot and Laval 2013, p. 152).

7 Decision group formed by the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

8 Available at the World Bank (n.d.), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/10/11/low-income-country-debt-rises-to-record-860-billion-in-2020>, accessed on 18 February 2023, and International Debt Statistics 2022, available at <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/36289>, accessed on 22 December 2022.

9 Pope Francis says: “The foreign debt of poor countries has become a way of controlling them, yet this is not the case where ecological debt is concerned. In different ways, developing countries, where the most important reserves of the biosphere are found, continue to fuel the development of richer countries at the cost of their own present and future. The land of the southern poor is rich and mostly unpolluted, yet access to ownership of goods and resources for meeting vital needs is inhibited by a system of commercial relations and ownership which is structurally perverse. The developed countries ought to help pay this debt by significantly limiting their consumption of non-renewable energy and by assisting poorer countries to support policies and programmes of sustainable development. The poorest areas and countries are less capable of adopting new models for reducing environmental impact because they lack the wherewithal to develop the necessary processes and to cover their costs. We must continue to be aware that, regarding climate change, there are *differentiated responsibilities*.” [. . .] (Francis 2015, sct.52).

10 We can see here a kind of mobility that seeks plurality and the creation and/or strengthening of new centers of political, economic, and cultural relations. It attempts to create barriers to the North American and western European hegemonic processes (new forms of the old imperialism?), or maybe even to dismantle one of their most important instruments of power, i.e., debt. In modern and contemporary history, for sure there have been other experiences of resistance and opposition to the indebteding model, to which the central countries systematically respond with the economic embargo formula, as a kind of debt and/or war. It may be interesting to check whether Cuba, Venezuela, Iraq, and Libya are examples of targets the devices aim at.

11 In this environment, Brazilian President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva draws attention to the need of resetting processes in global governance. He emphasizes: “[. . .] what was created after the Second World War, the Bretton Woods institutions no longer work, and no longer serve society’s aspirations or interests. Let’s be clear that the World Bank (n.d.) leaves much to be desired in terms of what the world wants from the World Bank (n.d.). Let’s be clear that the IMF leaves a lot to be desired in what people expect from the IMF. Banks often lend money, and the borrowed money results in state bankruptcy”. (Lula da Silva 2023).

12 Cf. Esposito, R. and Nancy, J.-L. 2021. Introduzione. In Nancy, J. L. *Essere singolare plural*. Torino: Einaudi.

13 In Nancy, abandonment and freedom are associated. Stimilli explains: “Thus begins the volume *The experience of freedom* that opens Nancy’s reflection in this direction. Freedom is not something you have, first you are free and abandoned in freedom, available for the freedom of being. It is a condition that leads to the possibility of an existence that, not being “produced nor deducted anymore”, is “abandoned to its own position” and, eventually, “free because of this abandonment”. [. . .] “Abandoned in freedom”, existence is subtracted of all the essence that does not coincide with itself. It is not a *telos* that gives it a meaning. The exhaustion of meaning, however, is not understood as a “loss”, because it does not occur in an original plenitude. First, it is the same condition of the existence abandoned in the unexpected potentiality that characterizes it. Not something you can do, but something you *are*, something that frees existence for the very possibility of existing. Not being something you can take, freedom can only be “common”—everyone’s and each one’s, nobody’s. It is a statement about freedom, it is an affix, not a subordination, is it not? It cannot be “common”—everyone’s and each one’s, nobody’s. (Stimilli 2011, p. 202)

14 In *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*, Esposito affirms: “What we can and must do is look to what Deleuze, using a deliberately theological term, defined as a “conversion” of the *dispositif* into its opposite. This is also the fate of

a thought of the impersonal: not to frontally oppose what a long tradition has defined as person, or even as subject, but to allow it to rotate on its hinges until its exclusionary power is diffused. Even the concept of “debt,” encamped at the heart of economic theology, can be interpreted as what leads in the end to exhaustion. In situations like our current one, in which everyone is indebted, the notion of credit itself begins to lose force. Certainly, this passage, which flips the violence of debt over into the solidarity of a shared munus (a burden or task but also a kind of gift) is not automatic. It can only result from a conflict against the political–theological order that unifies the world in the form of its division. In order for debt to be extinguished, rather than being repaid, it must be shifted from an economic dimension back into an ontological status—to what each of us always owes everyone else. In this way, only by assuming the common debt will it be remitted at the same time” (Esposito 2015, pp. 14–15).

- 15 As seen in *The Coming Community*: “A being radically devoid of any representable identity would be absolutely irrelevant to the State. This is what, in our culture, the hypocritical dogma of the sacredness of human life and the vacuous declarations of human rights are meant to hide. Sacred here can only mean what the term meant in Roman law: Sacer was the one who had been excluded from the human world and who, even though she or he could not be sacrificed, could be killed without committing homicide (“neque fas est eum immolari, sed qui occidit parricidio non damnatur”) [...] Whatever singularity, which wants to appropriate belonging itself, its own being-in-language, and thus rejects all identity and every condition of belonging, is the principal enemy of the State. Wherever these singularities peacefully demonstrate their being in common there will be a Tiananmen, and, sooner or later, the tanks will appear”. (Agamben 2007, pp. 86–87).
- 16 Still immersed in the Covid-19 pandemic, massive contingents of poor populations—both in central and peripheral countries—are even more vulnerable and imprisoned in the unpayable maze of debt. Although these same populations have been surviving through the pandemic with scarce protection measures, with little to no governmental aid, their countries’ debt has increased to the point of making the World Bank (n.d.) foresee the vulnerability swell of these populations and the bleak aftermath that awaits them in the recessive economic shock that the future stabilization of their countries’ debt shall demand. Such an event confirms what Stimilli stated earlier: debt engenders the logic of its own reproduction and growth.
- 17 Esposito says: “The biblical figure of liberation from all debts, no longer confined to the sabbatical year, can become the philosophical and political mirror in which political theology glimpses the unforeseen possibility of its own undoing (Esposito 2015, p. 15).

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Article

Metamorphoses of Friendship: Jacques Derrida and Saint Augustine

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Abstract: In his *Circumfession*, Jacques Derrida journeys at length with Saint Augustine. The angle adopted is somewhat autobiographical, its philosophy staying as close as possible to the body, to the intimate, to the family. In *Politics of Friendship*, the Bishop of Hippo is one interlocutor among others. Once again, the autobiographical vein is kept alive, this time by book IV of Augustine's *Confessions*. The episode of private life, the dear friend's death, opens now onto political dimensions. Saint Augustine plays a pivotal role in what Derrida calls the infinitization of friendship. Over time, links were put in place, and the contemporary society cannot ignore or get rid of them. Our work here goes back to the traces left in the writings of Saint Augustine by the most classic canons of friendship incorporated into Christian theology. In our conclusion, we will see that Derrida puts this tradition in tension with fraternity, family, and community—all elements that the philosopher considers the most problematic in our current situation, and even more so for a democracy to come.

Keywords: friendship; fraternity; hospitality; community

1. Introduction

Our thesis in this paper on friendship is not to work on the subject of St Augustine himself, but to examine the reception of a classical Christian author (Augustine) in a contemporary philosophical context (Derrida). The trend of our essay is in line with the shift from dogmatism to a more public reflection on theology.

On several occasions, Jacques Derrida appeals to Saint Augustine, whom he greets as his Algerian compatriot, born in 354, in Thagaste (Souk-Ahras): “in this Numidian soil, writes Serge Lancel, where three centuries of Roman presence had not erased the traces of a previous double culture” (Lancel 1999, p. 17). Such “traces” are our passage, bridge, and interface to Derrida himself, born in El Biar in 1934. Elsewhere (in *A Silkworm of One's Own*), on a more familiar tone, it is from “old Augustine” that the philosopher borrows his famous quote: “sero te amavi” (“Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you” (Augustine of Hippo 1991, X, xxvii, p. 38)),¹ while in his *Circumfession*, he reads the *Confessions* of Augustine very closely. This is the occasion for their most personal, autobiographical encounter. The philosopher would like “to raise the stakes” with the bishop of Hippo, as if in a game of poker (“the expression ‘raise the stakes’ belongs only to my mother”) (Derrida 1993, 1/3), or like in a race: “one car overtaking another, doubling it rather” (Derrida 1993, 7/39). Elsewhere, in *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida briefly brings in Saint Augustine. Therefore, through this political bias of friendship, then of fraternity and community, we will approach here the intersections between the thought of Augustine and the work of Jacques Derrida.

To read Derrida, himself a meticulous reader of the great classics, we can appropriate these observations of Jürgen Habermas:

The reader of Jacques Derrida meets an author reading the texts against the grain until they deliver a subversive meaning. Under his inflexible gaze, any context crumbles into fragments; the ground that was supposed to be stable becomes shifting, and the one that was supposed to be full reveals its double bottom. The usual hierarchies, arrangements

and oppositions give us a meaning that goes against the familiar one. The world in which we thought we were at home becomes uninhabitable. We are not of this world: we are strangers among strangers (Habermas 2004).²

As is often the case with Derrida, reading a text calls for, or even requires, reading a whole bundle of other texts with which it is linked, like an ivy or a vine, impossible to detach from their anchoring surfaces. It is about moves, strategies, covers, explorations, and explanations. In a certain way, Habermas has clarified or recalled what Derrida himself had written in *Dissemination*. If it is true that “these texts, and their commerce, definitively escape any exhaustive treatment”, it remains possible “to mark out, in a few rough strokes, a certain number of motifs. These strokes might be seen to form a sort of frame, the enclosure or borders of a history that would precisely be that of a certain play between literature and truth” (Derrida 1981, p. 183).

In *Politics of Friendship*, the theme is therefore inscribed in an arborescence whose varieties Derrida unfolds through time and space. Friendship is part of one or more “clusters”: semantic aggregates expressive or suggestive of many different social practices; policies where links are tied and/or undone between the private and the public, between religion and philosophy. Augustine’s friendship is pivotal in Derrida’s attention to these different policies. It is indeed the place of passage, transition, translation, and transmission of the Greco-Latin heritage in Christianity.

2. The Resumption of Augustine’s Voice

Friendship is caught in the network of languages and cultures. Augustine’s Latin is a living language for him. Yet, for Jacques Derrida, it is a foreign language, if not a dead one, a crude language, steep and arduous, as he confessed elsewhere. The fact that the philosopher assumes Augustine’s Latin, without making it his own, raises the question of language like the raised grain of the wood, and by extension, the questions of translation and then of quotation. Derrida wants to walk, to travel with Augustine, and we feel that the compatriot, in all the complexity of his *Confessions*, is mobilized by Derrida to play a role in a strategy put in place long before this recourse. To recall it briefly, this strategy is based on these crucial dimensions for the author of *Of Grammatology*: language, translation, writing, orality, etc. Moreover, closer to our subject, friendship, the search for another self, “all these words [writes Derrida]: *truth, alienation, appropriation, habitation, home [chez-soi], ipseity, place of the subject, law*, and so on remain, in my eyes, problematic. Without exception. They bear the stamp of the metaphysics that imposed itself through, precisely, this language of the other, this monolingualism of the other” (Derrida 1998, p. 59).

On the same occasion that he lends him his voice, Augustine allows Derrida to introduce into this intellectual strategy revolving around the concept of friendship what “thought” (in its long Platonic reverberation) has always wanted to keep outside, like a foreign body to its reflection: the body itself, the tears, the salt, the blood. Passion, emotion, mourning.

3. The Tears

In *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida opens, displays, and scrutinizes a dossier he has collected concerning politics and friendship: one *and* the other—politics and friendship; and one *of* the other—the politics that friendship establishes or makes possible, the politics that friends want to undertake together for the common good. The philosopher is interested in friendship, its definitions, scissions, curves, ruptures, and duplications. Above all, he is interested in the doubling of friendship, or rather it being overcome, perhaps, by fraternity, its extension to the community in which it is inserted, and the loss of value it may undergo there. In chapter seven of his book, Derrida first evoked the Aristotelian theme of a soul in two bodies, as recalled in the famous words of Montaigne: “One soul in bodies twain, according to that most apt definition of Aristotle”. While pursuing his study of Greek and Roman schemata, all of these discourses “setting off a powerful historical tremor” (Derrida 1997, p. 186), Jacques Derrida invites us to undertake an attentive reading, or better still, a

meditation of Book IV of the *Confessions*: a book, he says, that is “an immense and singular signature [*paraphe*]”, that is to say, “the abbreviation of a paragraph: what is written next to it, in the margin” (Derrida 1986, pp. 34–35). And he states that it “would here deserve, for itself alone, an interminable meditation”, which would seek to take into account the friend, the couple of friends, the mourning, and the testament, “the flow and the economy of tears on the death of a friend, the Christian infinitization of friendship or of a spiritual fraternity which continues, beyond all ‘conversion,’ to implement, in their translations, Greek and Roman schemata” (Derrida 1997, p. 186).

At the heart of this fourth book, we learn that an “infinitely dear friend” has died, that the unthinkable and the impossible have thus happened, and that mourning has begun. From this painful centre flows abundant tears: “Only tears were sweet to me and in my ‘soul’s delights’ (Psalm 138: 11) weeping had replaced my friend” (IV, iv, 9). Starting from a centre, from a bleeding heart, these tears drift in streams of ink towards the margins to inscribe this singular signature in a text dealing with friendship. However, before following them to where their weight of love leads them, we must evoke the presence of those whom the knell that announces death summons, counts, and classifies.

4. The Large Number

One of the shocks caused by the best friend’s death was the exit of the room, the house, the villa of the father, and the discovery of the large number of people: “This work of mourning is called—*glas*. It is always of/for the proper name. The *glas* is first of all [...] the signal of a trumpet destined to call (*calare*), convoke, gather together, reassemble as such, a class of the Roman people” (Derrida 1986, p. 86). Such an apparition had not come much to Augustine’s mind before 397. A recent bishop, a sought-after orator, he had undertaken a preaching tour in Carthage and the surrounding areas while keeping on with the redaction of his *Confessions*, “begun in the same year Augustine preached in Carthage” (Brown 2001, p. 596). The spectres moving in the foggy visions of previous stays suddenly took shape on this occasion. “These men and women whom Augustin had rubbed shoulders with without asking any questions about their subjects in the days of his student youth, whom he had seen again with a look that was already different, a little more distanced, from his professorial chair, he now had them in front of him, certainly differentiated from each other, but, in the eyes of the pastor he had become, overall a dangerously exposed *massa peccati*, who had to be led to his salvation” (Lancel 1999, p. 280). In these circumstances, Augustine no longer converses, exchanges, or dialogues with familiars, these other selves, friends in spirit and wisdom, friends taking advantage of intellectual leisure. In front of him are gathered the current Christian listeners (or readers), the curious, the influential pagans, still very present in society and with whom it is necessary to correspond.

On the one hand, the radical view of the gospel is that the proclamation of the risen Christ has nothing to do with the artifices of rhetoric. In *The City of God*, Augustine readily acknowledges this: “Men uninstructed in any branch of a liberal education, without any of the refinement of heathen learning, unskilled in grammar, not armed with dialectic, not adorned with rhetoric, but plain fishermen, and very few in number,—these were the men whom Christ sent with the nets of faith to the sea of this world” (Augustine of Hippo 1887b, XXII, V).

On the other hand, the law of a large number of listeners is diverting, bending the whole conception and practice of Augustine. The experienced rhetorician already had the tools of dialogue, persuasion, confrontation, appeal, pretence, and tears, actual or fictitious. But within the framework of a persuasion aimed at this crowd, which always slips away from rhetorical influence—in the theatre, Terence will complain about the “coarse multitude”—he knows that he will have to resign himself to resorting to the testimony of the example, and first, to testify from oneself, to take oneself as a witness, and sometimes to bear witness. Augustine had already noted this in a late addition to Book IV of the treatise *On Christian Doctrine*: “Whatever may be the majesty of the style, the life of the speaker will count for more in securing the hearer’s compliance” (Augustine of Hippo 1887a, XXVII,

p. 59). He adds, “The man who cannot speak both eloquently and wisely should speak wisely without eloquence, rather than eloquently without wisdom” (XXVIII, 61). Moreover, if to speak wisely is beyond the orator’s power, “let his manner of living be an eloquent sermon in itself” (XXIX, 62). Was this not Augustine’s explicit intention: “This I desire to do, in my heart before you in confession, but before many witnesses with my pen” (X, i, 1)?

The narration of the story and its dissemination is a fundamental step in keeping the friendship alive, nourishing and igniting it with a fire taken from the ether of the spirit. Friendship gives and is given as an example to a small number, but then you never know into whose hands the book may fall, and if not the book, the noise made by the book, and the rumour that carries the story beyond the circle of friends. “To whom do I tell these things? Not to you, my God. But before you I declare this to my race, to the human race, though only a tiny part can light on this composition of mine” (II, iii, 5). It may therefore be that the friends themselves, or their friendship, if possible, will be put on show. Since the knell sounding of the death of the infinitely dear friend has made it possible to gather and classify unexpected interlocutors, appearing from nowhere, from no horizon of friendship or even civility, something more illustrious is needed, which will shine forth the brilliance of genuine friendships. The surviving friend must build another architecture, a more prominent place that can accommodate the crowd and where theatrical performances will strike the imagination.

5. At the Theatre: *Homo Sum*

From the margins of this chapter four, which interests Jacques Derrida, the flood of tears drifts to the sand of the arenas, the circus, or the theatre. Augustine admits, “I was captivated by theatrical shows. They were full of representations of my own miseries and fuelled my fire” (III, ii, 2). Yet it was in such a place, as the socialist Pierre Leroux reports, that “the feeling of collective humanity” was expressed in Rome for the first time; and it was another compatriot of Augustine and Derrida, “a freedman, a child of Carthage, taken from his family and fed by the Romans as a slave, who formulated it, and this formula was so new that it struck every one with astonishment” (Leroux 1848, pp. 120–21). Leroux then quotes the passage of Augustine’s Letter 155 to Macedonius, an important figure in the Roman administration, vicar of Africa, a “penetrating” and “educated man” (Letter 153), with whom Augustine had already interceded in favour of criminals. Their correspondence speaks of “true friendship”, which is “an entirely gratuitous love that does not derive its price from temporal advantages. For no one can truly be the friend of a man if he has not first been a friend of the truth”. The bishop proposed to extend the movement of the love of God, wherein the base of true friendship is the love of neighbour. According to a very typical mixed argument, and since it is a question of truth, he relies first on the commandment drawn from the Scriptures: “For Christ, that is to say, the Truth, teaches us that all the Law and the Prophets are bound by these two precepts: to love God with all soul, with all heart, with all mind, and to love our neighbour as ourselves (Mt 12, 37–40)”. Then, he slides without transition on a concordance with both philosophy (reason) and commercial exchanges.

For if the bond of money unites people, how much more does the bond of nature unite them, which they share not by the law of exchange but by that of birth? For this reason, that famous comic playwright—for the splendour of the truth is not lacking to brilliant minds—has one older man say to another: Do you have so much leisure from your own affairs that you busy yourself with the affairs of others that are none of your concern? And he added the response from the other: I am a human being; I do not regard anything human as of no concern to me. They say that the whole theatre, full of stupid and ignorant people, applauded that idea. The union of human minds naturally stirs the love of all human beings so that each human being in it feels that he is a neighbour of any other. (Augustine of Hippo 1990a, p. 14)

The beginning of the following paragraph, however, will reaffirm the primacy of the Gospel commandment: “Man, therefore, must love God and himself and his neighbour

with that love which the divine law commands him”, so that the detour made by the scene of the universal applause appears after all as an almost ornamental excursus, a figure of speech, a reminder of a kind of commonplace rather than an evocation of the truth. Moreover, the recourse to divine law is a juridical formulation of a deeper theology, as stated by Saint Paul: “The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Romans, 5, 5).

6. Genetics of Friendship

The way Augustine seems to understand it, this verse by Terence belongs to an argumentation that aims to deploy the phases of the genetics of friendship. There are many harmonious metamorphoses wherein the natural, physical, biological, animal, or vegetable character that we like to show moults without shock or mutation, as if it were a vital drive, which triggers the organic development of an appetite for life that blossoms into a friendship. Here again, Augustine speaks with the same voice as Cicero, and both follow the Stoics. “It is nature itself, he observes in *The City of God*, which urges us to love those who are born of us” (Augustine of Hippo 1887b, III, xix, p. 62): household, family, loved ones, fellow citizens, neighbours. Laelius, for his part, puts in first place the political scope of this natural development, to which, he says, friendship must bring a correction and a supplement.

For I believe I see quite clearly that all men are meant by nature to have some sort of companionship one with another, and that the depth and significance of this companionship varies according to the degree of relationship between them. Thus, it is stronger between citizen and citizen than between citizen and foreigner, between those who are related by blood than those who are not. In the latter case, at least, nature herself brings about a friendship, but it is not quite as firmly based as it ought to be. For the friend has this advantage over the relative: relatives may lose their goodwill, friends cannot, for once goodwill has been lost, the friend is no longer a friend, but the relative is still a relative. (Cicero 1971, V, p. 19)

The same development is found again in Augustine’s comment on the classic Christian text on friendship, that of the First Letter of John. “It is with it [love and/or friendship] like fire: It must need, like fire, first seize upon what is nearest, and so extend to what is further off” (Augustine of Hippo 1888, viii, p. 4).

Love all men, even your enemies, not because they are your brethren, but that they may be your brethren; that you may be at all times on fire with brotherly love, whether toward him that has become your brother, or towards your enemy, so that, by being beloved, he may become your brother. Wheresoever ye love a brother, you love a friend. Now is he with you, now is he knit to you in unity, a catholic unity. (Augustine of Hippo 1888, X, p. 7)

The Italian translation expands the semantic field of “catholic unity” to this sense of humanity attached to Terence’s verse: “nell’unità che si estende a tutti gli uomini”. And Augustine, the rhetorician homilist, is carried away by the fire of love/Caritas: “The discipline of charity, my brethren, its strength, flowers, fruit, beauty, pleasantness, food, drink, meat, embracing, hath in it no satiety. If it so delights us while in a strange land, in our own country, how shall we rejoice!”.

Yet the difficulty of the interactions between humanity, friendship, and fraternity is not resolved. On the contrary, it is even more complicated by a third middle way, which considers the greatest number but establishes a hierarchy between individuals and groups, which is also considered natural. If humans are members of a universal fraternity, this “membership”, free and open to all, must draw the law of its organization from the human anatomy. “Just as, among the parts of the body, there are some which are as it were made for themselves, the eyes for example and the ears, while certain members serve as auxiliaries to others, the legs for example and the hands . . . likewise we are by nature prepared to form groups, assemblies, cities”. We can foresee all of the socio-politico-religious extensions of

this recourse to the body, and we can read about them in the letters of Paul, where a lot is said about the head, the chief, the headgear, the *esprit de corps*, the mystical body, and so on.

7. Survival of Friendship

While discussing the genetics of friendship, we are still debating the tears shed and the death toll, which, as Derrida reminds us, unites and classifies. At first, Augustin, the tried friend, pushes a rather rhetorical exclamation: How to survive his dead friend? The friend who stayed behind fears that he will now only live halfway, deprived of his other self. Augustine indeed knows all resources of eloquence when he writes: “I was surprised that any other mortals were alive since he whom I had loved as if he would never die was dead. I was even more surprised that when he was dead, I was still alive, for he was my ‘other self’” (IV, vi, 11). The survivor grieves (*mourning*) for surviving, and this grievance (*guilt*) expresses itself in blame: “What madness not to understand how to love human beings with awareness of the human condition!” (IV, vii, 12).

On the other hand, the survivor is afraid of dying too, in fear that the friend who is already dead will thus die definitively, entirely. Will the friend’s memory fade? Will the friend who was half of oneself now be a spectral companion, an immaterial ghost who accompanies, obsesses, and haunts his friend who survives him? “Things rise and set: in their emerging, they begin as it were to be, and grow to perfection; having reached perfection, they grow old and die. Not everything grows old, but everything dies”. (IV, x, 15) This reality, which one would say is ecological, is symbolized by Augustine in the movements of our language. Those who pass away and disappear after having appeared in our lives carry out, in fact, the same movement as the words of the language, which follow one another at the same time as the meaning of the sentence is formed: “I retain images of the sounds which constitute these words. I know that they have passed through the air as a noise, and that they no longer exist” (X, x, 17).

“He, [Augustine] avows ‘horror,’ and confesses to a double terror: that of surviving and not surviving, of surviving with half his soul amputated—the ineluctable arithmetical consequence of the Aristotelian axiom—but also that of not surviving, that is, of *perhaps* (*forte*) not keeping within himself; in what is left of self, at least a little of the beloved” (Derrida 1997, p. 186). If the spectrality threatens the dead friend, it also affects the survivor, who will henceforth be only half of himself, and who states “I did not wish to live with only half of myself” (IV, vi, 11). Death, mourning, and guilt made Augustine question himself so much that he had become a “vast problem” to himself (IV, iv, 9).

In another theatrical formula, Augustine exclaims: “Perhaps the reason why I so feared death was that then the whole of my much-loved friend would have died” (IV, vi, 11). Once the friend is dead, the need for the survival of the bond of friendship now gives it an extension, a diffusion, a political illustration. Jacques Derrida recalls that Aristotle’s “*Eudemian Ethics*, for example, inscribes friendship, knowledge and death, but also survival, from the start, in a single, *selfsame* configuration” (Derrida 1997, p. 7). While the death toll summons many strangers to this friendship, it is perhaps through the question of the friend’s survival that the friendship finally touches on political life. The friend’s death will be spread, and, like a tocsin, this noise will provide an occasion for the people to gather not around his still warm bed but around the memory of an immortal friendship. A monument to the dead, a column, or a stele must be erected and turned towards this vast audience needing “edification”. Loss drives friendships to engage in the work of memory, commemoration, and dissemination, in such a way as is described in the following strong expression of Cicero: “So that where his friend is he is; [. . .] and in his friend’s life he enjoys a second life after his own is finished. This last is perhaps the most difficult to conceive” (Cicero 1971, VII, p. 23).

It is, therefore, a question of surviving the dead and, ultimately, death itself, of living beyond or even in a beyond. A loss opens the door to survival, but faced with the friend’s death, the young Augustine, barely a Christian, does not yet possess the beautiful, haughty serenity of the pagan Laelius. “I do indeed grieve! After all, I have been bereaved of a friend

such as the world will never see again—at least so it seems to me. One thing I am sure of: there was never such a one before. But I am in no need of panaceas; I am quite capable of consoling myself, and I am particularly comforted by the fact that I am free of that error which in most men is the casual cause of anguish at the passing of friends” (Cicero 1971, III). What is this error? It is that something bad happened to the friend. Laelius adds, “I do not feel that Scipio has suffered any misfortune; I am the one who has suffered misfortune if any has occurred. But to be crushed by grief at one’s own misfortunes is the act not of a man who loves his friend, but of one who loves himself” (III, 10). It is, therefore, necessary that everyone supports what happens to oneself, stoically. Moreover, this friend, Scipio Africanus, had not died young, unlike Augustine’s anonymous friend. He had achieved in his long life all that he could wish to do, all that could be expected of him. “Well, then, what would a man like that have stood to gain from the addition of a few more years of life?” (III, 11), asks Laelius.

On the other hand, should the survivor’s sadness be based on whether there is some immortality after death, or whether there is none? Laelius and his friend Scipio are among those who think according to a long tradition bearing the opinion of the ancients and of “the wisest of men by Apollo’s oracle” (Socrates), who maintained “that the souls of men were divine, and that when they had departed from the body, they found the road back to heaven lying open before them, and that, the better and more just a man had been, the smoother and easier this road was for him” (Cicero 1971, IV/13). Augustine, the narrator of the *Confessions*, shares the same opinion, which for him is now doubled with a Christian belief. However, at the time of his friendship in Book IV, he states “I did not know this” (IV, xii, 20), that is: friendship in God. “‘Happy is the person who loves you’ (Tobit 13: 18) and his friend in you, and his enemy because of you (Matt. 5: 44). Though left alone, he loses none dear to him; for all are dear in the one who cannot be lost. Who is that but our God, the God who made heaven and earth and filled them? By filling them he made them. (Jer. 23: 24). None loses you unless he abandons you”. (IV, ix, 14). Among the pagans, “if, on the other hand, the opposite view is sounder, that is, that body and soul both perish together, and no sensation at all is left, then, to be sure, there is nothing good in death, but equally surely there is nothing bad”. Since the dead do not suffer at all, the suffering is therefore only that of the survivors, and Laelius has already concluded that they must master their pain. It is therefore up to them to ensure the dead maintain a specific survival in the world they have left, through the work of memory and celebration.

At first, this memory that has woven a narrative of the memories of the days lived together is a personal treasure. Then, however, the ordered memory of the beautiful past concordance and the perfect agreement that the friends have known must also be shared by the public in a social diffusion. Friends, few on Earth in the society of the living, will be even fewer in the limited pantheon of famous men. “And I cherish this hope [the hope that for all time to come men will remember my friendship with Scipio] the more because in all the course of history, men can name scarcely three or four pairs of friends; to this category, I venture to hope, men will assign the friendship of Scipio and Laelius” (Cicero 1971, IV/15). This social recognition does not relate to the memory of a single man, or of a great man—nor is it about two or more of these characters. It is about the friendship that united them, and that the memory is now offering as an example.

8. Backtracking: Emulation and Imitation

Let us come back for a moment to the experience of humanity that took place at the theatre. The instantaneous (and ephemeral?) effectiveness recognized in the theatrical performance is entirely based on a complex dynamic of mimesis, the very one that presided over education, then friendship, and which will now be used to persuade the great number. It is therefore necessary to pause in order to follow its establishment in Augustine’s thought. Two major statements preside over it. On the one hand, a fundamental theology: humans are imitators of God himself. “In their perverted way, all humanity imitates you. Yet they put themselves at a distance from you and exalt themselves against you. But even by thus

imitating you they acknowledge that you are the creator of all nature and so concede that there is no place where one can entirely escape from you" (II, vi, 14). From a less spiritual point of view, imitation seems to be the realization of this statement of Aristotle: "First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated" (Aristotle 2008, IV). Thus, in the *Confessions*, the imitation practiced by the schoolboy in the first book pursues the bitter experience of the jealous infant (I, vii, 11) while transforming it. What is now the object of imitation at school is first an imitation through narrative. The student must memorize the words and the corresponding acts thanks to the stories that have organized them. The reading, for example, of the misfortunes of Dido in tears brings tears to the young reader. Augustine succeeded too well in this exercise, which he considered to be "fornication". Nevertheless, this is how language is learned, and words, "which are like exquisite and precious vessels" (I, xvi, 26) only reach us filled with those poisons that we must absorb before protecting ourselves against them. "It is as if we would not know words such as 'golden shower' and 'bosom' and 'deceit' and 'temples of heaven' and other phrases occurring in the passage in question, had not Terence brought on to the stage a worthless young man citing Jupiter as a model for his own fornication" (I, xvi, 26).

Secondly, another form of imitation offered to the schoolboy is what the poet's words give us to see. The "copy" that the young boy must make in his life concerns the painting of a painting, a fresco, more precisely, "representing how Jupiter, they say, sent a shower of gold into Danae's lap and deceived a woman". What the schoolboy reads in this play by Terence allows him to see a "young debauchee" who contemplates this image and proposes to imitate in his conduct the "lust of Jupiter": "Notice how he encourages himself to lust as if enjoying celestial authority". And Augustine, after quoting the two verses that report the self-excitement of the young man in the legend, exclaims: "And am I, poor little fellow, not to do the same as he? Yes indeed, I have done it with pleasure" (I, xvi, 26). The pedagogy of imitation is practical, since "the words actually encourage the more confident committing of a disgraceful action".

This process of pedagogical imitation is essential for Saint Augustine. In his Letter 91 (year 408) to Nectarius of Calama, he comes back to it more explicitly, and at the same time, he discusses the political repercussions of *mimesis*. He observes with satisfaction that "those most learned men [...] who investigated or even described the character that they thought the earthly state or city ought to have in discussions among friends" have ceased to propose to youth the imitation of their gods, and replaced it by the imitation of men "whom they considered outstanding and praiseworthy". Augustine, having reminded his correspondent of the well-known episode of another play by Terence, *The Eunuch*, adds that this young man "would in no way have fallen into that sin out of passion or have plunged himself into it by committing it, if he had preferred to imitate Cato rather than Jupiter". Such a choice, however, was impossible, since the young man "was forced to worship in the temples of Jupiter rather than Cato". Is it not, therefore, the religion that acts as a meta-rule governing individual and collective behaviour?

Moreover, as a moralist, Augustine observes that the perversion of the people makes them recognize themselves in these comedies that resemble them. "Read or recall how wisely the same books [of the *Republic*] explain that the descriptions and actions portrayed in the comedies can only be accepted if the morals of those who accept them are in harmony with them". Calling again upon "the authority of the most illustrious men, who are outstanding in the state and are discussing the state", Augustine draws the conclusion that "very wicked men become worse by the imitation of the gods, not, of course, true gods, but false and fictitious ones" (Augustine of Hippo 1990b, p. 4). In the second book of *The City of God*, Saint Augustine will rephrase the same argumentation, calling this time to the authority of two of those "most learned men", Cicero and Scipio the African: "The opinion of the ancient Romans on this matter is attested by Cicero in his work *De Republica*, in which Scipio, one of the interlocutors, says, The lewdness of comedy could never have

been suffered by audiences, unless the customs of society had previously sanctioned the same lewdness" (Augustine of Hippo 1887b, II, ix).

The different orders of human activity do not function in isolation. Saint Augustine's argument thus works on several correlated levels: the theatre, the official religion, and public mores. The most radical solution for the bishop writing to a cultivated pagan who shares the same culture is that the metarule should be an authentic religion, the religion of the true God. Once this is in place, the other dimensions of human life will find their ethical and political dispositions.

9. Confluences of Friendship and Imitation

While the primary level of imitation in the first book of the *Confessions* is pedagogical, the following books still bring out more of its resources. Our Book IV gives us a new cartography in three configurations, as imitation is grafted onto friendship. At first, this book is about the role of imitation in the perversion of the one-to-one relationship between one friend and another, and this perversion was to be one of the causes of tears at the time of mourning. But it was a brief friendship of youth that lasted barely a year. Initially, Augustine and his companion formed a small community of tastes. It was a friendship of thought. But retroactively, the theologian Augustine will consider (despite the profoundly emotional tone of the rest of the story) that it was not a true friendship, since there is no true friendship except that which God cements.

The second configuration of imitation organizes the relationships between the individual and his group of friends. Augustine illustrated the harmful powers of these friendly liaisons, the "mysterious seduction of the spirit", in the well-known episode of the theft of the pears. An almighty narrator, the bishop undoubtedly aggravates the power of harmful influences to better warn his current readers: "Friendship can be a dangerous enemy [. . .]. As soon as the words are spoken 'Let us go and do it', one is ashamed not to be shameless" (II, ix, 17). The moment of decision under the influence of friendship is instantaneous; it suffers no delay and no procrastination.

Finally, a third configuration links friendship to public opinion. Augustine, after writing his first book, *De Pulchro et apto*, dedicated it to a man unknown to him, Hierus, orator of Rome: "I had never set eyes on him, but I loved the man for his renown as a person of high culture, and because I had heard some words of his quoted which gave me pleasure" (IV, xiv, 21). Augustine gives then a glimpse of the insidious work of social persuasion.

How do I know and how can I be sure in making confession before you that my love for him was aroused by the regard of those praising him rather than by the actual achievements which evoked their praise? If, far from praising him, they had vilified him, and had given a critical and scornful account of his work, my interest would not have been kindled and aroused. Certainly, the actual facts would have been no different, nor the man himself. The only alteration would have been in the feeling conveyed by the speakers. See how the human soul lies weak and prostrate when it is not yet attached to the solid rock of truth. The winds of gossip blow from the chests of people ventilating their opinions; so the soul is carried about and turned, twisted and twisted back again". (IV, xiv, 23)

Likewise, for spiritual friendships, it is still the image of fire, of flame, which illustrates the contagion that expands membership: "But love in one person is infectious in kindling it in another. Hence, it comes about that a person who is praised comes to be loved, when people believe that the praise comes from a sincere heart, that is, when the praise comes from one who loves him" (IV, xiv, 21).

Thus, in these three stages, imitation exerted itself on friendship to lead it astray by persuasion. It exercised such a constraint that the action was done reluctantly, and finally, via an emotional contagion, it moved to love a stranger according to the strength of praise given to him by praisers presumed to have sincere hearts.

10. Derrida's Revival of Augustine

Jacques Derrida invited us to a meditation that he said would be endless and which had to consider the autobiographical elements described in a masterful way in Book IV of the *Confessions*: “the friend, the couple of friends, on mourning and the testament, the flow and the economy of tears on the death of a friend the friend, the couple of friends”. This anchoring point in the emotional, the intimate, and the domestic, was to open onto “the Christian infinitization of friendship or of, spiritual fraternity which continues, beyond all ‘conversion’, to implement, in their translations, Greek and Roman schemata, Book IV of his *Confessions*” (Derrida 1997, p. 186).

However, the incompleteness of this conversion is not entirely due to blindness, inaction, or the resignation of Christian thought. Jacques Derrida recognizes that the Greek concept of friendship was already pregnant, full of Christian developments to come: “We could identify a Christian logic only after acknowledging *also*, in the same move, with all its subsequent consequences, the deployment of a Greek memory” (Derrida 1997, note 10, p. 268).

The new phenomenon, of which Augustine gives the expression, and the lived testimony is indeed that of a cultural continuity, whereas the Catholic bishop maintains or appears to maintain the Greek and Roman patterns. “He [Augustine] is an heir and a shaper of a long tradition that takes from the Greco-Roman past assumptions about human beings and how they work. The intellectual revolution of Greek antiquity and the cultural revolution of Christian antiquity both make sense within that underlying tradition. If that tradition now gives way, ideas built on them will find the ground shifting precipitously” (O'Donnell 2005, p. 326). Augustine claims to maintain these assumptions while making them undergo a Christian conversion, a curvature, a radical translation. This radicality would be that of the Good News, of the message of Christ. The Christian conversion of classical schemata and their translation entails an extension to infinity, which Derrida calls “infinitization”, taking place in two directions. One is vertical, a *metanoia in God* in the Christian faith “of this model of fraternal friendship”, as we can read more specifically in the confessional speech given by Augustine. “Here, one would then have to call on the testimony of the entirety of the *Confessions*, for this is the very law of their movement” (Derrida 1997, p. 187). This upward orientation and this Christian turning away is expressed, for example, in Augustine's injunction to “love the friend in you, O God, and the enemy because of you”.

The Christian infinitization of friendship is also expressed in its extension to a spiritual, theological, communal fraternity. The texts of the Greco-Roman canonical tradition are confronted with the canon of the Christian scriptures (and the institutions that stem from them), in which fraternity and community are intimately linked. Derrida believes that this “perhaps suffices to de-configure, if not to disfigure, the exemplary paradigms, the classifications and the periodizations of use” forming “the tormented landscape of these geological folds”. However, it appears that the expected Christian discrimination will not have taken place. Thus, with Augustine, we see how the restricted circle of friends widens progressively according to new configurations required by the novelty of the Gospel. At the same time, this widening of the circle corresponds to an extension of the meaning of the words *friends* and *friendship*, although the lexicon and large sections of the old discourses are taken up as they are in their new context and Christianized Latin. For example, the few friends in Christ develop into many brothers, the number of which comes into play in democracy, in a way that does not overlap with what is experienced in the assembly of Christians. Civil political fraternity may appear to duplicate Christian political fraternity, but it is not identified with it. For a Christian, the friend often takes on the brother's features, and vice versa: fraternal friendship or friendly fraternity. Theology and the institution find their interest in these semantic overlaps. But the community of brothers (and sisters, although they remain firmly in the background if they are not totally excluded) is not a democracy, no more than the family unit.

At the end of his “digression”, Derrida brings together in a single appreciation a movement that is common to Saint Augustine and Montaigne.

The fact that Saint Augustine and Montaigne (among others) continue to develop, deploy and make explicit Aristotelian and Ciceronian motifs, to claim authority for themselves in the letter of these texts while undoubtedly submitting them to a sort of infinite transplantation, to an uprooting and transplantation of the infinite, is enough to cause us to suspect something untimely, some non-identity with self, in each of the presumed models: Greek, Roman, Christian. (Derrida 1997, p. 188)

Therefore, a contemporary reading that would try to disturb the beautiful Greco-Roman-Christian order, the conservation, and transmission of this archive would not be so untimely. It would not be at all out of place to question the strategies and effects of these displacements. Considering completely new situations that would have been unthinkable for the Ancients, this contemporary reading would be perspicacious, interrogative, clairvoyant, and young in a certain way. In the sense of the work proposed by Derrida himself, it would seek to try to displace the conventional practices of reading to create a new kind of community of readers, as he said in “Une folie . . .” (8). He immediately indicated, however, that he did not like either the word community or even the thing: “if by the community we mean, as often, a harmonious whole, consensus and fundamental agreement under the phenomena of discordance or war, I don’t really believe in it and I sense as many threats as promises”. His interlocutor, François Ewald, suggested to him that would not his own “deconstructive” work be “to induce these reading practices which will themselves be producers of meaning?” Certainly, agrees the philosopher, insofar as a community “knows its limit—and that its limit is its openness: once it believes it has understood, collected, interpreted, kept the text, then something of it, something quite different in him escapes him or resists him, which calls for another community, which never allows itself to be completely interiorized in the memory of a present community. An experience of mourning and promise which establishes the community but also forbids it to come together keeps within itself the reserve of another community which will otherwise sign quite different contracts” (Derrida and Ewald 1991, pp. 8–9).³ A community that is aware of its circularity and which would not allow itself to be locked into it would be driven by a call to go beyond its borders to give place and hospitality to any other community that is simultaneously a signatory to the shared contracts and dissident.

11. Conclusions

Did not Derrida evoke “a powerful historical tremor” (Derrida 1997, p. 186) that should occur at the root of a democracy to come, the necessity and the possibility of maintaining both the heterogeneity of the “all other is all other” concept, and equality? Derrida, writes Paola Marrati, “forcefully asserts that the democracy to come is not only not present, but that the very idea of a democracy that bears infinite otherness at its root has not yet been thought of” (Marrati 2004, p. 240).⁴ However, it is quite the contrary. As clearly stated in the list Cicero gave, priority is always given to the closest to oneself. “Apparently freer from the “natural” ties of family and consanguinity”, adds Paola Marrati, “therefore less suspect in the register of democratic and universalist policies, friendship nevertheless renews, and powerfully, a family model, and not just any family model. Friends-brothers, equality as fraternity, moves away from the family in the strict sense of the term only to universalize it in the figure of a fraternal community” (Marrati 2004, p. 241). It is only step by step that the figure of the stranger appears, sometimes like a spectre or a haunting. Caught in the difficulties of the double etymology: *hostis* and *hospes*: enemy and host, “the categorical imperative of hospitality” of which Anne Dufourmantelle (1997, p. 71)⁵ speaks struggles to make itself heard and even more so to impose itself.

Jacques Derrida (and Emmanuel Lévinas, even more powerfully) recalls the necessary ethics of the other and of the Wholly Other to policies that otherwise encourage the self-segregation of the same, of the other as oneself, and the gathering of the same. “The *hostis* responds to hospitality as the ghost remembers the living without admitting oblivion.

To the pacified reason of Kant, Derrida opposes the primary haunting of a subject that otherness prevents from closing in on his peace of mind" (Dufourmantelle 1997, p. 12). As an echo of the astonishment of the pagan correspondents of Augustine, reticent at his openness to *Caritas*, Jacques Derrida asks himself: "Why would I call this foreigner my friend (for we are speaking of this absolute foreigner, if only the neighbourhood foreigner, the foreigner within my family) and not the other? Why am I not the friend of just anyone? Am I not, moreover, just that, in subscribing to such a strong and at the same time disarming and disarmed proposition? There could never be any appeasing response to this question, of course" (Derrida 1997, p. 298). This deconstruction of the (too) familiar to restore its appearance of foreignness constitutes a healthy asceticism for the better health of our life in common.

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- ¹ Unless otherwise specified, references are to the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine.
- ² My translation.
- ³ See note 2 above.
- ⁴ See note 2 above.
- ⁵ See note 2 above.

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Article

Biopolitics, Immunity, and Religion: A Brief Critical Reading of Roberto Esposito

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Abstract: In Western culture, it is possible to trace an archeology of the political as an effect of theological-political devices (essentially Christian-inspired). If we add to this the evolution of politics, in modern times, towards biopolitics, then this relationship focuses on very concrete topics. This is the case of the immunological process—from a personal, social, and philosophical perspective—thoroughly analyzed by the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito. In the context of his philosophical immunology, the place of religion is mainly archaeological and is interpreted critically: either as an immunization mechanism that results in self-immunization, destroying what it intends to defend; or in another way, from a perspective closer to the Christian tradition, as a “theological-political machine”, based on the “person” device, which ends up giving rise to binarisms that dissolve themselves into the One, by the domain of one of the poles. This article aims to critically analyze his position on both aspects, proposing a reading close to his thought but which is, at the same time, somewhat different. This proposal is directly inspired by neither a binarian nor an immunological, but rather a “ternary” trinitarian theology. The originality of the article lies in evaluating the place of religion within Esposito’s philosophical immunology—which has not been worked on—as well as in a critical discussion on his interpretation either of religion or of some theological-political devices; this critical approach is based on an alternative reading of the same topics.

Keywords: biopolitics; philosophical immunology; political theology; community

1. Introduction

The Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito has developed a reflection concentrated on the category of politics, with a particular focus on biopolitics (Fulco 2021; Cacciari and Esposito 2013). As part of this reflection, he elaborated a proposal called, in his own nomenclature, philosophical immunology. In this approach, it is possible to think of a proper place for the religious dimension¹, especially in its political articulation and political relevance. The present study intends to understand and critically situate, within this proposal, the place of religion, first of all, from the perspective of the “immunity” category. Furthermore, in his philosophical immunology, the reference to certain theological-political devices or *dispositifs* that influenced the Western world, and which are critically analyzed, occupies a prominent place, namely in the sense of discovering the place of the non-political dimension in the constitution of human communities. This dimension of Esposito’s proposal makes it possible to deepen the place of religion, namely Christianity, in a philosophical immunology, exploring the archaeological and genealogical significance of certain concepts which are from theological origin, like the concept of “person”, as well as their impact on the configuration of Western societies, namely in the political dimension. The study that follows, in addition to presenting some fundamental lines into Esposito’s thoughts, intends to critically analyze the way in which he situates the religious dimension and how he analyzes the effect of theological-political devices, advancing a proposal directly inspired by the Italian philosopher and his challenges, but with some significant changes.

To accomplish what it proposes, the article begins by presenting the philosophical immunology project, as developed by Esposito himself, based on a group of philosophers (1); afterwards, the way he understands the religious phenomenon within this immunology will be presented, drawing mainly on Derrida (2); then the subject will be deepened philosophically, exploring the way in which Esposito understands the genealogy of politics based on the effect of a certain “theological–political machine” (3); and finally, based on a revisitation of trinitarian theology, a critical reading of Esposito’s approach is sketched (4).

2. Biopolitics and Immunology

The period of the recent pandemic can be considered one of the most explicit global manifestations of the biopolitical devices described by Michel Foucault: firstly, the affirmation of politics as governability; and secondly, the expansion and concentration of government activities in the lives of subjects and populations, with a special focus on its strictly biological (or zoological) dimension, which Giorgio Agamben named, after Walter Benjamin, “bare life” (“*nuda vita*”) (Agamben 1995). Regardless of the different positions on that issue, either more radically or more moderately balanced for or against (with Agamben among those who were radically against, and Esposito among those moderately in favor) (Gesueli and Passos 2020), it is indisputable that it was a matter of revelation and, to some extent, the consummation of a paradigm which had been intensified by modernity. The protection and conservation of “bare life” became the central focus of political activity, namely through the classic mechanisms of disciplining individuals, population control, and the politicization of medicine (or the medicalization of politics). Of course, all of this raised more acutely the question of biopolitics that not only reduces politics to the protection of life before and after any other function in the constitution of the *polis*, but also reduces life to its purely biological—or even zoological (cf. Agamben 1995, p. 4)—dimension, transforming the pursuit of *salus* (salvation or health) into a pure concern for biological health and concentrating everything on health policy. The conflict of values, which we witnessed during the pandemic, was merely the clearest revelation of a state of affairs that has marked modern and contemporary societies, in which protection and security have become a primary concern².

It is not my intention to discuss here the different perceptions of the concept of biopolitics (Marzocca 2020), from the most critical to the most receptive positions, and much less to debate the correct interpretation of Foucault’s proposal (Nancy 2020a). In this first step, I only intend to establish the relationship between the biopolitical process that clearly accompanied the pandemic—and which raises the question about the political paradigm that will succeed it—and the concept of philosophical immunology, in the sense of a reading that clearly combines the biological lexicon with the sociopolitical lexicon (in the sense of protecting life, in whatever form), in order to extract some ideas about the plural and diversified place of religion in a social context marked by all of these tensions, potentially collected in the concepts of exposure, contamination, and community, versus confinement, protection, and immunity.

One of Roberto Esposito’s most recent volumes, *Immunità comune. Biopolitica all’epoca della pandemia* (Esposito 2022) will serve as a guide. Here, Esposito presents different philosophical interpretations of reality (ontologies, anthropologies), according to the immunological paradigm, applying them to the post-pandemic situation.

Essentially, the main objective of this step is to think about religion in its relationship with the mechanism of conservation and protection of life, as the main task of the political dimension. A task that is carried out through the category of the body, as an organism that constitutes the horizon that makes life possible—and implies death—whether as a natural, biological (or zoological) body, or as a social or political body.

In his previous book, *Communitas. Origine e destino della comunità*, Esposito had already addressed the philosophical dimension of the immunological paradigm, especially in Hobbes (Esposito 1998, p. 3). At the heart of modern political theory would remain precisely the search for protection, provoked by fear of the other human being (in reality, as

fear of the community), which would lead to the institution of the State as a protective social body, represented in the biological and political body of the sovereign (Leviathan). There, the political–religious dimension of the protective device is even more evident than what will happen in its subsequent biopolitical transformations, in which science (especially medicine) will progressively gain prevalence and where the relationship to an absolute sovereign is diluted (including in its configuration as sovereign state).

Esposito proposes a re-reading of certain landmarks of recent Western thought as a configuration of philosophical immunology, that is, of an interpretation of reality or the strategies of its control as essentially an immunological process³. According to him, Nietzsche was the first to establish a more explicit relationship between immunization devices and life, thus inaugurating a particular form of biopolitical reading. At the same time, Nietzsche also inaugurates what could be called immunological thinking, based on a fundamental contradiction between protection and threats to life, which makes the biopolitical process aporetic. According to him, the potency of life invariably threatens life itself, precisely because of its excess; however, by wanting to control this excess, because of a defense instinct, humans threaten their own lives: “To want to preserve oneself is an expression of an extremely painful state, of a limitation of the true basic instinct of life that tends to an expansion of potency” (Nietzsche 1967). The protection that controls vital power, in order to conserve it (namely through morality, law, religion, and subjectivism), invariably destroys it, in a nihilistic way. We are, in practice, facing the phenomenon of autoimmunity, which will accompany all immunological thinking.

Following Nietzsche, Heidegger applied the immunological reading to modern Western thought, insofar as it is interpreted as corresponding to an attempt to immunize the subject against the “threat” of the object; protection is mounted through Cartesian certainty, achieved by creating an image of the world as a representation of reality (Heidegger 1950). Here, too, the cure turns against the organism, through the effects of representative thinking, based on certainty and the idea of ownership of the subject over the object. The harmful, even destructive, effects of this immunological strategy became clear, for example, in Bruno Latour’s criticism of the so-called “asymmetric anthropology” (Latour 1991).

In a way that is possibly closer to Nietzsche’s intention, Esposito states that Freud also considers that resorting to law or morality protects each human being from the chaos of instinct, thus serving as an immunizing device; but, insofar as this protection provokes neuroses, it tends to liquidate life, precisely through its control. At the same time, in reaction to everything that limits them, brothers seek the father’s death as protection from an ancestral threat, except that the limiting effect of the dead father, in the imagination of the children who killed him, becomes even stronger than that of the living father (Freud [1927] 1960). In this sense, the ghost of violence remains alive in all immunization strategies, and it is stronger the more ghostly it is, that is, the less explicit and evident its permanent impact is.

It is precisely to the device of violence as control of violence itself that René Girard dedicates his attention, in his interpretation of the immunological devices of human societies. The scapegoat mechanism is thus interpreted as the basic scheme of all immunization, as a search for protection, in order to survive (personally and communitarian), in the face of the fatal outcome of the mimetic desire that marks every human relationship (Girard 1972). But violence does not solve the problem of violence. Autoimmunity is therefore a permanent danger that threatens to destroy the social organism, as a result of the protective mechanism itself. For Girard, Christianity introduces an unprecedented dimension—precisely as denunciation and the overcoming of the victimization and scapegoat scheme—and can be interpreted as the beginning of another solution. Religion, thus, could appear in a dialectical rupture with the mechanism of violence and its violent control, as we will see. To what extent this device can constitute an archeology for a specific mode of politics remains an open question. We will return to this subject later on.

Returning to Esposito’s reading, Niklas Luhmann would apply the immunity paradigm—as the inclusion of contradiction (possibly as violence or conflict) in the autopo-

etic process of each system—the social system as a whole and each subsystem (Luhmann 1984). In this sense, the immunization process is an endless and central process in all social systems. Its function is to manage insecurity, in the communicative process, as opposed to achieving stable and final security. Here, too, religion occupies a particular place, helping to manage contingencies within the system and the global contingency of the system itself, as well as the non-integrability of many of its elements. And here, too, this social “task” of the religious dimension can have effects on the political, given shape to the archaeological process of the theological–political devices.

Derrida explicitly explores the permanent contradictory process of reality, namely in the co-belonging of life and death. In this sense, all identity delimitations that distinguish the same from the other, the inside from the outside, the own and the strange, are strictly impossible delimitations, because they are invariably marked by their opposite. The process of deferring identities turns all intent of immunization into its opposite, which results in inevitable autoimmunity. The case of religious identities is one of the most obvious. In its own delimitation, religious identity destroys itself. The *indemne*, while sacred, is simultaneously life-giving and potentially life-destroying, without any possibility of overcoming this ambivalence (Derrida et al. 1996).

Finally, according to Esposito, Peter Sloterdijk’s entire work can be considered a philosophical immunology in the strict sense. It would be, in fact, the most complete proposal for philosophical immunology. The volumes of “spheres” approach the immunological periods as human protection strategies in relation to the outside of themselves: the Cosmos that surrounds and protects the Earth (within the sphere that it protects); the Earth as a globe, abandoned to itself (on the surface of the sphere, but within the history it protects); and the individual spheres or bubbles, in the era of the end of history and the end of community (total exposure, seeking protection in the individuality of each bubble). In contrast to this individualized immunity, there is the possibility of a single common immunity for all humanity (Sloterdijk 1998). From a biological perspective, this possibility is tested precisely as a result of the pandemic process—and this is one of the final topics of Esposito’s work, as indicated in the title. From a more properly social, even political and religious, perspective, this question remains open.

In all these approaches to the immunological devices present in human relationships, one can consider the claim of immunity from the perspective of subjects or from the perspective of communities. If it is true that, in a way, immunity takes place in relation to the community (possibly in the sense of radical individualism, or in its corresponding mitigation), in many other ways, it happens in the relationship between communities (in the sense of radical tribalism, or also in its possible mitigation).

In this process, we witness an insurmountable ambiguity of immunization—it does not close itself to the threat (although this may be, in the extreme, one of its paradigms), but integrates it in a controlled way (giving rise to hybridity rather than to tribalism). Instead of affirming a well-defined identity, with clearly delimited contours and which, at the same time, exclude what is different, the immunological device (as it happens in biology and medicine) does not allow identity definitions except in a hybrid form, as exposure to the outside of oneself—in fact, making the very distinction between inside and outside difficult, as is the case in the human body and all the fauna and flora that inhabits it.

At the same time, any immunological device is permanently exposed to the possibility of provoking the phenomenon of autoimmunity. On the one hand, the integration of the threat in itself can turn against the body, destroying what it intends to protect, especially if it happens in an uncontrolled way or in excessive doses; on the other hand, the radical pretense of protection by excluding the outside results, inevitably, in turning against what it protects, as with legalism, moralism, chauvinism, and all kinds of fundamentalism. That is, the body—individual or social—can succumb to excessive protection (in the tribal paradigm) or to excessive exposure (in hybridism). But whichever the case, one will only be able to protect oneself by exposing oneself.

3. Religion and Autoimmunity

As already seen, all these analyses could be applied by understanding the different manifestations of the religious phenomenon. On the one hand, because in all these processes religious convictions and practices are often involved—in some cases, as the main protagonists. On the other hand, religious practices, like all individual and social practices, are also marked by immunological devices.

Firstly, biopolitical practices have made the “religious” character of science more evident, especially in medicine and biotechnology. The distinction between health and salvation—*salus*—thus becomes very tenuous. Naturally, many immunological devices specific to biology and applied in medicine thus become permeable to a certain religious dimension, albeit metaphorically (Agamben 2020).

Secondly, reading the political dimension in immunological terms allows an extension to the religious dimension and respective practices, especially insofar as these also include clearly political aspects. I will, therefore, focus on interpretations of the religious dimension, in the context of biopolitical immunology.

The classic interpretation of religious experience as a process referred to as an untouchable dimension or reality can be included in this perspective (Derrida et al. 1996; Esposito 2002, p. 51). It would be about safeguarding an immune, inaccessible, transcendent, unspeakable scope, with effects on the possible immunity of its human representation; this is how the *Homo Sacer* is understood as an exception excluded from the social body (that is why he is immune), but which at the same time is included in it (even as the foundation of society). This dimension would protect humans in the same movement that it would enhance life. Freud, for example, is explicit when referring to it as protection from the fear of death. Of course, in the dialectic of immunology, as Nietzsche had mentioned, this protection devalues concrete earthly life (including “bare life”) and produces illusory images, which can become pathological and neurotic, nihilistic, even. The religious devices of sacredness can therefore turn against what they intend to protect.

One of the social, political, and even juridical configurations of this immunity is precisely the protection through law and through identity (*religio*) against the threat of the different, above all provoked once again by fear; the religious dimension thus constitutes a civil religion, in its function of controlling the contingency and the danger that accompanies it, with the respective fear (Lübbe 1986).

Interestingly, both the religion of untouchable (*indemne*) transcendence and the civil religion of immanent control were replaced in modernity by the alleged political or scientific self-immunization, maintaining remnants of transcendence and civil mystique, which seems to indicate a genealogical relationship between one another, regardless of whether this relationship is read in terms of secularization (Schmitt 1922; Esposito 2013). This more complex interpretation of the phenomena becomes explicit in more recent sociological approaches, overcoming the strict thesis of secularization (Costa 2019; Rosito 2017), as in Luhmann’s systemic perspective. Religion appears as a possibility for the system to survive, in the integration of what is different, what is uncontrollable, what is contingent; immunity (religious or otherwise) does not correspond to a protection that closes off, but to a permanent process of communication, which is synonymous with exposure and openness.

Derrida, for example, intends to do justice to this complexity, by initially conceiving religion as the construction of an unimpaired (sacred) sphere which, at the same time, saves (protecting) and threatens (forbidding); but the historical phenomenon of the Christian religion, for example, is something that includes its own contradiction (life/death; sacralization/secularization). Currently, this happens even in relation to its potential opponents or even competitors, such as technology and even capitalism. Nor does he forget the permanent danger of autoimmunity, whether from democracy or religion or even as an articulation between both, as explicitly happens with fundamentalism (Esposito 2022, p. 49).

Also, Esposito, by explicitly approaching the scope of religious experience, chooses the way proposed by Derrida, inspired by the distinction worked out by Benveniste between

sacer and *sanctus* (*hieros/agios* in Greek). According to him, all religious experience has two dimensions: a positive one, which saves (especially from death) and promises life (corresponding to the original sacred); the other one negative, as it establishes prohibitions relating to certain fields of existence, namely through the law (corresponding to the holy, as distinct from the profane). “On the one hand, the sacred can be referred to a situation of vital fullness, and also of expansion of the one or those on whom it is directed” (Esposito 2002, p. 52)⁴. “This first positive side... is however matched, in apparently contrastive terms, by another semantic cadence of a negative type. Both the Greek *hagios* and the Latin *sanctus*... allude, in fact, to the prohibition regarding something that is forbidden to contact with men and, in broader terms, to the law that sanctions this separation” (Esposito 2002, p. 53)⁵. The immune function of the first dimension consists of the protection it promises; that of the second consists of the exception it establishes.

In a different distinction, namely that established by Levinas between sacred and holy (Levinas 1977), or by Jan Patocka between sacredness and responsibility (Patocka 1981; Derrida 1999), the religious dimension that protects and that forbids would still be completely on the side of sacredness; the dimension of sanctity or responsibility would be placed on the side of human freedom, which corresponds to a requirement posed by the exposure to the other, who contaminates. “There is religion, in the literal sense of the word, from the moment when the secret of the sacred, the orgiastic or demonic mystery would be, if not destroyed, at least dominated, integrated and finally subject to the sphere of responsibility. The subject of responsibility would be the subject who was able to subject the orgiastic or demonic mystery to himself... Religion is responsibility, or it is not. His story only makes sense in a transition to responsibility” (Derrida 1999, pp. 16–17)⁶. Instead of immunizing, the religious dimension would be the process of exposing the human to the outside of itself. In this sense, the religious only protects, to the extent that it exposes; hybridity would be an identity constructed on the basis of non-identity.

It is likely in this sense that Girard interprets Christianity as a critical break in the mechanism of immunization of violence through violence—it would be, therefore, a kind of counter-religion, opening up to another way of being. Strictly speaking, Esposito also allows for this interpretation, insofar as he bases community—as opposed to immunity, which he exhaustively explores in his emblematic work *Immunitas. Protezione e negazione della vita*—on the process of permanent exposure to what is different (Esposito 2002). The fact that this community mechanism is not explicitly related to a theological–political or religious device does not prevent this reading from being carried out. In this sense, Esposito’s proposal about community can help us go beyond his strict interpretation of the religious phenomenon.

Religion, instead of protecting from fear (of death or of the other), through an identarian confinement defined using a set of properties, would constitute a demand for exposure, in the recognition of the absolute non-absoluteness of oneself and the community and in the assumption of a responsibility; it would, therefore, be a way of being that lays beyond fear and beyond oneself (individually and as a community). This would correspond to the recognition of an excess of exteriority and the consequent impossibility of ownership; it would be, therefore, exposure to death (as finitude or a limit) instead of protection from death; of the integration of death not as an act of killing, of giving death, sacrificing what is different, but as an act of dying, of giving one’s life as a sacrifice/gift of oneself (Derrida 1999).

From the point of view of the social body, the paradigm of hybridity (corresponding to the device of exposure) would overcome the paradigm of tribalism (corresponding to the device of appropriate identity). At the same time, the danger of autoimmunity, either as overexposure or as overprotection, is permanent. On the one hand, the ghost of dissolution looms over the social body due to the absence of contours; on the other hand, over the same body looms the danger of destruction by expelling the other from himself or the other in himself, to the extreme of *thanatopolitics* or *necropolitics* (Mbembe 2019).

It is in this reformulation of the possible (archaeological and genealogical) place of religion in the constitution of the immunity and community process (also in its political dimension) that we find clues to the second level of a critical debate with Esposito, equally in an archaeological perspective of the political in articulation with a theological dimension, which in his case leads to the search for an origin prior to the political, in the realm of the non-political (Esposito 2012; Rosito 2015, p. 141). To what extent this scope touches even more closely on a theological archeology of the social body and the relationship between subjects is something that remains open for now.

4. The Theological–Political Machine

In a work published in 2013, entitled *Due: la machina della teologia politica e il posto del pensiero* (Esposito 2013), Esposito dives directly into the debate of a theological archeology of political power which, in part, also extends to a political archeology of certain theological concepts. In this regard, it is not exactly original, since the discussion on the relationship between theological concepts and political concepts—with their respective paradigms—is very old, having found in the work of Carl Schmitt, and in the debate it triggered, possibly one of its most explicit symbols (Schmitt 1922). Esposito’s originality lies in the way he reads all Western history, namely its political dimension, as triggered by a very specific theological–political device, which is precisely the device of *person*.

While possibly not being an exclusively theological device—perhaps not even an originally theological one—its appropriation by theology, carried out specifically by Christianity, explicitly transformed it into a historically and conceptually significant one. Strictly speaking, its Greek origins in the theatrical mask (*prosopon*) and its Roman origins in the scope of law reveal it as a device that leads to a dual—possibly dualistic—understanding of all reality. Between the individual and his mask, in fact, such a distinction was established whereby the device of the mask resulted in transforming the individual, adding an identity that he did not previously have. Between the “bare life” of his being as a biological body and his identity as an actor, there is a duality that separates and, at the same time, merges, but this fusion consists of the body’s absorption by the new identity of the actor. Personhood would always be something added to the previous assumption, which absorbed this same assumption, roughly in the sense of *Aufhebung* in the Hegelian dialectic.

This process is even more explicit in Roman law, insofar as it divides humans between persons and non-persons, through the device of the legal person (*persona*). The dimension of the person is, in reality, functional (as in the case of the mask), and does not coincide with the bodies of the humans in question (as realization of “bare life”); however, it becomes the central modality of the qualification of humans, at different levels, from the maximum personalization of the *dominus*, to the depersonalization of slaves, placed at the level of things.

The structural scheme of the theological–political device itself corresponds to a relationship of permanent tension and, at the same time, of unavoidable union between the theological and the political: “Whether on the historical level or on the conceptual level, the two poles of the theological and the political relate themselves in the continuous attempt to overcome themselves alternately” (Esposito 2013, p. 41). The result of this type of relationship has become so impactful that even the current work of deconstruction is always already within it, which makes it difficult to analyze it. “The fundamental obstacle to penetrating the horizon of political theology resides, in short, in the fact that we are already inside it” (Esposito 2013, p. 12)⁷.

For this very reason, Esposito refers to the whole process as the Heideggerian idea of “machination”, since the process happens as an impact of the theological–political “machine”. Strictly speaking, the fundamental structure of this machine cuts across different dimensions, starting with the very dual-unitary relationship between the theological and the political: “The thesis I advance is that such an exclusionary assimilation procedure is the fundamental provision of the ‘theological–political machine’. This works precisely by

separating what it declares to unite and unifying what it divides, through the submission of one part to the domain of the other" (Esposito 2013, p. 45)⁸.

While this relationship of excluding unification, based on a previous dualistic division, is worked on by other genealogical approaches to the relationship between theology and politics—namely, in Schmitt's case, through the idea of sovereignty and the corresponding separation between friend and enemy—what Esposito proposes is different, finding in the category of person, as transformed from the Greek theater and Roman law, the fundamental device for the functioning of this "theological-political machine".

At this level, Trinitarian theology (based on the concept of person) itself works as a theological-political "machination", contrary to what Erik Peterson defended, who based the impossibility of any political theology on Trinitarian monotheism (Peterson 1935). In fact, for Esposito, the Trinitarian device constitutes a highly influential supreme example of the device of division—in this case, between Father and Son—which leads to an excluding unification, insofar as the monotheistic principle (concentrated in the Father) absorbs in the unification what was divided, subjugating the other end of the pole (the Son), resulting in a contraction of "the triadic formula in a dual module, centered on the hierarchical relationship between Father and Son"⁹. This module manifests itself in a "functional distinction between the First person, holder of sovereign power, and the Second, delegated with the effective government of humans" (Esposito 2013, p. 113)¹⁰. Thus, the application of the same "machination" of the dual-unitary relationship is verified. "As in the case of the dual nature, divine and human, of Christ—or the relationship between soul and body in every human being—a duality tends towards unity, through the submission of one part to the dominion of the other" (Esposito 2013, p. 117)¹¹.

Now, in line with this mechanical structure, the theological-political device of the person, through its "machination" throughout Western history—within which we find ourselves—contributed to an extreme opposition between person and thing. It is true that, throughout history, we have witnessed a kind of universalization (namely with Kant) of the person status which, at a certain point, stopped dividing humans—unifying them, precisely, in the subjugation of the non-personal dimension (impersonal) to the personal one. But, by universalizing this application to humans, the division shifted to the relationship between person and thing, between the personal dimension and the impersonal dimension. This same division is unified, to the extent that the impersonal dimension is subjugated to the personal dimension, the latter dominating the other, as happens in the aforementioned "asymmetric anthropology". At the same time, from a strictly political point of view, this paradigm based on the device of person results in a global practice "that unifies the world in the form of its division" (Esposito 2013, p. 262)¹², namely in the field of the so-called sovereign debt of some nations in relation to others, or even in the field of personal debts.

In order to overcome this "asymmetrical anthropology", as well as the political effects of the entire corresponding device, which are expressed in the political form of the bipolar division, Esposito's deconstructive process leads him to the discovery of another possibility, also present in the history of Western thought, namely following the tradition of Averroes, Giordano Bruno, and Spinoza, with its repercussions on Schelling, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze. This is the lode of a thought of the impersonal: "This, moreover, is the destiny of the thought of the impersonal—not to oppose frontally what a long tradition has defined as a person, or even a subject, but to make it rotate on its axis, until deactivating its excluding power" (Esposito 2013, p. 262)¹³.

At the same time, overcoming the paradigm of the person would allow for overcoming the duality between persons and things, which tends to divide reality in a problematic or, at least, ambiguous way, including the hybrid modalities that personalize things and reify persons. "If there is a postulate that seems to organize human experience from the beginning, it is that of the division between persons and things... The life world is cut by a dividing line that divides it into two zones defined by their reciprocal opposition" (Esposito 2014, pp. VII–VIII)¹⁴. For Esposito, the overcoming of the theological-political

ties of the West would allow a simultaneous overcoming of this division and the respective subjugation from one side to the other.

Of course, it would be possible—for example, if we concentrate on the relationship of this modality of thought with Spinoza—to also link the category of the impersonal, as an alternative to the device of person, with a theological–political machine, possibly closer to a pantheistic or even cosmotheistic interpretation of reality. Jan Assmann, for example, brings his deconstruction of monotheism as a theological–political device closer to this cosmotheistic approach which is, therefore, no less a “theological–political machination” (Assmann 2003).

Esposito intends the device of person to be strictly theological–political and, therefore, inseparably linked to the religious dimension of the human being, even if only in an archaeological way, no longer explicit and often not even perceptible. The category of the impersonal, which is opposed to it, would be due to the activity of thought and, therefore, to another “machine”: “Averroes, Bruno and Spinoza, although in different ways, separate the purpose of religion, oriented towards social cohesion, from that of philosophical research, oriented towards the knowledge of truth” (Esposito 2013, p. 174)¹⁵. But the issue will not be as simple and as alternative as that, since an archeology of power based on theological–political devices is equally possible in a context where the device of person is absent. The aforementioned thinkers can also be placed within a theological–political vein that is very specific and that is dominant in certain cultural traditions, as is the case of many East Asian cultures, or even of ancient Egypt (Assmann 2000).

Perhaps because he senses the near impossibility of leaving the interior of a theological genealogy of the political, or of a political genealogy of the theological, Esposito attempts, in almost all of his work—which is, strictly speaking, a political philosophy—to identify the non-political origin of the political dimension—which could also be equivalent, in our case, to a possible non-theological origin of the theological dimension that accompanies politics.

From the point of view of the deconstruction of the political dimension towards the non-political, as possibly being more original, the central question posed is the possibility of the existence of a politically non-representable dimension, namely through the mechanisms of power. This dimension of the unrepresentable would therefore be prior and subsequent to all representation, namely through theological–political devices or “machines”. It is, therefore, about “critically determining the threshold of irrepresentability of Good, or Justice, by power. From this point of view, power is always characterized by conflictual terms and, therefore, situated within precise limits, which precisely trace the line of the non-political” (Esposito 2012, p. 50)¹⁶.

Strictly speaking, if the logic of theological–political machination intends to tame the community process itself, through mechanisms of power of which the concept of sovereignty is one of the most representative, then politics—which is always theological–political—already constitutes a process of immunization relative to the community’s own role, which would take place especially in exposure to the other (Rosito 2015, p. 143).

This exposure is, so to speak, the index of reference to the unrepresentable Justice, whose representation through power is already always the result of a problematic machination and which must be constantly deconstructed. In this sense, the issue of biopolitics and immunity—as opposed to community—intersects with the theological–political device of person, insofar as this reduces everything to the dimension of someone’s power over others, through the division introduced by the notion of person. The impersonal dimension would thus open up not only to the non-political dimension, but also to the communitarian dimension, in overcoming all immunizing machinations, including those of religion, in the strict sense, as a place of the *indemne*, understood as salvation or protection.

5. Some Critical Questions

If, in fact, the root of community—overcoming immunity—is exposure to the other (person?), including the otherness of the irrepresentability of Justice by power, how can it be identified with the impersonal dimension? Does the reduction to the immanent field

of pure impersonality, as a differential continuum, not imply the impossibility of real difference and, therefore, of alterity? But if there is no otherness, how can there be exposure to the other?

It is true that the relationship to alterity can be immediately understood in terms of hierarchical or dialectical duality. Another use of Trinitarian theology can be elucidative here, in the possible continuity of a theological archeology of the political. In fact, Esposito's approach to the "theological-political machine" according to this Trinitarian model is based on its tendentially *subordinationist* interpretation which, in fact, predominated in history. Or else, it was dissolved into the *modalist* interpretation, which completely annuls the difference between Father and Son and, therefore, the duality into the One. At the outset, resorting to the category of the impersonal would end up being very close to the modalist reading of Trinitarian relationships which, in reality, would not be relationships, as they do not know true alterity but only a monist whole or totality.

As it happens, in traditional Trinitarian theology, despite the predominance of these two extremes, neither of them was considered correct by patristic theology and councils, since the one hierarchized the relationship, through the mechanism of unification through exclusion, and the other annulled the relationship, through the mechanism of its reduction to a pure One. But does this not imply the search for an intermediate possibility—as was the case throughout the history of Trinitarian theology—and for a theological device that allows the interpretation of community as exposure to the other and not as immunity from the other? Incidentally, this device includes the use of the "third" as an essential dimension, formulated in the person of the Spirit (Duque 2023). The third dimension is precisely the one that prevents the binary reduction of the relationship and, therefore, the rigorous application of the "theological-political machine" as described by Esposito.

Also in the explicitly Christological dimension, the relationship between divine nature and human nature, if seen from a simply binary perspective, would end up implying the absorption of the latter by the former, as is the case in all versions of Docetism. But the person of Jesus is conceived as a conjugation without division—despite the distinction—between humanity and divinity, which do not constitute a division of the single personal being, and for that reason, His unity cannot be conceived as an absorption of one by the other. Here too, the dimension of the Spirit—strictly speaking, the condition of the possibility of human mediation of the divine—can be read as the third dimension that prevents the monism of impersonal unity and the dualism of division that leads to unity through the exclusion of the other. "Orthodox" Christology (as expressed in the Council of Chalcedon) does not correspond to the way in which Esposito presents the functioning of the person's theological-political device. At the same time, its solution, by resorting to the impersonal dimension, does not do justice to what the Christological formulation intends either. What could the third dimension mean by overcoming the excluding duality of the binary relationship?

Esposito, in this and other contexts, explicitly explores the dimension of the third person (Esposito 2007). However, the tendency is to identify, in a total and radical way, the third dimension with the non-person and, therefore, with the field of the impersonal. It is difficult, however, to understand this identification, as the dimension of the impersonal would end up absorbing all other dimensions, removing all meaning from the distinction between first, second, and third—or even between me, you, and he/she. If the third dimension can be understood—as in the case of Trinitarian theology—as a personal dimension, which annuls the binary relationship between first and second (between me and you, between Father and Son), then it could be the index of another understanding of the political—not necessarily as non-political, but in a very specific sense—which always implies an opening up of the dual dynamics of power beyond themselves.

Rosito, in his reading of Esposito's political theology (Rosito 2015, pp. 141–53), essentially focuses on his work of deconstruction, which would result in the annulment of the theological-political device itself and the recovery of the impolitical dimension, as previous and fundamental for interhuman relations, namely in communitarian dynamics. Saidel

also highlights Esposito's tendency, in search of the impolitical, considering his position explicitly against political theology: "And if there is an element that philosophically and politically connotes the impolitical perspective, which is neither apolitical nor antipolitical, it is the opposition to any form of theologization of politics—which in many cases is the mirror effect of the politicization of theology" (Saidel 2016, p. 1). Being a correct reading of Esposito's more explicit position, I think it is possible to find elements in his own work that allow us to imagine another theological genealogy of the political dimension.

The discussion should focus on the proposal to overcome the reduction of plurality through an immunological absorption into the One (even if it happens through a previous binary division), which Esposito considers to be the inevitable result of theological–political machinery. I do not consider that the solution presented by Esposito—the way of impersonality, explored from the action of thought, according to a tendentious monist paradigm—is fully inappropriate, as it could be considered a way that would eventually make it possible to think about the plurality of reality, particularly in its communitarian configuration (and even in politics). A pure monist solution in order to safeguard the plurality of reality could be questionable (how could monism be plural?), but I do not intend to deepen this discussion here. I only propose that a theological–political genealogy exploring either ternary devices—such as the reference to the "third person" without canceling its personalist configuration as Esposito does—or pneumatological devices (as the basis of a communicational understanding of reality) can allow an interpretation of the political similar to that proposed by Esposito. In this case, to achieve the same purpose—and make the same legitimate criticism of some theological–political devices—it would not be necessary to completely abandon the scope of theological–political devices, nor to deviate into the realm of the impolitical and impersonal, as Esposito intends (Esposito et al. 2012).

The theological (in this case pneumatological) dimension could, in this sense, be close to the "impolitical" (but personal) and allow another path for the theological–political "machine", namely as political pneumatology. On the one hand, the "third" (even in a personal meaning, as in the case of the Holy Spirit) allows the overcoming of the binary and, ultimately, totalizing dialectic, which would affect the theological–political machine analyzed by Esposito¹⁷; on the other hand, from the point of view of the theological genealogy of the political dimension, the place of the people is explored, more than the dynamics of sovereignty: "God is present in the people, to the extent that He places Himself 'between' the people. God is, therefore, 'in the middle', making himself middle, that is, *medium* of communication and social interaction" (Rosito 2015, p. 181)¹⁸. However, God is not directly between the people, but precisely mediated by interactions that constitute the people, that is, these interactions function as if God did not exist (*est Deus non daretur*), but even so, in relation to theological–political devices. A political paradigm thus becomes evident based on the multiple interactions of pluralist societies and not on the dialectical relationship between sovereign and subject, which would lead to the totalitarian imposition of an absolute sovereignty.

Esposito himself resorts to central elements of Christian theology to identify parallels with his proposal for understanding the human community. In the search for clarification of the *munus* of community, the reference to the Christian *koinonia* becomes explicit: "What one participates in is not the glory of the Resurrected, but the suffering and blood of the Cross (*I Cor*, 10,16; *Phil* 3, 10). There is no possibility of appropriation: 'taking part' means anything but 'taking'; on the contrary, losing something, diminishing oneself, sharing the lot of the servant, not the master" (*Phil* 3, 10–11). His death. The gift of life—offered in the communitarian supper archetype" (Esposito 1998, pp. XVIII–XIX)¹⁹. Will we not find here another possibility of being a person, not identifiable with the duality that leads to the domination of one over the other? And is it not also a theological archeology of another political model? In this sense, it seems that, based on the references contained in Esposito's work, it would become possible to follow different ways from those that he himself proposes, in his criticism—not just in his deconstruction—of the dominant "theological–political machine". A final question takes up the meaning attributed to

the religious dimension. At the end of his analysis of theological–political “machining”, Esposito suggests: “The biblical figure of liberation from all debts, no longer confined to the sabbatical year, could become the mirror, philosophical and political, in which political theology glimpses the unprecedented possibility of its own dissolution” (Esposito 2013, p. 266)²⁰. But will it be possible, precisely from this perspective, to speak of a complete dissolution of all theological–political devices? What is the foundation, the genealogical archeology of this practice of debt forgiveness which, in fact, does not unite humanity through the dualistic division? Is not the very reference to the one God the origin of the notion of a common humanity? (Cohen 1935).

In this sense, religion would not simply be a source of protection and immunization of communities and subjects—in dialectical opposition to the other—but exposure to otherness, with all the resulting insecurities and contaminations. This would correspond, precisely, to the paradigm of *communitas*, in Esposito’s sense, as a relationship of exposure of singularities, in the realization of the common *munus*, and not to the paradigm of *immunitas*, as an exception or refusal of this *munus*. Analyzing the theological genealogy of both paradigms allows us to deconstruct the processes that led and continue to lead to different, possibly antagonistic, political models, such as the model of absolute sovereignty—immune and immunizing—or the model of a pluralist community, which liberates each subject for the communitarian relationship “between” humans. At the same time, we could think of a genealogy in a reverse sense and, as such, imagine equally different—and perhaps antagonistic—paradigms of religion.

6. Conclusions

The discussion about the place of religion—understood as a multifaceted phenomenon beyond concrete religious traditions—in the context of a philosophical–political immunology focuses on the understanding of the religious phenomenon as a process of protection or immunization (which would end up resulting in potentially destructive autoimmunity) or, alternatively, as a process of exposure to the other human, to the other of the human being, or even to a transcendent alterity, because it can never be dominated by mechanisms of appropriation. Esposito opts for the first hypothesis in his interpretation of religion. But his philosophy of community provides elements that prefer the second interpretation, more appropriate to many aspects of the religious phenomenon.

Applying this criticism of the immunological paradigm to a certain theological genealogy of political systems, we can consider that, according to Esposito, the main effect of a “theological–political machine” based on the device of *person* would result, precisely, in the immunization of one of the poles of the resulting binary structure, through the absorption and annulment of the other pole. In other words, the immunological structure of theological–political origin would be based on the binary division of all reality—namely, between person and non-person, between human and thing, between friend and enemy, between indigenous and foreign—and would inevitably lead to the dominance of one over the other, as a protective process.

In order to overcome this binarization of reality and consequent reduction into one of the poles—finally into the One as a totality—Esposito proposes an interpretation of reality in impersonal and impolitical terms, based on an immanent monist paradigm, in which the dynamics of permanent exposure constitute the flow of reality.

In this article, a ternary understanding of reality was proposed, based on a possible Trinitarian and pneumatological theological genealogy, in which the reference to a third dimension annuls the dual binarity criticized by Esposito. Without that, one of the poles absorbs the other into a uniform whole. The main thesis argues that only this ternary dynamic allows for the real exposure of differences and, therefore, a communitarian dynamic—also political—that overcomes attempts at immunization, which end up being fatal for subjects and institutions.

This thesis, however, does not directly intend to be neither a proposal for political theology—which would be possible, from a strictly theological perspective—nor a proposal

for explicitly theological politics. Therefore, a new theocratic paradigm, or a new civil religion, that sacralizes the political structure itself is not recovered. The proposal remains at the level of genealogy, that is, by understanding how certain theological–political devices can be effective from a political—and possibly also religious—point of view without being directly applied. In this sense, what is under discussion are not the directly political consequences of a given religious belief, which would imply the direct involvement of a reference to God’s sovereignty within the scope of politics (either directly, or through the mechanism of representation).

What is under discussion is a better understanding of the functioning of certain theological–political devices, regardless of the beliefs of those involved. In this case, it is argued—in a certain, although not total, divergence with Esposito—that the effect of theological–political devices does not need to be overcome, in the sense of an absolutely impersonal and even impolitical scope (which could lead to a new version of totality, even without the mediation of dialectical binarities). It is possible, while maintaining awareness of the effect of certain devices—this time, the device of the “third”, taken from Trinitarian theology and from the reference to the Spirit—to meet a paradigm that interprets non-binary reality not as a uniform totality, but as a plurality of permanent exposures of singularities, especially in the context of freedom. And this may correspond to another way of understanding the political, beyond the idea of sovereignty. This other way, however, also reveals a certain theological–political genealogy.

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Notes

- ¹ I often use the expression “religious dimension” to refer to a phenomenon of human experience—on a personal and social level—that cannot be reduced to its articulation in concrete religious traditions or communities (usually called religions).
- ² The article focuses on Esposito’s contribution to a theory of immunization, and not on the political and philosophical discussion on the different ways of interpreting the pandemic and facing it. On this subject, you can see: (Agamben 2020; Nancy 2020b; Erber 2020; Žizek 2020; Lévy 2020; Esposito 2020).
- ³ Here these authors are synthetically presented, as important precursors of a philosophical immunology as developed by Esposito. For this reason, the respective theories of different thinkers are not deeply explored.
- ⁴ “Da un lato il sacro è riferibile ad una situazione di pienezza, e anche di espansione, vitale di colui o di coloro sui quali esso si dirige” (my translation).
- ⁵ “A questo primo versante positivo. . . fa però riscontro, in termini apparentemente contrastivi, un’altra catena semantica di tipo invece negativo. Sia il greco *hágios*, sia il latino *sanctus*. . . alludono, infatti, al divieto rispetto a qualcosa che è proibito al contatto con gli uomini e, in termini più ampi, alla legge che sancisce tale separazione” (my translation).
- ⁶ “Il y a religion, au sens propre du mot, à partir de l’instant où le secret du sacré, le mystère orgiaque ou démonique seraient sinon détruits, du moins dominés, intégrés et enfin assujettis à la sphère de la responsabilité. Le sujet de la responsabilité serait le sujet qui a pu s’assujettir le mystère orgiaque ou démonique. . . La religion est responsabilité ou elle n’est pas. Son histoire n’a de sens que dans un *passage* à la responsabilité” (my translation).
- ⁷ “L’ostacolo di fondo a penetrare nell’orizzonte della teologia politica sta, insomma, nel fatto che ci troviamo già al suo interno” (my translation).
- ⁸ “La tesi da me avanzata è che tale procedura di assimilazione escludente sia la prestazione fondamentale della ‘machina teologico-politica’. Essa funziona precisamente separando ciò che dichiara di unire e unificando ciò che divide mediante la sottomissione di una parte al dominio dell’altra” (my translation).
- ⁹ “. . . nella dogmatica trinitaria si può ravvisare una tendenza. . . a contrarre la formula triadica in un modulo duale, incentrato sul rapporto gerarchico tra Padre e Figlio” (my translation).
- ¹⁰ “. . . distinzione funzionale tra la Prima persona, titolare del potere sovrano, e la Seconda, delegata al governo effettivo degli uomini” (my translation).
- ¹¹ “Come nel caso della doppia natura, divina e umana, di Cristo—o del rapporto tra anima e corpo in ogni uomo—una dualità tende all’unità attraverso la sottoposizione di una parte al dominio dell’altra” (my translation).
- ¹² “. . . che unifica il mondo nella forma della sua divisione” (my translation).

- 13 “Questo è, del resto, il destino di un pensiero dell’impersonale—non opporsi frontalmente a ciò che una lunga tradizione ha
definito persona, o anche soggetto, ma farlo ruotare sui suoi cardini fino a disattivarne la potenza escludente” (my translation).
- 14 “Se c’è un postulato che sembra organizzare l’esperienza umana fin dai suoi primordi, è quello della divisione tra persone e
cose. . . Il mondo della vita risulta tagliato da uno spartiacque che lo divide in due zone definite dalla loro opposizione reciproca”
(my translation).
- 15 “Averroè, Bruno e Spinoza, sia pure in forme diverse, separano la finalità della religione, rivolta alla coesione sociale, da quella
della ricerca filosofica, tesa alla conoscenza della verità” (my translation).
- 16 “. . .determinare criticamente la soglia di irrappresentabilità del Bene, o della Giustizia, da parte del potere. Da questo punto di
vista, il potere appare sempre caratterizzato da termini conflittuali, e quindi situato dentro limiti precisi, che tracciano appunto la
linea dell’impolitico” (my translation).
- 17 For a more in-depth analysis of the recourse to the category of the “third” as overcoming any reduction to the totality of the One,
even through a merely binary contraposition, see (Duque 2021).
- 18 “Dio è presente presso il popolo in quanto si colloca ‘tra’ il popolo. Dio sta dunque nel ‘mezzo’ facendosi esso stesso mezzo, ossia
medium della comunicazione e dell’interazione sociale” (my translation).
- 19 “Ciò cui si partecipa non è la gloria del Risorto, ma la sofferenza e il sangue della Croce (*I CorI, 10,16; Fil 3,10*). Viene meno
qualsiasi possibilità di appropriazione: ‘prendere parte’ vuol dire tutto fuorché ‘prendere’; al contrario perdere qualcosa,
diminuirsi, condividere la sorte del servo, non quella del signore (*Fil 3, 10–11*). La sua morte. Il dono della vita—offerta
nell’archetipo comunitario della Cena” (my translation).
- 20 “La figura biblica della liberazione da tutti i debiti, non più confinata nell’anno sabbatico, può diventare lo specchio, filosofico e
politico, in cui la teologia politica intravede la possibilità inaudita del proprio disfacimento” (my translation).

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Article

Archaeology and Hauntology: An Ongoing, Stalled Conversation

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Abstract: It is certainly possible that we might learn to better acknowledge the spirits of our ancestors who came before us, as well as to recognize them in such ways that we also learn to embrace the ‘woven density’ of our own lives, our histories and our communities. By doing so, we might begin to discover that the spirits we had thought were removed from our modern, secularized world never fully left us, just as the irrationality of our humanity cannot be fully tamed via a reductive, rational and scientific outlook on life. There are, as Bruno Latour had frequently argued, many modes of human existence that interact in complex networks of relations. To fall back on any one particular mode as if it could dominate over others would only grant us a mistaken impression of our own humanity, even though this is what has been practiced for centuries in order to legitimate a particular, sovereign configuration of power. It is to the credit of archaeologists and hauntologists alike that we are more able than ever to take account of the complexity of ourselves in ways that we had previously ignored or repressed.

Keywords: archaeology; hauntology; complexity; sovereignty

1. Introduction

As Todd May has rightly suggested, the refusal of one’s vulnerability signals a refusal to grieve the losses that an individual inevitably sustains at so many points throughout their life (May 2017). To deny our vulnerability is to construct a series of futile attempts to buttress ourselves against the very possibility of personal destruction. Seeking to be invulnerable, as May terms it, is to attempt to be sovereign over oneself in such a way as to never compromise or grieve and never recognize the failings that are bound to appear on the horizon of our existence. To construct an invulnerable self is to perform one’s subjectivity *as* a sovereign act, then becoming a sovereign self that denies its relationships with others, with the precarity and, yet, necessity of love and with one’s own embodied existence (see the arguments put forth in (Elshtain 2008)). To accept our vulnerability, however, means to accept the brokenness that accompanies our failures, whether real or perceived.

Our vulnerability is acted out on a number of levels that characterize the complexity and richness of our humanity. For example, we can actively see it at work in the necessary failures of our memory. We must forget things in order to move forward in life—in order to fabricate those narratives that sustain our sense of self—though our lives, immersed in the documents that seem to verify our existence to ourselves and to others, cry out to be preserved and maintained (see Ferraris 2013). We must forget even the violence and tragedy that befall us at times, though the retention of such memories in certain historical contexts is, nonetheless, a necessity for justice to be enacted (Rieff 2017). I think here of the ways in which we, as humans, strive to cultivate a ‘happy memory’, as Paul Ricoeur once phrased it, a memory that cannot possibly recall everything, but which is open to recalling whatever cries out to be remembered (Ricoeur 2004). The painful fragments of our lives ask us to listen to them, and our maturity and wholeness depend in large part upon our

willingness to do so, even if, at a later time, we are able to let go of painful memories in order to allow a truer healing take place.

Facing our vulnerability as a species frequently means listening to the extreme moments of witness testimony concerning the many and ongoing failures that humanity has encountered and that we must learn from as they register themselves within our collective past. To do so means challenging the sovereign selves that we construct for ourselves and facing the realities that abound in our world when we let those sovereign selves loose, free to roam unrestrained in the world. Whether we read the meditative history of inhumanity encountered in Primo Levi's writings or the account of destruction that haunts W.G. Sebald's descriptions of German warfare, or whether we think of our continued exploitation of the planet that we try to dominate or the cries of so many marginalized and displaced persons whose very lives testify to the unjust dealings of so many sovereign powers, we are confronted with our vulnerability in ways that move far beyond the domain of the individual, though they call forth every possible configuration of the individual at the same time (see (Levi 2015) and (Sebald 2003)).

Confronting and challenging the sovereign self and the narrative that it constructs for itself in order to make itself sovereign at all, no matter the form that either takes, has occasioned a variety of tactics, ranging from those who would label them as sources of a 'unbound' will to power at the root of modern forms of nihilism, relativism and totalitarianism, much as more conservative voices often lament, to those who identify with the so-called left and try to discern how various 'postmodern' critiques of the self are an attempt to legitimize their own position, with the author as sovereign (see Elshtain 2008; Milbank 2013; Dews 1987). (The 'postmodern' deconstructions of the self are mainly represented in this essay by the archaeological and deconstructivist perspectives discussed. For a fuller account of the context, however, see (Lyotard 1984). For more details on the author as sovereign, see (Derrida 2011)).

As all of these attempts to be sovereign are implicated in a long history of Western metaphysical claims to absolute (divine) power, there are often theological stakes at play in the various formulations of the self-positing in order to legitimate themselves in relation to something else over which the self dominates—animals, our planet, other races or women, one's own body, and so forth. By asserting the human being as sovereign over the other animals on this planet—men as dominant over women or the 'white race' as dominant over all others—sections of humanity 'play God' in order to assert their own claims to superiority.

It makes a good deal of logical sense, therefore, that so many philosophers focused on the end of Western metaphysics have also been suspicious of the Western subject formed as an image within God's shadow.

2. Archaeological Methods

Ever since Nietzsche began to investigate the sovereign claims of Western morality, with its deterministic framing of an ambiguous good in contrast to an ambiguous evil, through a genealogical exploration of the history and development of such concepts, digging through the evolution of theologically inflected concepts in a genealogical–archaeological manner has become a privileged method of philosophical inquiry (Nietzsche 1989). Such archaeological methods, as Michel Foucault was to later call them, dislodged the dominant, normative claims of a particular present and the subjects who live in it in favor of new possibilities for cultural, social, political and religious representations, among others. Archaeology, in its essence, looks for an origin that was never actually, historically present, but which dwells—as Derrida would himself formulate matters in a deconstructive context—as a sort of spectral presence that does not really exist but haunts the present moment nonetheless, dictating the terms by which we configure our realities and relationships. Archaeology searches for alternative meanings and histories of concepts so that it might dislodge any attempt to root oneself in an originary meaning that seems—but only seems—to withstand the test of time.

Though Jacques Derrida was skeptical, and highly critical, of those utilizing archaeological methods, as I will look at below, his writing, as I have argued elsewhere, was surprisingly resonant at times with the methodological aims embraced by both Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, two archaeologists whom Derrida would accuse by name of falling into the madness of ‘archive fever’.

Foucault, for his part, criticized any alleged origins for fixed subjects because the selves that we know ourselves to be are far more mutable than we often want to recognize. For him, archaeology was not a science, but a willingness to locate the disruptions, dissociations and failures to connect that lay between various discourses (Foucault 2002). In his words, ‘It is no longer a question of judging the past in the name of a truth that only we can possess in the present, but of risking the destruction of the subject who seeks knowledge in the endless deployment of the will to knowledge’ (Foucault 1984). Archaeology, like deconstruction, I would add, was about decentering or destabilizing the subject so that another representation might be able to appear, though what that representation would come to be was impossible to determine and certainly not a fixed, sovereign self.

Archaeology, for Agamben, whose work is a direct outgrowth of Foucault’s in many ways, is an operation *on* the subject as much as on any alleged origin point *for* the subject seeking to establish itself as sovereign in some sense (Agamben 2009). The ‘origin’, in fact, is not to be understood as a ‘given locatable in a chronology’, much as Derrida had also understood it (Agamben 2009, p. 110). Archaeological regression, as Agamben phrases the process, is an attempt to go back to a spot within ourselves prior to the split between the conscious and the unconscious in order to experience ‘the sudden, dazzling disclosure of the moment of arising, the revelation of the present as something that we were not able to live or think’ (Agamben 2009, p. 99). These tactics do not mean that we escape positing any sovereign claims through such gestures: we still require a minimum of sovereign power in order to form ourselves as subjects at all. Rather, they indicate that our sense of self and our subjectivity is dependent upon our ability to call forth a present based on our access to such a space. Our ‘access to the present’ is only made possible through an archaeological regression that begins to explore, and rethink, our relations to ourselves (Agamben 2009, p. 103).

The ‘anonymous’ sovereignty that is made possible through such tactics, as Agamben describes this contrasting figure in his writings—one that is able to construct a sense of self, and so be sovereign over itself, while also refusing to utilize such a construct in order to dominate over another, any other—is distinct from those sovereign claims that underlie the long history of political theology (I describe and analyze Agamben’s development of an anonymous form of sovereignty in (Dickinson 2022, p. 81)). This anonymous form of sovereignty is, thus, not closed off from its relationships with others. Rather than being legitimated by a sense of sacrality that sovereignty often asserts, there is another sense of self possible, one that issues forth from the structural parallel between archaeological regression as that which makes the present possible and the task of profanation that regresses to a space prior to the split between the sacred and the secular in order to make things truly usable (Agamben 2007).

The archaeologist profanes what was once taken to be sacred, or inviolable, in this sense, no matter whether we are talking about holy sites or seemingly incontestable senses of the self. Archaeological methods put us in touch with the fragility of our present conceptualizations and identities, those that undergird our societies and the selves they generate and become part of our religious–symbolic economies. In this area, I argue, Foucault and Agamben agree with Derrida in espousing positions that do not seek to restore a particular metaphysical, sovereign claim, though Derrida would take both to task for allegedly doing just that, as we will see in a moment. From where I stand, however, there is more of an ongoing conversation between their methods than even they had ever realized.

Archaeological methods are often profoundly illuminated in the context of the history of religious structures, which have very specific ties to their own origins and are often

sacralized to some degree. Every political theology, as well as the sovereign claims legitimated therein, necessarily starts by defining its relationship to particular origins and ruins, accessed through specific archaeological means or those literal, physical digs in the dirt that seek to uncover a past that can appear to legitimate a present political configuration of (sovereign) power. This context is the case for justifying the sovereign claims of religious scriptures no less than national–ethnic mythologies. Seeking to monumentalize the sacred origins of a particular community will always be subject, however, to another form of archaeology, a philosophical–political archaeological inversion—or profanation, as Agamben calls it—that seeks to lessen the dominant, sacralized hold that a particular myth has upon its subjects (Agamben’s approach to profanation, to my mind, bears a resemblance to Étienne Balibar’s quest for ‘secularizing secularity’ (see Balibar 2018)). This issue was what was consistently on the minds of Nietzsche, Foucault and Agamben, among others.

After such an archaeological investigation ‘unearths’ alternative readings of history as new possibilities for the liberation of alternative subjectivities, and so does not simply lift physical objects from under the soil in order to attempt to legitimate a hegemonic claim on the present (and as Derrida mistakenly understood philosophical archaeology to be), what we are left with is something like a sense of freedom in the ruins of history—a position that some philosophers can only negatively refer to as a ‘disenclosure’, perhaps, or a ‘negative dialectic’ that embraces the nihilistic currents within history so that new formulations might be possible (see Nancy 2008, as well as Adorno 1973). As Walter Benjamin had once intimated, locating the right time in history, or a Kairos, was not just about finding a particular, historical location or point of origin: it was about finding the right constellation or configuration of ideas from among the ruins of history (Benjamin 2003; Benjamin’s conceptualization of history is explicitly linked to Agamben’s genealogical project through his reading of Kairos in (Agamben 2005)). From this perspective, he aligns not only with Agamben’s archaeological agenda but also with those thinkers, such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who seek to make new assemblages from the ruins among which we live (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

For Nietzsche, such methods signaled the death of a particular, Western metaphysical God, but not the gods themselves, as vague or ambiguous as such a formulation might sound. There are, he maintained, and as Heidegger followed, *other* possibilities for sacrality present in our world (see, among others, the essays collected in (Bloechl 2003)). Though some may argue that Nietzsche, and Heidegger along with him, trusted more in a (sovereign) will to power than to its renunciation (in and through one’s vulnerability), Nietzsche’s suggestion that other possibilities for sacrality might be present elsewhere may ultimately grant us another way to perceive the possibilities of religious beings in the world.

As Agamben himself has argued, modern forms of reification have brought us objectified representations of selves that reduce our humanity, such as one sees in pornography, for example. But such acts of reification have also suspended those previous theological signatures that governed our conceptions of self, dictating the duties of reproduction and sexual morality alike, thereby offering us a new sense of freedom we have yet to fully comprehend (Agamben 1993). Though his archaeological–genealogical methods are intended to displace and allow new configurations, and so as not to make one particular claim upon us, there will, nonetheless, always be metaphysical–theological claims made upon us that we must also always strive to profane at the same time. We are caught in an inescapable tension that archaeological methods make more transparent to us, even if we will never be able to eradicate such a tension altogether (this tension is represented and discussed quite well in Giorgio Agamben’s lecture at the Notre Dame cathedral in Paris on the future of the Church—see (Agamben 2012)).

3. Hauntology as Critique and Collaborator

The critique of archaeological methods that Derrida undertook on multiple occasions was a direct outgrowth of his own deconstructive practice that sought to keep a healthy

distance from any historical claims to (sovereign) power. Though religion might be rightly critiqued as attempting to sacralize its mythological origins, there was yet another side to religion that he tried to recover and uplift in order to provide a corrective tension to any given representational claim.

Derrida pointed out, for example, how religion captures something of the essence of the emancipatory hauntology that Marxism once sought to embody (Derrida 1994). Religion, especially in the Judaic–Christian strand that he directly analyzes in his *Specters of Marx*, emphasizes a messianic logic embedded within every history or historical form that undid each and every representation in a bid for more justice to appear upon the face of this earth. To be fair, this is precisely the place where Foucault and Agamben converge with Derrida, especially insofar as the latter explicitly called attention to those Benjaminian ‘weak messianic forces’ that undo our most normative representations (Agamben 2005, pp. 140–45).

To be clear, no particular representation could ever fully disclose a presence long sought after, though we will still yearn for a presence we cannot enjoy. The history of the West is in many ways one thoroughly complicit with a ‘metaphysics of presence’, wherein we construct representations that we take to be presentations of the ‘thing itself’, which is always beyond our comprehension. We are always on a quest for a presence, or a point of origin, that we will never actually obtain sight of as we sift among the existent ‘copies of copies’ for the most authentic or most just representation of reality (see the arguments made in (Derrida 1974)). Theology, from this point of view, would seem to be little more than a long history of humanity trying to establish the boundaries of what is and what is not an acceptable (re)presentation of those lived realities that we ultimately do not know how to express.

Archive fever—as the name for Derrida’s diagnosis of the archaeologist’s madness in believing their methods might reveal a previously concealed presence within history—takes over, he argued, when we believe that we can locate, once and for all, a presence beyond all of the copies, an ‘original’ presence that is nothing more, and nothing less, than a metaphysical claim to sovereign power. We are haunted by the fact that no representation that we will construct or find is authentic or original, yet we are unable to locate such a presence because it cannot be represented in any form or made intelligible in any language. Freud, who was the central aim of this critique that was later extended directly by name to both Foucault and Agamben, was haunted by his own ghosts, as Derrida notes, the same as we are all haunted by ours, all of us given over to a bit of ‘archive fever’ in trying to dislodge their hold upon us if we could only but name them and exorcise them once and for all (see (Derrida 1996) and the commentary on the debate between Foucault and Derrida in (Gasché 2007)).

The one suffering from archive fever believes that somehow, by sifting through the documents and narratives that constitute an ‘official’ record of the subject of history, they might be able to locate, once and for all, its point of origin. Thus, if they might, they would be able to possess the subject in some sense, to be master of it, to be sovereign over it, even if that subject is one’s own self. As Jean Bethke Elshtain has illustrated in another context, the search for origins has historically been routinely bound up with fascist movements and their desperate searches for power amidst the ruins of history, such as with Mussolini’s various excavations undertaken in the ancient city of Rome in the early Twentieth Century (Elshtain 2008, p. 198).

Derrida was determined to unearth voices lost to time but not actually identify such spirits as if they could be propped up like some embodiment of monumental history, as Nietzsche had once critiqued it (see Nietzsche 1997). Derrida was rightly concerned about, and critical of, those archaeologists whom he believed suffered from ‘archive fever’, such as Freud, Foucault and Agamben, who, he argued, sought to dig through the dirt of history in the hopes of uncovering an overlooked object or presence of some sort that they might then utilize in order to construct a sovereign narrative of their own (I discuss the debate between Derrida and Agamben in terms of their methodologies and references to each other

in-depth in (Dickinson 2013)). Derrida was at pains in his lectures on sovereignty to critique Agamben for attempting to be sovereign ‘as an author’ by rushing into his archaeological endeavors in order to be the first to ‘uncover’ historical concepts and connections that others had never seen (Derrida 2011, pp. 316–17). Such totemistic fetishes, if we can call them that, *might* end up becoming a source of legitimation for concrete, ideological causes, something that Derrida was inclined to read within each author’s writings, such as when he read Foucault’s history of madness as an attempt to let madness speak for itself, as if it could ever do such a thing (Derrida 1978). Archaeology, he claimed, searches the ruins for other configurations, possibilities and potentialities, though it is also possibly a way to cement a specific sovereign claim, to legitimate a present identity through recourse to an alleged, mythological past. This possibility, for instance, was what had once motivated Edward Said’s critique of Israel’s use of archaeological methods to legitimate contemporary political claims made upon already occupied lands (Said 2003).

The example that Said gives us of a nation-state grounding its sovereign claims through its historical ties to its past, whether justified as ‘authentic’ in any way or not, at least opens up the possible ideological uses of archaeological methods to us, and it implicates a variety of theoretical endeavors that exist under the banner of archaeology, or genealogy as some have shifted the label.

The constant subversion of our stability, and, thus, our identity, by the fragility of existence indicated through each ruinous or haunted expanse explains a good deal about the hauntology that defined Derrida’s acts of deconstruction as bids for more justice to enter our world. What we have ceased to listen to, but which cries out to be heard, forever haunts us, asking us to issue more justice so that our normative social and political orders might not bury or suffocate them any longer. No singular archaeological claim can be legitimated, once and for all, as the most authentic or most just reading of a present day identity, for this would inevitably imply an impossibility for change. To claim that one has found the point of origin is to, therefore, posit a sovereign, or even totalitarian, gesture at the same time. Though one could argue that neither Foucault nor Agamben directly made such claims, Derrida offers cautionary words.

What Derrida did not articulate in his critique of sovereignty and the ghosts that haunt any sovereign form was how all of our constructs, all of our collective projects, are built from out of the ruins of previous societies, as Maia Kotrosits has argued (‘New cities are constructed awkwardly over old ones, the cornerstone of one building becoming the marginalia of another, or vice versa. People inhabit the very places laid waste by themselves or others. They do so preoccupied, often without knowing, by what’s underground. Collectives are not “anchored” in the past, in other words. They are rearranging its debris, and arranging themselves in the process’ (Kotrosits 2020)). I believe that this is the reason Derrida rarely defended particular canonical claims—such as with particular, Western literary canons of the ‘classics’—though he made clear on occasion that he did endorse their existence and not just their deconstruction (see Derrida 1992). Humanity depends upon such depositories and archives, these canonical formulations, even if they are nonetheless always subject to acts of deconstruction through those messianic elements embedded within them that cry out for a better, more just representation to be deployed. Derrida’s consistent approach to mainly deconstructing the most canonical of writings in the Western philosophical canon would seem to underscore such a claim.

The hauntology that defines Derridean deconstruction is not, therefore, at complete odds with an archaeological methodology, though he was undoubtedly right to be suspicious of those who would sift through the past in order to legitimate any construction of identity in the present (see the commentary offered in (Kleinberg 2017)). A true archaeology that digs through concepts of the past looking for alternative possibilities needs to be a hauntology acknowledging that no solid representation can ever be permanently fixed at the same time—a point of convergence that both Agamben and Derrida routinely failed to suggest in their various debates with one another. Rather than simply deploy a critique of both archaeology and deconstruction, however, as many are wont to do, perhaps we can

benefit a great deal from a more nuanced view of the limitations and benefits of both of their methods.

4. Conclusions: Archaeology and Hauntology

Humankind's nostalgia for ruins and its fascination with haunted houses and sacred lands converge through the various ways that our identities are constantly subverted by the material existence of these phenomena (see Woodward 2001). Communicating with the spirits that reside in such locations, as with our ancestors, as but one concrete example intended in a non-metaphysical sense, is a significant part of our humanity that we are reminded of when we dwell in such places. We are both symbolically haunted and normatively undone as we dig through the dirt in the places we live, uncovering past connections that gift us with new readings of the present, realigning reality in ways both subtle and profound, even if we will never actually reach a point of origin as we dig deeper into the ground beneath us.

There is no doubt a great truth to Derrida's critique of particular archaeological methods in the observation that so many of us seek a point of origin on which to base our present identities, even if such a point can be destabilized by a plurality of alternative readings, as Foucault, Derrida and Agamben alike all ultimately recognize. Nonetheless, despite the multiplicity of selves possibly uncovered through either archaeological or hauntological methods, we are also more dependent at times upon those singular, sovereign presentations of ourselves, representing what we have to offer socially and politically in terms of our normative identities, than upon those much more complex realities that we actually embody. We are, thus, forever haunted by those possibilities that lurk underneath what we present publicly as ourselves.

It is certainly possible that we might learn to better acknowledge the symbolic spirits of our ancestors and ancient concepts alike that came before us and recognize them in such ways that we also learn to embrace the 'woven density' of our own lives, histories and communities (see the account of 'woven density' given in relation to ancestral spirits in (Lara 2021)). By doing so, we might begin to discover that the so-called messianic spirits that we had thought were removed from our modern, secularized world never fully left us, just as the irrationality of our humanity cannot be fully tamed via a reductive, rational and scientific outlook on life (see Smith 2020, and the account of ancestral religious practices, even superstitions, in modern configurations of the self in (Chakrabarty 2007)). There are, as Bruno Latour has frequently argued, many modes of human existence that interact in complex networks of relations (Latour 2018). To fall back on any one particular mode as if it could permanently dominate others would grant us only a mistaken impression of our own humanity, even though this is what has been practiced for centuries in order to legitimate a particular, sovereign configuration of power. It is to the credit of our archaeologists and deconstructive hauntologists alike that we are more likely than ever to take account of the complexity of ourselves in ways that we had previously ignored or repressed.

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Essay

Doing What, by Whom, for Whom and How?: An Essay on Interests, Modes, Methods and Other Dynamics in “Theology” and/or “Religious Studies”

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Abstract: The essay begins with a methodological exploration of aspects of the continuing contested relationship between modes of engaging in the study of religion, which are often described in English as “Theology” or “Religious Studies” and more sharply differentiated in the German language as *Theologie* and *Religionswissenschaft*. By reference to the example of some of the conflicts that emerged around the formation of the European Academy of Religion, the essay shows how these two modes can solidify into opposing scholarly camps. While acknowledging the economic pragmatics that can come to the fore in institutional settings, it notes that the primacy of “Theology” was rooted in a Christendom social, religious and legal inheritance, while the emergence of Religious Studies and *Religionswissenschaft* represented an Enlightenment aspiration towards freedom from such. However, the purpose of this essay is neither to take sides between these broad camps, nor to argue that the differences between them are unimportant. Rather, it is centrally concerned with critiquing both modes for having too often proceeded without a sufficiently self-conscious embrace of the contextual impact upon them of social, political and economic frameworks, interests and/or the individual positionalities taken in relation to these. To support its arguments, the essay deploys aspects of the theological and socio-political legacies of the Czech and German theologians Josef Hromádka and Dorothee Soelle, alongside methodological insights and arguments from the British Religious Studies scholars Richard King and Malory Nye. In conclusion, drawing on Ninian Smart’s call for “axioanalysis” in the study of religion, the essay sets out a series of questions to both “Theology” and/or “Religious Studies” which it posits could help to facilitate an important and needed transformation in both “Theology” and “Religious Studies”. Within such a transformation, if socio-political contextuality and positionality are embraced and embedded as necessary (but not exhaustive or exclusive) for both critical and constructive scholarship in “Theology” and “Religious Studies”, then an “engaged” approach to the study of religion might prove able to facilitate a fruitful “shared borderland” between the “hinterland territories” claimed by these otherwise often broadly differential modes of study.

Keywords: theology; religious studies; *Religionswissenschaft*; methodologies; methods; epistemologies; study of religions; ideologies; secular; decolonization

1. Biographical and Professional Transparency

The central contention of this essay is that what are usually differentiated from each other as either “Theology” or “Religious Studies”, and which can sometimes be in conflict, have both all too often proceeded without a sufficiently self-conscious embrace of the contextual impact upon them of social, political and economic frameworks, interests and/or the individual positionalities taken in relation to these. Especially because of this contention, as author of this essay, it is important for me to be as transparent as possible with the reader in terms of disclosing the socio-political context and the professional and biographical positionality out of which this paper was written.

For the majority of my professional academic career within university settings, although occasionally making more theological contributions, I have generally operated in a mode of study and research that would likely more often be described by others, and by myself, as “Religious Studies”. However, my initial academic formation was undertaken within a highly traditional Christian “Theology” curriculum of the University of Oxford in the mid-1970s. Within that undergraduate study, the main element that went beyond (a certain kind of Christian and Jewish) scriptural studies and the (mainly) historical study of (Christian) doctrine was the introduction of a new paper in the (very western form of) philosophy of religion. Indeed, this initial training and development were undertaken in a way that could probably accurately be described as having been “in parallel” with my preparation to become an ordained Christian minister in the Baptist tradition of Christianity.

My subsequent Master of Philosophy research, undertaken while working as a Baptist minister, proceeded in what was, in many ways, the methodologically very different (because it is much more contextually engaged) mode of Social and Pastoral Theology. By the time that I undertook my doctoral research, I was operating in what would normally be identified as a “Religious Studies” mode, albeit within a framework of perspectives, orientations and methodological inflexions which were strongly informed by a concern to be religiously, socially and politically “engaged” rather than claiming to proceed on the basis of the kind of scholarly “detachment” advocated by some proponents of “Religious Studies”. Finally, during much of my academic career, I have been especially engaged in “Religious Studies” research of a kind that has been strongly informed by social scientific methods and has been explicitly conducted at the interface between scholarly work, government funding and public policymaking (Weller 2007, 2009).

2. The Relationship between Theology and Religious Studies

This essay aims to make a methodological contribution from within a British and wider European context to wider international debates about the relationship between what is generally called “Theology” and “Religious Studies” and the differences and intersections between them. However, the central purpose of this essay is neither to take sides between these broad camps, nor to argue that the differences between them are unimportant. Rather, as noted at the outset of the essay, it is centrally concerned with critiquing both modes for having too often proceeded without a sufficiently self-conscious embrace of the contextual impact upon them of social, political and economic frameworks, interests and/or the individual positionalities taken in relation to these.

In Germany, until more recent times, despite a number of important exceptions,¹ there has often tended to be a sharper differentiation between these modes in German institutional contexts, where the linguistically more differentiated terminologies of *Theologie* (understood in terms of “confessional Theology”) and *Religionswissenschaft* (understood as the “scientific” study of religion) are more usually in use. In Britain, again, despite the existence of exceptions, many of the institutional forms and settings through which universities engage in study and research around religion have not been so sharply differentiated, either in their historical origins and evolution or in their contemporary forms. As an autobiographically related example of this, the organizational unit of which I became a part when, in 1990, I first joined what was previously known as the Derbyshire College of Higher Education, and later became the University of Derby, had historically been called “Theology”. At the time I arrived, it was in process of becoming what was first known as “Theology and Religious Studies”. In due course, it became “Religious Studies” and then “Religious and Philosophical Studies” before being closed by the University in 2001. Indeed, especially in British institutional contexts, both the labels that are chosen and/or ascribed to university departments, as well the realities of the modes of research and teaching that go on within them, can, in practice, often be quite fluid. In fact, it is not uncommon that what is institutionally labelled as “Theology” or as “Religious Studies” can be found in the organizational units that may bear public labels which suggest the opposite.

From the perspective of a more German scholarly environment, this, in many ways, highlights what can be seen as a typically English trait of not being sufficiently *konsequent*. Such “fuzziness” is also found in the name of the national body that was originally founded as the Association of University Departments of Theology and Religious Studies (AUDTRS) and is now called Theology and Religious Studies—UK (TRS-UK). In this body, alongside the thirty-four universities listed as having academic units that are in membership, there are also thirteen more sharply focused (and sometimes quite contrasting) disciplinary associations—from the British Association for the Study of Religion (BASR 2023a) to the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain (CTAGB 2023).

In many ways, this kind of approach is also reflected in the so-called Units of Assessment (UoA) of the UK’s periodic Research Excellence Framework (REF), which is the national system for the benchmarking of research quality and the selective distribution of public funds for research, within which the relevant UoA has been called “Theology and Religious Studies”. Therefore, especially when taking into account the more “external” perspective of bureaucratic accountability mechanisms, the sharpness of distinction between “Theology” and “Religious Studies” that is theoretically advocated by some individual scholars can, in institutional settings, often be relativized within the context of a pragmatic approach that recognizes the need to “huddle together in a cold climate” within many universities in which religion or belief is marginalized as an appropriate focus for contemporary study and research.

In taking the kind of approach that it does, TRS-UK is somewhat reflective of the current broad approach of the American Academy of Religion (AAR).² Thus, TRS-UK states, as its first objective, that: “TRS-UK serves, represents, supports, and promotes the academic study of religion and theology in UK higher education institutions” (TRS-UK 2023). Another part of the AAR’s “mission” is stated to be “to foster excellence in the academic study of religion” (AAR 2023). In both of these statements, the word “academic” appears to function as signifying that there is thought to be at least a common quality of study and research across “Theology” and/or “Religious Studies” that distinguishes them from what may be other legitimate approaches in different contexts. If so, the question also arises of what might be the shared characteristics, if any, of such an “academic” approach? And what might the specific differences be from other approaches where it might not be appropriate to use the word “academic”? How far might more substantive ontologies and epistemologies come into the articulation, development and application of “academic” procedures? And therefore, how far might any apparently common methodological procedures be equally capable of being applied with integrity by religion and belief “insiders” as well as “outsiders”?

3. A Recent Example of Two “Camps”

These questions are important in practical as well as theoretical terms because while, in Britain, “Theology” and/or “Religious Studies” manage broadly to work together within the framework of TRS-UK, in the wider European and global academic spaces, things are not always so straightforward. However, rather than taking the well-worn approach of citing a range of individual scholars who support one mode or the other and/or who, in some instances, argue for greater fluidity between them (for overviews of such from various perspectives, see King 1990; McCutcheon 1999; Warriar and Oliver 2008), in this and the following section of the essay, I will primarily set the scene for such debates by reference to organizations and institutionalized bodies and their approaches to and positions taken within these contestations.

As particularly illustrative of this, in 2016 a new pan-European body was launched under the name of the European Academy of Religion (EuARe). This sought to project itself as echoing, in a European context, the name, role and profile of the American Academy of Religion. In response, on 27 May 2017, a statement was issued by the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR 2023) and the International Association for the History of Religion (IAHR 2023), in which they jointly declared that they “... are not in support of

the newly established ‘European Academy of Religion’ (EASR 2017). One reading of this might simply be that of a kind of academic “turf war” between an existing European level body and a newcomer also with European aspirations. Indeed, a part of the EASR-IAHR statement points out that the EASR has been in existence since 2000, and itself at the time had twenty-four member associations. Therefore, it was argued that the creation of another association for the academic study of religion in Europe “is superfluous and represents an objectionable disregard of existing organizational structures in the field” (EASR 2017).

However, a closer look at the debate suggests something more than territorial competitiveness alone, which may also underlie unspoken reasons for the EuAre initiative itself. This becomes clearer when the EASR-IAHR statement cites what it calls the EASR’s and IAHR’s “shared perspective on religion as an object of scientific research and scholarship”. In relation to this, it states that both organizations’ constitutions promote and welcome “all forms of research on religion that are carried out in an impartial and non-confessionally motivated manner” (EASR 2017). The EASR has, as one of its member organizations, the previously mentioned BASR, which, as we have already noted, is one of the affiliated disciplinary associations of the TRS-UK. The BASR’s constitution states that its object is to “promote the academic study of religion/s, understood as the historical, social, theoretical, critical and comparative study of religion/s through the interdisciplinary collaboration of all scholars whose research is defined in this way”, with the addition of the qualifying statement that it is “not a forum for confessional, apologetic, or similar concerns” (BASR 2023b). As a member organization of the EASR, the BASR supported the EASR’s position with regard to the EuAre (BASR 2017), while the EASR is, on a global level, affiliated with the IAHR. On its website, the IAHR states its self-understanding as being that it is “dedicated to the scientific study of religion” and that it is “not a forum” for what it describes as “confessional, apologetical, or other similar concerns” (IAHR 2023), although perhaps ironically, the AAR—which includes “Theology” alongside “Religious Studies”—is a member organization of the IAHR!

While noting the presence of the word “science” in the name of the University of Bologna Institute that facilitated EuAre’s formation (the *Fondazione per le scienze religiose Giovanni XXIII*), the EASR/IAHR statement maintains that “Despite its name, we regard this Academy as not representing the non-confessionally based and globally oriented approach that is essential to the study of religions as an academic discipline” (IAHR 2023). Here, again, we see the word “academic” being used as a marker for something that is deemed to be important and distinctive about this particular kind of study and research of religion. However, in this instance, and contrary to its use by TRS-UK and the AAR (which both leave open a more *substantive* meaning of their use of the word “academic”), what was intended clearly carries with it a sense of more clearly boundary-making methodological approaches and assumptions. Indeed, this can clearly be seen when the EASR-IAHR statement articulates its position as being that, while “The pursuit of normative theology and engagement in interreligious conversation are legitimate activities in their proper context”, they fall “outside the generally accepted definition of the study of religions as a field of evidence-based research” (IAHR 2023).

4. Some Broader Historical Contexts for the Debates

The historical context for this is the fact that, for the majority of its existence, “Theology” in Western universities has tended to reflect the hegemony of the Christendom and Constantinian forms of Christian religion, with all that was entailed in this in terms of the exercise of forms of social, political and legal power within which claimed theological truth acted to draw the boundaries of social and political community and acceptability. Examples of this can clearly be seen in the history of English universities during the period following the Restoration of the Monarchy until only a century and a half ago, during which time Dissenting Christians and Roman Catholics, as well as Jews, atheists, Freethinkers and others, were by law excluded from participation and from qualifying for degrees in England. This was because they could not, in conscience, assent to the 39 Articles of the Church of

England either on graduation (as in Cambridge) or on matriculation (as in Oxford) as the price demanded for demonstrating their civic loyalty. In response, Dissenting Christians formed their own Dissenting Academies so that their religious leaderships could have access to training for an “educated ministry” and laypeople could have opportunities in the emerging professions of civil society (Weller 2022).

In relation to the overall heritage of universities, the removal of such impediments is not so long ago in terms of institutional history. While, in England, laws no longer prevent diverse Christians, Jews, Muslims, atheists and others from studying religion in universities, what Foucault (1988) calls “regimes” of truth and/or “power/knowledge” continue to operate. However, this now occurs in a more diffuse and permeating way of which those who benefit from them are often not conscious, but which those who are in practice excluded can all too easily identify. Thus, until the rise of the “secular” human sciences of anthropology, sociology and psychology, “Theology” in western universities tended to have an almost exclusive focus on Christianity (and, within that, often only on particular traditions within it). By contrast, other Christian traditions of religion or belief have generally been studied and researched largely to the extent that they were of apologetic relevance and/or were the focus of a more “detached” textual–linguistic–historical interest in illuminating some aspect of the dominant tradition’s scriptures, main “sacred” languages and history.

Indeed, it was concerns such as these that were reflected in the observation made in the EASR-IAHR joint statement that the programme of the EuARE’s founding conference was “strongly dominated by themes relating to Christian theology. . .” (EASR 2017). Because of this inheritance, it is perhaps not surprising that conflicts such as those around the founding of EuARE occur. It is also a reminder of the fact that, as with the concept of the “secular” (which, in its currently dominant form, is reactively emergent out of a Christendom history and therefore in many ways takes a “Christian-shaped” form), the concepts and concerns of the “Religious Studies” and *Religionswissenschaft* modes of study have also not emerged ahistorically in their own right. Rather, their evolution in contemporary Western universities has generally occurred in a continuingly *interactive* way in relation to “Theology”. And understanding this can assist in better assessing such conflicts, regardless of one’s own evaluative position in relation to them.

5. Interactivity, Productivity and the Transformation of “Theology” and “Religious Studies”

From the perspective of both individual scholars and institutionalized bodies working primarily from within the mode of “Religious Studies”, this continuing *interaction* has often (although not always) been an interaction of *protest against*, and an attempt at *liberation from*, the academic tutelage of dominant truth regimes of particular inherited forms of Christendom theology and theologizing. And these concerns are not completely superseded—as some might want to advocate—simply because it might be argued that “secular” truth regimes are stronger in universities. Nor are they superseded in light of the undoubted fact that academic “Theology” in universities has itself diversified substantially beyond its more traditional shapes and forms to embrace feminist theologies, liberation theologies and the like, or that other Christian religious traditions are, not only in universities but also in many Christian seminaries, often now approached with an attempt at understanding in the terms of the logics of their own primary traditions, beliefs and practices.

In fact, I would assert that it can cogently be argued that, historically speaking, many of the changes that have occurred within “Theology” in terms of the more recent developments of practical, pastoral, contextual and liberation theologies have come about only out of the critical interactive relationship between the emerging human sciences (such as ethnography) within “Religious Studies” and what has more traditionally gone on under the label of “Theology”. However, just as traditional “Theology” has benefitted from the critiques developed by the human sciences and deployed via the interactive evolution of “Religious Studies” with “Theology”, it could plausibly equally be argued that “Religious

Studies” might (and arguably might need to) benefit from being exposed to the kind of more fundamental questions of life and humanity that “Theology” at its best can pose. As the former Head of Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Leeds, the Church historian Adrian Hastings argued in an essay called “Pluralism: the Relationship of Theology to Religious Studies”, published in 1990, that:

We may note here that if Religious Studies is in its way very much wider than Theology, Theology also remains in its way very much wider than Religious Studies. Religious Studies is, inevitably, the study of religion—all religion, including the relationship between religion and anything else. But Theology is not, as such, necessarily about religion at all. It is about existence in its totality, seen in the light of faith. (Hastings 1990, p. 233)

If, then, what is usually called “Theology” might, from this wider perspective, also positively be able to contribute to the self-critique of what is usually called “Religious Studies” then, just as the critiques from “Religious Studies” found “touch points” with developments that were articulated in terms of “Theology’s” own transforming self-understanding, such approaches from within “Theology” could find developing points of contact that are emerging from within “Religious Studies” own developmental dynamics. In any case, it is the argument of this essay that, however such transformations have come about, both within “Theology” and within “Religious Studies”, the critical “touch points” have very often been located precisely in the need to take more seriously the socio-political contextuality of the intellectual work and the socio-political positionality of the scholars who produce it. And this will be further developed in the remaining sections of this essay.

6. Exemplars of Socio-Political Contextualization and Positionality

As not only examples of but also exemplars in support of the argument of this essay that, both separately and in their interaction with each other, “Theology” and “Religious Studies” need to take more seriously the socio-political contextuality of their intellectual work, as well as the socio-political positionality of their scholars, the next section of this essay discusses four selected scholars and aspects of their work that are particularly relevant to this. Two of these would normally be identified with “Theology” (the Czech, Josef Hromádka, and the German, Dorothee Sölle) and two would normally be identified with Religious Studies (the British scholars, Richard King and Malory Nye).

6.1. Josef Hromádka: Socio-Political Contextualization and Positionality in “Theology”

In what is now “another world” of the mid-1980s in what was then the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, the author of this essay was sitting in a pub in Prague together with a Madagascan friend who was studying Theology at Prague’s Charles University. We were joined at our table by a young man in uniform who turned out to be one of the country’s border guards. As we got talking, this young man asked my friend what he was doing in Prague. My friend replied that he was a student. The border guard then asked, “What subject are you studying”, and my friend answered “Theology”. Now, both my Madagascan friend and the border guard were talking in what was not the first language of either of them but what was, for my benefit, the common conversational language of English. Responding to my friend’s revelation that he was studying “Theology”, the border guard said, “Oh, geology! That’s interesting!” My friend replied “No, no—not geology, Theology!” The border guard said, “Theology!—What? Here in Prague?! That’s impossible! Never!”

This incident is instructive in a number of ways. First, the border guard did not expect “Theology” to be a subject of possible study in a university in the context of a state defined by an ideological commitment to Marxism–Leninism. And yet, including during the period of Communist Party rule in Czechoslovakia, at Charles University, it did remain a possibility for students to study Theology. And this underlines that “Theology” can have a remarkable vitality even in contexts that, in ideological terms, might be assumed to be inhospitable to any notion of the value of studying and researching religion as a lived

phenomenon, such as at the Charles University during that period. While that ideological context of “really existing socialism” was one which many would almost axiomatically see as having been inimical both to the practice of religion and to the study of it, it is important also to consider the extent to which from “really existing capitalism” there might be a set of parallel but different challenges for the study of religion, whether in terms of “Theology” or “Religious Studies”. Indeed, one of those who might offer helpful resource to a contemporary reflection on this is the Christian theologian, Josef Hromádka.

Hromádka was a doctoral alumnus of Charles University and later (1950–1966) Dean of the Comenius Faculty of Protestant Theology, Josef Hromádka (See Salajka 1985; Opočenský 1990; Secretariat of the Christian Peace Conference (International) (1998)) who, as a pastor and theologian of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, following exile in the USA (1939–1947), specifically chose to return to Czechoslovakia at a time of significant geopolitical uncertainty in Europe as a whole, and at a point of imminent political change with the Communist Party’s accession to power in his country. In this period, such figures as the US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, were arguing that the states of “really existing socialism” were expressions of “godless terrorism” ranged against what, at the time, was often called “Christian civilization”. This was on the basis of an argument that these states were seeking the destruction of a Christendom culture, the appropriation of Church property and at the least restrictions on religious freedom, if not, in at least some settings and periods, the outright persecution of religious believers. In the light of this, Dulles, who played a significant role in the World Council of Churches’ (WCC) Churches’ Commission on International Affairs (CCIA), tried at the WCC’s 1948 Amsterdam Assembly (Kuem 2016, p. 120) to enlist the (at that point largely Protestant) WCC into an ideologically broad, anti-Communist (Milliband et al. 1984) front.

But informed by what he saw as a theological understanding of history and a critique of Christendom ideologies and structures, Hromádka refused to accept co-option into the anti-Communist discourse and crusade which figures such as Dulles sought to promote. He argued instead that Christian believers living in either socialist or capitalist societies *both* faced challenges to their Christian religious faithfulness and integrity. And indeed, it was following an intervention from Hromádka (1948, published in (Secretariat of the Christian Peace Conference (International) 1998, pp. 6–14)) to the WCC Amsterdam Assembly, in which he offered a biblically informed critique of capitalist society, that the Assembly declined to follow the siren voice of an anti-Communism that would have uncritically aligned the Christian Churches with “bourgeois capitalism” during the Cold War. It chose instead to articulate a Christian vision of a “responsible society” as being of relevance to a state with any social system, whether that of “really existing socialism” or of “bourgeois capitalism”.

Building on that historically important theological stance, and in a context where (in contrast to the vast majority of other institutions in what might be called civil society), the Christian Churches could be found on both sides of the emerging so-called “Iron Curtain” across Europe, Hromádka went on in 1958 to convene the Prague Christian Conference, which then evolved into the international Christian Peace Conference (CPC), as a Christian ecumenical organization based in Prague. While helping to contribute to keeping the channels of communication open across East and West, it also became an important forum for an emergent Christian–Marxist dialogue in Europe and beyond, until in 1968 the Soviet tanks ended the Prague Spring, followed by Hromádka having a heart attack and then dying, which some interpreted as his dying of a broken heart. Hromádka’s theological and political legacy in many ways became overshadowed by the ensuing so-called “normalisation process” that followed and for many years restricted many of the initially creative energies of the CPC until it later succeeded in connecting with liberation theology developments in the Two Thirds World.

Today, Hromádka is (sadly) little known outside of his native country, and our times seem far on the other side of the practical end of what was known as “really existing socialism”. But, regardless of whether we operate primarily in terms of “Theology” and/or

“Religious Studies”, we may have become so immersed within the capitalist system in which we as individuals, our universities, our faith communities and our ways of studying and researching religion are shaped by it that we do not really see it. If so, the work associated with Hromádka could stand as an academic, professional and human resource for the importance of critical engagement with the wider social, political and economic contexts in which one as an individual and as a professional is embedded. In the final analysis, both Hromádka’s ability not to fall captive to ideologies³ and his courage not to withdraw from wider social and political realities but rather fully engage with them to try as much as might be possible to discern the signs of the times in history and to act in relation to them were rooted in a fundamentally theological orientation, which he articulated as follows:

All the sense of work lies in the desire, in the midst of today, to have the courage in the sovereignty of faith to recognize and understand the sense of the present moment, the relation between today and yesterday, the hidden connections of history, and to be able, with the desire for the courage of faith, to approximately determine the direction of the way which the Lord designates for our life and death. (Hromádka, in Salajka 1985, p. 4)

6.2. Dorothee Sölle: Socio-Political Contextualization and Positionality in “Theology”

Perhaps not surprisingly, out of the crucible of their country’s experiences with Nazism (including those of the co-option of large parts of their Churches and much of their university system into the Nazi system), a number of theologians of German heritage have also been notably strong in their advocacy of the importance of theological critique in relation to social, political and economic environments, including those of capitalism. Among these, one of the most emblematic was, perhaps, the German liberation theologian, political activist and feminist Dorothee Sölle⁴ (1927–2004), who was famous (and in the eyes of some, infamous) for advancing the argument that “Every theological statement must be a political statement as well”. This statement was, in itself, for many controversial, as it was bold because it was critiqued as a reductionist approach to “Theology”. However, it was intended in at least two complementary ways:

1. The argument was, on the one hand, *descriptive* of what Sölle held to be the case in relation even to theological articulations that claim to be independent of such an understanding, in relation to which the question is raised of what political interests do, in fact, any and all theological statements serve.
2. On the other hand, it was also something that Sölle argued should rather be *consciously embraced* so that, in articulating “Theology”, one should always consciously recognize its political implications and that, rather than this resulting in reductionism, the methodological self-awareness in doing this is precisely the best available mechanism for avoiding the inevitable “passive” positioning by others that in any case occurs relative to all theological statements.

Examples of this in Sölle’s own life and work include, among other things, the regular *Politisches Nachtgebet* (political night prayers) that she and her husband, Fulbert Steffensky, organized in Köln between 1968 and 1972 and which engaged “Theology” and spirituality against the Vietnam War and the Cold War. For Sölle, love (as Christian praxis) was very much at the heart of “Theology”. But such “love” was not to be limited to a personalist interpretation but integrally included political dimensions (Weller 2021). In her work, which, in many ways, was as much that of an activist as that of a more classical theologian,⁵ she was known for other sharply provocative pronouncements such as “Vietnam is Golgotha”; “The Third World is a permanent Auschwitz”; “God has no hands except our hands” and “We should eat more at the Eucharist and we should pray more when eating”. In her 1970 book, *Beyond Mere Obedience*, as a German Christian theologian (and therefore very unlike later uses of the superficially similar term “Islamofascism”), she coined the term “Christofascist” to describe certain kinds of Christian “fundamentalism”. And in perhaps

her (Sölle 1975) best known book in English, *Suffering*, she critiqued what she, again in a sharp turn of phrase, called “Christian masochism” and “theological sadism” in making a call for human beings to struggle together against oppression, sexism, anti-Semitism and all forms of authoritarianism.

Building on the example of these two in many ways different⁶ but in some ways similar “engaged scholars” working primarily under the rubric of “Theology”, perhaps one should ask the question: what is it within the colonially rooted capitalist economic and cultural (and, might one also go so far as to say, “religio-ideological”) system that impacts upon and shapes the way that not only “Theology” but also *Religionswissenschaft* and “Religious Studies” functions in universities today? And this is a question which will now be explored in relation to the socio-political contextuality of the intellectual work and the socio-political positionality of two British scholars who have been strongly identified with the modality of “Religious Studies”, in many ways, as over and against that of “Theology”, namely, Richard King and Malory Nye.

6.3. Richard King: Socio-Political Contextualization and Positionality in “Religious Studies”

In relation to the aspiration towards neutrality most often found among those who pursue Religious Studies, the introduction to Jeremy Carrette’s and Richard King’s co-authored 2005 book *Selling Spirituality* is particularly illuminative. And this is especially so in relation to the way in which aspects of both religion and the study of it have become absorbed into, and changed by, contemporary market economy capitalism. In relation to this, the introduction stated that their book set out to “...address the politics of knowledge” in “an explicitly political project that ...seeks to challenge the commodification of life as well as disrupt the domestication of diverse cultural traditions, practices and communities” and to do so by drawing “... attention to the pernicious social effects of neo-liberalism and the corporate takeover of society that such shifts represent” (Carrette and King 2005, p. x).

Within the legacy of his own “redundancy” that occurred at the University of Derby as part of the 2001 closure of Religious and Philosophical Studies there, a rather understandably sour note of “thanks” was added to the book’s introduction to the effect that: “Richard would like to make special mention of the University of Derby, UK, for making him personally aware of the effects of market forces in the workplace and for providing a case study of the transformation of the university education into a retail enterprise” (Carrette and King 2005, pp. x–xi). But lest such a critique should be seen as being rooted only in understandable anger arising from the direct experience of the impact particular managerial decisions have on both what had been one of the University’s then leading research areas and also upon one’s professional and personal life, it should be noted that, in many ways, *Selling Spirituality* also built on King’s previous critical work in relation to the influence upon what is often claimed to be the more “neutral” approaches to studying and researching religion than what goes on under the label of “Theology” of the kind of Orientalism that has shaped the Western university system and analyzed by King (1999) in relation to the “mystic East”, thus complementing Said’s work in relation to Islam and Muslims (Said 1979).

This brings us back to the question of the kind of “secular” within which Western universities, and both “Theology” and “Religious Studies” within them, operate and which, as well as arguably being a “(reactively to) Christian secular”, is neither an economically nor culturally neutral, nor “genderless” nor “colourless” form of the “secular”. And in this context, “Religious Studies” cannot hope any more than “Theology” (and perhaps, in some ways, might be less capable) to study and research religion as if immune to the effects of how social, political and economic contexts, frameworks and interests operate.

6.4. Malory Nye: Socio-Political Contextualisation and Positionality in “Religious Studies”

Writing out of an originally formative intellectual background in the anthropology of religion, Malory Nye (2019) has sought to develop an important strand of reflection on what he has called “Decolonizing the Study of Religion”. In this, he has been trying to

develop a post-colonial critique of the way in which religion is studied and engaged with in universities, and especially in relation to those modes of study and research that lay claim to an objectivity of method over and against “Theology”. Nye’s paper begins with the challenging words:

The ways in which contemporary scholars talk about religion remain steeped in the ongoing legacies of European colonialism and assumptions of white supremacy. There are various lines of descent for the study of religion, and like much of the humanities and social sciences, they all lead back to colonialism, and in particular the 19th- and early 20th-centuries. (Nye 2019, p. 2)

He then goes on to pose the even sharper question of: “. . .to what extent can we say that the study of religion is so deeply the product of colonialism that its structures, presumptions, and methods are irredeemably flawed? Is the study of religion a rotten fruit of the poisoned tree of colonialism?” (Nye 2019, p. 2). A part of this is about what is and what is not taught in university curricula. In relation to this, the study of religion finds itself in a wider context of, for example, the “Decolonizing SOAS” initiative (SOAS 2023b) initiated in 2017 by the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London (SOAS).

In comparison with the heritage and content of some disciplines, Nye notes that the study of religion has the at least potential advantage of having “an important function in exploring and transmitting ancient sources and philosophies from Asia, Africa, and elsewhere (and is not so ‘obviously’ white as some humanities disciplines such as philosophy, classics, and medieval history)” (Nye 2019, p. 12). At the same time, he argues that what prides itself as a more pluralistically inclusive study of religion nevertheless generally proceeds within what he calls “a framework of colonially structured modernity” (Nye 2019, p. 12). Furthermore, he argues that, in trying to understand, critique, challenge and overcome this, it is important to acknowledge that the ways in which the emergence of the human science disciplines occurred within the long-established universities were in the context of institutions that were what Aníbal Quijano (2007, p. 168) refers to as part of the “colonial structure of power”.

While empire in its original sense has ended with political decolonization, Nye notes that, “Despite the fairly recent take up of the term in mainstream academia, decolonization is not the same as ‘inclusion’ or ‘diversification’: it is not about a paternalistic offering of inclusion to outsiders”. Rather, he underlines that, “The metaphor of the ‘seat at the table’ (or the space on the syllabus) for such diversity is part of such white paternalism. In contrast, decolonization is a challenge to these assumptions of power and the structures that are formed to maintain them” (Nye 2019, p. 24). In relation to how such a process can be started, in terms of how scholarly debate is conducted, with who and to what end, Nye argues that “Decolonization is about changing how people think, talk, and act through a radical engagement with a plurality of voices and perspectives that have been historically marginalized and silenced” and that “Decolonization is not about ‘finding space’ at the table: it is about changing the room” (Nye 2019, p. 5).

Such an approach echoes the notion of “pluriversity”, as articulated in the work of Achille Mbembe, who explains what he, in the South African context of post-apartheid decolonization, means by this as an aim for the university, which he describes as being “a process of knowledge production that is open to epistemic diversity” (Mbembe 2016, p. 4). In arguing for this, Mbembe anticipates the critique that such a position leads to epistemological, cultural and ethical relativism by arguing that such an approach “does not necessarily abandon the notion of universal knowledge for humanity”. Rather, Mbembe argues that pluriversity embraces the possibility of a universal knowledge for humanity “via a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions” (Mbembe 2016, p. 5).

7. Empirical Grounding and Axioanalysis: Questions for “Theology” and “Religious Studies”

Perhaps what Mbembe argues on a broader front might have something to say regarding the specific and more focused question here concerning the relationship between “Theology” and/or “Religious Studies” in a “secular” university. As a Christian theologian writing an introductory textbook for a past generation of Theology undergraduates, Maurice Wiles succinctly expressed it in his compact book *What is Theology?*: “The exact relation between Christian theology and religious studies depends partly upon how the two titles themselves are understood” (Wiles 1976, p. 13). In light of this and all that has been discussed in this paper so far, including the important argument from Mbembe in favor of “. . . a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions” (Mbembe 2016, p. 5), I would suggest that we should, perhaps, not speak of a methodological debate between the singular concepts of “Theology” and “Religious Studies” but of a plural debate between theological methodologies and the methodologies of various forms of Religious Studies.

What this means for someone whose professional approach comes more from the “Religious Studies” end of the “Theology” and/or “Religious Studies” conversation is that, in critique of “Theology”, I stand close to what the scholar who is often revered as the “father of Religious Studies” in the UK, Ninian Smart, used to argue in critique of “Theology” rather than in alignment with the attempts of many in the EASR and, especially, the IAHR to exclude from the validity of the “academic” study of religion the making of evaluative judgements and the exploring of truth claims. Thus, for me, as for Smart: “The real problem with traditional theology is not that the latter goes in for judgements and constructs worldviews, but that on the empirical and descriptive, historical side it so restricts enquiry through the modes of its institutionalization” (Smart 1984, p. 268).

My other main problem with “Theology” is when it, at least apparently, seeks to proceed methodologically without some degree of empirical engagement. Concretely, for example, a consequence from this would be that if “ecclesiology” can properly be considered as branch of “Theology”, then it seems to me that it is no longer responsible to “do ecclesiology” without it being informed by what has come to be called “congregational studies” (see Guest et al. 2004). Equally, in relation to “Religious Studies”, it is important that this can, and also, where possible, *should*, be carried out in a way that is grounded in and contextualized along the lines of what the German scholars Michael Klöcker and Udo Tworushka call *Praktische Religionswissenschaft* (see Klöcker and Tworushka 2008; Weller 2009).

In relation to both “Theology” and/or “Religious Studies”, as one becomes more aware of the regimes of knowledge found in both major tendencies within the academic study of religion, many professional and personal questions are raised, with the dimension of ethical self-criticism often mediating between them. Choosing conscious “scholarly engagement” rather than being “passively shaped” in one’s study and research of religion, whether undertaken primarily as “Theology” or as “Religious Studies”, entails a willingness both professionally and personally to try to live and work in a self-aware way and being prepared to do so with all the sense of ambiguity that comes about from the making of active choices that have practical consequences. In this, there is no professional rule book by which to proceed. But there is also no need for personal or professional paralysis. Returning once again to Josef Hromádka, who knew (including painfully) about such matters in his life as a theologian and citizen, he put it as follows:

. . . any attempt at understanding the meaning of historic events, any definite conviction or vital decision is inevitably one-sided. It is a decision for a certain course over against another course, and it draws a line between what I consider right and wrong—I do not recognise any so-called objectivity without conviction. Only dull indifference can boast of objectivity. (Hromádka, in Salajka 1985, p. 4)

For someone operating primarily in a “Religious Studies mode” of scholarship, as also in Theology, this entails the need to be transparent about one’s own personal religious or other positionalities, whether religious or non-religious. From within contemporary

“Religious Studies”, there are now a range of other methodological approaches (see, especially, Flood 1999) that have been developed partly in reaction to, as well as developed from, earlier phenomenological approaches to the study of religion such as that advocated by Ninian Smart. However, because alongside his major contribution to the emergence of “Religious Studies” in British universities, Smart argued against an a priori exclusion of the question of religion or belief truth-claims, I would advocate that what Smart called “axio-analysis” both can and (necessarily) should be something for scholars in both “Theology” and “Religious Studies” to undertake since, as urged by Smart, it

...seems to be part of the procedure for one who approaches a religion cross-culturally that he or she should stimulate some degree of self-awareness. It is as though we should undergo axioanalysis—a kind of evaluational equivalent to psychoanalysis: what has been called more broadly ‘values clarification’. Or perhaps we might call it ‘own-worldview analysis’. (Smart 1984, p. 265)

While neither transparency nor axioanalysis guarantee objectivity or good scholarship, both at least allow others in the university and public arenas to take such factors into account when contributing to, and making their evaluations of, published research. Therefore, in concluding, I would like to share the following questions that I used to pose to doctoral students from all university disciplines in a seminar on the topic of “The Societal View of Research/The Uses Made of Research”. Although originally formulated in relation to research alone (rather than research and teaching) and intended as more generically applicable across various disciplines, they are presented here with the words “and especially that in Theology and/or Religious Studies” inserted into the originals:

- Who funds your research and teaching, and especially that in Theology and/or Religious Studies?
- Are some forms of funding incompatible with some kinds of research and teaching, and especially that in Theology and/or Religious Studies?
- How does the source of the funding impact on the processes and content of your research and teaching, and especially that in Theology and/or Religious Studies?
- Is your research and teaching, and especially in Theology and/or Religious Studies, seen in the wider society as generally useful, generally “use-less” (in an instrumental sense) or potentially dangerous?
- Do different “stakeholders” and/or “interest groups” see your research and teaching, and especially that in Theology and/or Religious Studies, differently?
- Do you feel you have any responsibility for the “uses” that may be made of your research and teaching, and especially that in Theology or Religious Studies, by others?
- If you do feel such a responsibility, what can you do to address this?

If individuals who work in either “Theology” or “Religious Studies” ask these and other similar questions, then we can perhaps all engage in “academic” scholarship in both “Theology” and “Religious Studies” in interaction with each other and with the social, cultural, political and economic systems in which we find ourselves, in ways that are more self-aware, more ethically responsible and, because of that, more critical—in both the scholarly and societal senses of the word. In more structural terms, and in closing, I would also like to argue that it would be of benefit to individual scholars, to the “secular” university and to the wider society if what collectively goes on in universities, including in “Theology” and/or “Religious Studies”, was also seriously to interact with the following policy bullet points taken from the “Decolonizing SOAS Vision” that was adopted by SOAS’ Academic Board in November of 2017 (see SOAS 2023a) as part of its commitment to addressing the need for decolonization across its curricula. However, as with the above series of questions, the following is again presented here in an adapted form of questions posed especially to the fields of Theology and/or Religious Studies asking what it means to be engaged in:

- Supporting further recognition and debate about the wide, complex and varied impacts of colonialism, imperialism and racism in shaping our university, especially in Theology and/or Religious Studies;
- Embedding within our policies and practices a deeper understanding that these impacts produce and reproduce injustices and inequalities within education, especially in Theology and/or Religious Studies;
- A stronger commitment to actively making redress for such impacts through ongoing collective dialogue within the university and through our public obligations, especially in Theology and/or Religious Studies;
- The provision of institution-level support to embed this understanding in [our] contribution as a public university in the service of the wider world, and especially in Theology and/or Religious Studies.

If both sets of concluding questions were asked in serious ways that lead to action, then they could help to facilitate an important transformation within which socio-political contextuality and positionality are embraced and embedded as being necessary (but not exhaustive or exclusive) for rooting both critical and constructive scholarship in “Theology” and “Religious Studies” in a methodological process of social and personal reality-matching, the products of which—unlike those of particular kinds of religious dogma or critical theory alone—are then more capable of being dialogically contested. In this way, what could be called an “engaged” approach to the study of religion might prove able to facilitate a fruitful “shared borderland” between the “hinterland territories” claimed by these otherwise often broadly differential and sometimes conflicting approaches.

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Notes

- ¹ For example, Potsdam University’s Department of Jewish Studies and Religious Studies. As well as being one of only two Universities (the other being Bremen University) where Religious Studies departments are centrally responsible for training schoolteachers who are not attached to any religious confession in LER (Lebensgestaltung, Ethik und Religionskunde, or Conduct of Life, Ethics and Study of Religion), it also co-operates closely with the University’s Institute/School of Jewish Theology.
- ² For comprehensive awareness, in relation to the AAR, it should be noted that the main reason for the foundation of the separate North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR 2023) was the “broad tent” approach of the AAR.
- ³ It should be acknowledged that there are those who, especially following the “fall of Communism”, evaluated Hromádka as a Communist “fellow-traveller”, noting, among other things, that he was awarded the Lenin Prize in 1958. But such judgements were usually made by those from outside his social-political setting, where, in the context of what he saw as a judgement on “Christendom” models of society and grace for the opportunity of building something new, he opted for the possibility of a socialist transformation and strongly welcomed the Prague Spring as the fruit of the efforts in Christian–Marxist dialogue, to which he had made a major contribution, and the potential start of a new stage in the history of socialism. But he was also clear in his analysis of the political consequences of the Warsaw Pact intervention in his country in a letter written in his personal capacity to the Soviet Ambassador. In this, he spoke of a “tragic error” and an “immeasurable disaster” as a result of which “The moral weight of socialism in this country and in the world will be shaken for a long time”. And this was also reflected in a Memorandum that he afterwards wrote, as President of the CPC, to members of its Working Committee meeting in Massy, France, 1–4 October 1968. For both of these, see Opočenský (1990), pp. 427–45.

- 4 More properly, her name was Dorothee (Steffensky-) Sölle, but in most English publications, her surname is written without the umlaut as Soelle. Her double-barrelled surname, adopted following marriage to her husband, Fulbert Steffensky, is usually omitted.
- 5 In connection with this, it is perhaps worth noting that Sölle never held a Professorship in Germany, being Professor and resident for six months a year at Union Theological Seminary in New York between 1975 and 1987, although in 1994, she received an Honorary Professorship from the University of Hamburg.
- 6 Hromádka's formulations, though sharp, were always written carefully. Sölle perhaps felt the necessity, in a complacent West German society that had still not really (on either a familial or a political level) confronted the legacy of National Socialism, to be much more provocative in both formulation and expression in order to be able to even gain a hearing.

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