Look Back in Wonder: Some Historiographical Reflections on Revolution in Christian "Tradition"

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Let me begin, first, by thanking the organizers for inviting me to speak. Second, I must apologize for departing from my initial intention, which was to revisit "classic" popular histories which have shaped much of the discussion surrounding what one might call "revolutionary Christianity" in the medieval and modern periods. I was thinking at the time of Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* and Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down*, both of which were indeed very much invitations to look back in wonder.[1] Third, I'd like to commend the organizers on their stimulating conference brief, one which so effectively diverted me from my plan as advertised. I'll therefore begin with an attempt to engage more or less directly with the brief.

In particular, there are two points from the brief which captured my attention from the outset. First, there is the indication that many casual observers tend to consider something called "religion" to be the very antithesis of something called "revolution." In the conventional language of many revolutionary projects, religion is thus a "counter-revolutionary" force. It is unclear to me whether this formulation indicates a conceptual-theoretical relation, in which religion and revolution coexist dialectically. Or, whether it indicates a historical-political relation, in which religion regularly inhibits radical social transformations. In either case, it is clear that it is fairly easy to poke holes in such general conceptions, either by means of any number and kind of case studies, or by means of a representation of revolutionary ideologies or practices as quasi-religious, of "revolution

1. Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millennarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*. Revised ed. (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1970 [1957]); Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1972).

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as religion" if you will. In this latter kind of argument, the commitment to an as yet unrealized revolution is construed as an act of faith or as a belief which, under circumstances, may even be correlated to specific sub-classes of religious belief, for example Jewish-Christian eschatology.

This leads me to my second observation *à propos* of the brief: that what it invites are reflections on basically the reverse proposition: "religion *as* revolution." To take up this challenge, one might, as indicated, pursue specific examples of religious ideas (say, chiliasm), agents (say, Louis Riel), practices (say, community of goods), etc. that seem to meet certain criteria of what it means to be revolutionary. These one would deem to be significant, presumably, because they run counter to those normative expectations, already identified, that such religious ideas, agents, practices, etc., function in a conservative or reactionary manner. In other words, one would test the general theory of reactionary religion with particular instances of revolutionary religion. I must admit this case study approach does hold a certain appeal for me. But on further reflection one must wonder what, if anything, simply amassing examples of—presumably—subversive appropriation of religious discourse, could actually contribute to the discussion of "religion as revolution." The ability of observers to accord examples of say, pious and revolutionary peasants, the status of "exception that proves the rule" strikes me as potentially limitless. In this way, the academic study of religion appears remarkably immune to the famous Kuhnian paradigm shift. Thus any number of examples of actual religion implicated in actual revolution might be expected to do little, if anything, to destabilize the perception of religion as inherently counter-revolutionary. All of which is to say, that Religious Studies, as distinct from religion, may not possess revolutionary capacities, let alone tendencies. But that really is beside the point.

And yet, while Thomas Kuhn may not have much to say about Religious Studies, a field in which the sociology of knowledge is simply so very different from that of the natural and experimental sciences, his work obviously did have something to say about the problematic nature of "revolution" as a concept. What is more, Kuhn addressed revolutions in the realm of ideas as a social problem, rather than social revolution as a theoretical or ideal problem, which since the later 1960s has certainly been the more common and familiar formulation. What Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* did, above all, is question the hitherto nearly

universally accepted notion of a revolution in *thought*, by means of a detailed analysis of the *practice* of scientific communities.[2] Many in this audience will perceive a resonance here with recent developments in the academic study of religion, and in particular with a shift in focus from ideas and ideal types (commonly called doctrines and dogmas) to religious practice. In it most coherent and abstracted form this shift has produced the field of "ritual studies," in a turn described most programmatically by Catherine Bell.[3] Otherwise also implicated in the "ritual turn" have been a great variety of religious practitioners, who have redeployed their energies in what might be called, admittedly with considerable generalization, a turn from homiletics to liturgy. Indeed, one might push this point further, well into the realm of speculation, to wonder whether the current vogue for religious mega-productions (complete with "son-et-lumière") is in any way related to the recent "cognitive turn" in the academic study of religion.

In any case, my point is this: there are some interesting parallels between the fortunes of "religion" and of "revolution," including the fact that each term lives a double-life in both academic and non-academic discourses. From an academic point of view, however, the study of each presents entirely analogous theoretical and methodological problems. So, in a way, in turning my back on the case-study-that-may-or-may-not-prove-the-exception-to-the-rule approach, I am turning back to the "revolution as religion" model dismissed at the outset. But to borrow freely from Philip Tite's gloss on Russell McCutcheon, I am not doing so in an ontological way, but in a methodological way.[4] That is, I am proposing that the most fruitful way to consider "religion as revolution" is from a method and theory standpoint.

When, in the course of reflecting on the conference brief, the enormity of the method and theory issues contained therein started to dawn on me, and I abandoned (at least temporarily) my predisposition for case studies, I reached for the work of a scholar widely recognized for his grand theoretical

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2. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

3. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

4. Philip L. Tite, "Gnosticism, Taxonomies and the *Sui Generis* Debate: A Response to the Rennie-McCutcheon Exchange" *Religion* 30 (2000), 65–67, here 65.

approach to the historical study of revolutions, the late Charles Tilly. Tilly is actually frequently described as a macro-sociologist of revolutions, but he is also recognized for his attempt to engage the micro-historical movement of the 1980s and 1990s. It is through this attempt at dialogue that I had first encountered him when I was a student. I found his work helpful then, and I certainly am not disappointed now.

In 1993 Tilly published a volume entitled *European Revolutions, 1492–1992*, a work which, while true to Tilly's established pattern of producing synthetic works spanning many centuries, was also very much a work of its own particular time. At one level, therefore, it can be read as a response to Francis Fukuyama's braying and triumphalist—Derrida, famously, actually called it eschatological[5]—*The End of History*, a work which had appeared to great fanfare in 1992.[6] Of course, what distinguished Tilly from Fukuyama was that the former's take on revolution was thoroughly *historical*, whereas the latter's was vigorously *historicist*, engaging as it did with themes of vindication and destiny, rather than the past per se. Thus, while Fukuyama declared an end to revolution as a problem, political or intellectual, Tilly handled it simply as a concept for the ordering of certain data, and certainly not as a *Ding an sich* or as a natural phenomenon. In other words, Tilly handled revolution just as many of us would prefer to handle religion, as a second order abstraction. Thus Tilly stated at the outset that he did not think a general model of revolution possible. More striking still is his declaration that "revolutions do not develop *sui generis*."[7]

This particular formulation is destined to grab the attention of any student of religion who hasn't been hiding under a stone for the last twenty years or so. In the 1990s a complex series of debates in our field, concerning matters as varied as "crypto-theology" and "scientific reductionism" came together in a sprawling brawl over the alleged existence of a "sui generis discourse" on religion. The beginnings of the sui generis debate probably reach back to the early 1980s, when Jonathan Z. Smith published his widely

5. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), passim.
6. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
7. Charles Tilly, *European Revolutions, 1492–1992* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 8.

influential *Imagining Religion*.[8] That book, both directly and indirectly, shaped Russell McCutcheon's *Manufacturing Religion*, which was subtitled "The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia."[9] In any case, the sui generis problem has been widely debated in print in recent years, including by graduate students in Religious Studies here at McGill.[10] Thus it hardly warrants repeating that in McCutcheon's terms the crux of the *sui generis* discourse entails the view that religious experience is "somehow ahistorical, non-social and apolitical."[11] In Tite's gloss, which I have already mentioned, this entails "[t]he collapsing of second-order theoretical constructions into first order descriptions."[12] This, of course, is exactly Tilly's point about revolution. And further, only those committed to the promotion of either a particular religion or revolution, as the case may be, would claim otherwise.

At another level, what Tilly's highly resonant statement reminds us, is that what must be true for religion as a second-order abstraction is likely true for all such second-order abstractions, including revolution. Otherwise, we would be back to treating religion as a special category. At the very least, we cannot stabilize our destabilized object of study, religion, by splinting it to a more stable concept of revolution, and especially not one which is, like Fukuyama's, a pseudo-religion. Both religion and revolution are equally historical, contingent, constructed, and the like. Riffing on Jonathan Z. Smith, then, one might state that "there is no data for revolution." Or, that "revolution is solely the creation of the scholar's study." Which is as close as one might come to saying: "there are no revolutions except armchair revolutions." Such a statement is certainly not intended to minimize or even trivialize the struggles of peoples throughout history, but rather to shed some limited light on protracted debates about whether this or that action can be counted as a *bona fide* revolution or *merely* as a revolt, a rebellion,

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8. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

9. Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Sui Generis Discourse on Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

10. For example, see Bryan Rennie, "Manufacturing the *Sui Generis* Discourse: A Response to Russell McCutcheon" *Religion* 28 (1998), 413–414; Russell McCutcheon, "Of Straw Men and Humanists: A Reply to Bryan Rennie" *Religion* 29 (1999), 91–92; Tite, "Gnosticism," 65.

11. McCutcheon, "Of Straw Men," 91.

12. Tite, "Gnosticism," 65.

a resistance movement, etc. Those debates, it turns out, are all about the debaters.

And, of course, it now seems clear that those of us interested in "religion as revolution" must actually undertake to pursue a double-program of reflexivity and self-criticism. So, in that spirit, permit me to acknowledge —I assure you without even a whiff of a hint of false modesty—that I consider myself to be a very odd choice as a speaker for this conference. In truth: I have only marginal investments in either religion or revolution. Indeed, even my minimal investment in the former, religion, as a Professor of Religious Studies, has over the years further diminished whatever stake I once may have held in pursuing the latter, revolution. Basically this is a function of my own cooptation or *embourgeoisement.* Since I currently make a secure and decent living and since, after years many and long devoted to the acquisition of very specific skills and the cultivation of highly uncommon abilities, I am ill-suited to any other lucrative pursuits I can think of, a radical transformation of the existing social order may not be in my immediate best interest. So standing before you is a man who, by virtue of his profession, can speak about religion and revolution only from the vantage point of a secular bourgeois!

Having established that I possess no moral authority on the subject, I must fall back on whatever intellectual qualifications I possess as an historian. Moreover, I am by training and inclination both, a very peculiar kind of historian: a micro-historian. From a conventional Religious Studies standpoint that means, above all, that I am not at all a comparativist, since my expertise is limited to a very small part of what is commonly called "Western Christianity." Indeed, since I was trained in a discipline in which scholars are identified chronologically ("what's your period?") and spatially ("what's your area?"), I didn't even know that I was in Christian Studies until I joined the department/centre for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto. Of course that was back in 1994, so I've had some time to adjust.

While I have thus come to appreciate deeply what the academic study of religion has to offer, especially in the area of method and theory, my own view of revolution and religion remains heavily influenced by debates close to the centre of early modern history, and in particular of the German Reformation. Actually, early modern Europe is a common enough site for the practice of the academic study of religion. It is also the case, however, that there is a long history of historical scholarship that seeks to establish

both religious and social-political developments on the cusp of modernity in a revolutionary framework. Indeed, in his *Geschichte des Deutschen Bauernkriegs* Friedrich Engels wrote what is widely considered to be one of the very first modern social histories of what Ranke enduringly identified as the Reformation epoch. In this work Engels clearly extrapolated revolution from the 16th century to the 19th century, and by turn also projected backwards onto the 16th century the revolutionary aspirations of his own age. Thus the nexus of early Reformation and German Peasants' War became in Engels's terms an "early bourgeois revolution."[13] For obvious reasons, Engels's work remains in print. For equally obvious reasons other attempts to locate a revolutionary model for the present in the tumult that accompanied the dawning of modernity have been consigned to obscurity. This is the fate, for example, of a 1913 biography of the Bohemian proto-Reformer Jan Hus, the work of young Italian socialist by the name of Benito Mussolini (though an English translation of that work was published in New York in 1939!).[14] And, of course, the Reformation served similar function in the official historiography of the Third Reich, was well as very prominently in one of its successor states, the German Democratic Republic.[15] It should come as no surprise, therefore, that scholars and non-scholars alike continue to interpret radical religious developments of the Reformation era as revolutionary. But the point is this: they find exactly the *type* of revolution they are set out to find. Two contrasting examples will suffice to make the point.

In 1977 Peter Blickle published the enormously influential *Die Revolution von 1525*, which appeared first in English in 1981, followed by an English paperback edition in 1985.[16] While the English editions are now out of print, the German has been through multiple editions and printings, most recently in 2004. In this book, and in many subsequent publications, Blickle articulated a grand theory of revolution in which evangelical Christianity played a key role. His complex argument was also framed, however, by

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13. Laurenz Müller, "Revolutionary Moment: Interpreting the Peasants' War in the Third Reich and in the German Democratic Republic" *Central European History* 40 (2007), 193–218.

14. Benito Mussolini, *Jan Hus, The Veracious* (New York: Italian Book Co., 1939 [1913]).

15. Müller, "Revolutionary Moment."

16. Peter Blickle, *The Revolution of 1525: The German Peasant's War from a New Perspective*. trans. Thomas A. Brady Jr. and H. C. Erik Midelfort (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

key debates concerning German national historiography. Of course, when Blickle formulated his thesis, there were two competing German national historiographies, each representing one of the German states to emerge from the ashes in 1945. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, moreover, both states still seemed very much viable enterprises. A major part of Blickle's historiographical program, therefore, was to wrest control of "revolution" as a category from his Marxist colleague-competitors in the East. In GDR historiography, of course, Engels's view of the German Peasants War as an "early bourgeois revolution" was the essential premise of the likewise *de rigeur* notion that revolution in the orthodox Marxist sense has a long and venerable tradition in Germany. For Blickle, the events in which peasant unrest and Radical Refomation had come together, briefly, in 1525–26, constituted an entirely different kind of revolution: a *failed* revolution. Not only did this make Germans as revolutionary—at least potentially—as, say, their immediate neighbours the French or the Russians, it actually permitted Blickle to construct, in comparison to other failed German revolutions like 1848 and 1918, a bona fide tradition of such frustrated revolutions that was peculiarly German. In this way, Blickle was actually intervening, on both sides, apparently, of the debate over the German *Sonderweg*. But for our purposes, the key question really is this: how was Blickle even able to identify a "failed revolution" in the distant past? How could one even perceive a revolution that had no discernible revolutionary outcomes? The answer is actually fairly obvious: by its revolutionary ideology or spirit, which Blickle identified with the evangelical content of various contemporary Peasant programmes. Thus a grand conception of religion as revolution served the even grander aims of German nationalist historiography in the liberal mode. Because evangelical ideas appeared in texts like the "12 Articles of Memmingen," Germany had an indigenous revolutionary tradition to rival both Russia and France, and possibly England (Blickle's later work came to focus explicitly on German traditions of parliamentary democracy)!

In 2000 there appeared in Italian a post-modern novel with the curious title—especially to Religionists—*Q*. The work appeared in English in 2003,[17] and has, according to Wikipedia, also been translated into Spanish, German, Dutch, French, Portuguese, Danish, Polish, Czech, Russian, Greek and—oddly enough—Korean. The author is identified by the equally

17. Luther Blissett, *Q* (London: William Heinemann, 2003).

symbolic *nom de plume* Luther Blissett; the book was actually the work of a four-person collective based in Bologna. It thus consists of four stylistically distinct parts, each one narrating the fortunes of a central character in his entanglements with: (I) Thomas Müntzer and the German peasant's last stand at Frankenhausen; (II) Jan Bockelson's ill-fated Anabaptist commune at Münster; (III) Hendrick Niclaes's "Family of Love" in the Netherlands; (IV) the Italian publication and distribution of the mystical text *For the Benefit of Christ Crucified*, in which Cardinal Reginald Poole is sometimes supposed to have had a hand. Throughout, the hero is pursued by a shadowy agent of the Papacy. The novel is thus both formally and substantively an allegorical commentary on the security super-state and its weaknesses in the face of revolutionary communication, whether in print in the sixteenth century, or digitally in the twenty-first. It is also clearly an attempt to construct, from the fragments of early modern radical religious movements, a tradition for a new European left. It is thus very much a work of the new millennium, pitting the forces of transnational mobility of ideas and persons, against the forces of super-state and globalization in the European Union. And of course, the novel depends, like Blickle's work, on the historiographical conceit of locating a pure revolutionary impulse in specifically religious ideologies and institutions.

So, where do we go from here? Does the fact the one can recognize "revolution" as historiographical conceit or construct mean that one must give it up entirely? Of course it does not. No more so than the acknowledgment that religion is, likewise, a scholarly invention means it should be abandoned. But one does have to be aware of how the concepts one chooses shape that conversation between past and present that we still commonly call history. Moreover, such history can no longer simply be plundered for exemple, without due attention to the modes of historiographical production. The religionist who wants, for whatever reason, to demonstrate the symbiosis of religion and revolution cannot just take Blickle's *Revolution of 1525* to show that formative protestant Christianity was indeed a revolutionary ideology, any more than she or he can rely on the account of the Radical Reformation provided by Luther Blissett's *Q*. Revolution here is an interpretation, not a datum. On the other hand, we can as scholars take ownership of our revolution concept, much as we have over the last decades become comfortable—admittedly, some of us more than others—with our responsibility for the "invention of religion."

While relentless self-criticism may be burdensome, the payback is likewise weighty. One might imagine, for example, by the methodological analogy of religion and revolution, putting to rest once and for all debates concerning distinctions between "transcendent" true revolutions on the one hand and mere rebellions and local revolts on the other, much as we have already moved beyond the once hallowed distinction between religion proper and mere superstition. It might indeed be helpful to disenchant all key categories or second-order abstractions, not just the obvious ones. Perhaps it is time to consider revolution as something ordinary?[18]

That may be, but my ultimate concern, as it were, lies elsewhere. As I have already remarked, I am by training and inclination both, a micro-historian. Yet, for a variety of reasons, I have spent the better part of the last decade and a half engaged in the task of teaching something called Christianity (clearly a macro-concept), usually using textbooks with titles like *The Christian Tradition* (which is actually the name of a very good recent text by Ralph Keen[19]). Such works are obviously the outcome of an enterprise of synthesis, rather than analysis, of setting norms rather than posing questions. And yet, one cannot—and certainly not as a responsible pedagogue—evade the prospect that such works, inasmuch as they further entrench the concept of tradition, both indicate and perpetrate a hegemonic regime, in the sense articulated and elaborated in Jean and John Comaroff's two-volume ethno-history *Of Revelation and Revolution*. In this work the Comaroffs, whom I would describe as anything but micro-historical in their theoretical approach, nevertheless posited the notion of "local Christianities."[20] In a similar vein, Peter Brown, likewise anything but a micro-historian, recently introduced the concept of "micro-Christendoms," a term which not only seeks to challenge traditions of scholarship, but of course also seeks to upend the very notion of "tradition" as a category of

18. The allusion, of course, is to a key programmatic statement in Russell McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001).

19. Ralph Keen, *The Christian Tradition* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2004).

20. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 4.

serious scholarship.[21] So, perhaps the "micro-" has finally come of age, and not just by default, or as corollary of disaffection with "grand theory." In that case, permit me to suggest that we begin a scholarly movement in pursuit of "micro-revolution!"

21. Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), passim.