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ARTICLES

Which Secular Grounds? The Atheism of Liberation Philosophy

Winner, 2020 APA Essay Prize in Latin American Thought

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La secularización era el nombre falso del fetichismo; y el ateísmo de las izquierdas era un primer momento dialéctico, cuyo segundo momento era una afirmación del Absoluto como liberación.¹

– Enrique Dussel

INTRODUCTION

It has been something of an accepted but misunderstood refrain that Latin American liberation philosophy employs the methods and approaches of liberation theology in the philosophical arena, effectively putting liberation theology on secular grounds.² While this formulation is true insofar as philosophy is not bound by the hermeneutics of any particular religious tradition, a closer reading of both movements’ methodologies complicates the presumed meaning of secularity in this interpretation. On the one hand, liberation theology is already partly secular in that it deploys the social sciences to diagnose and chastise the sinful character of material oppression. On the other hand, liberation philosophy affirms secularization as a methodological separation between faith and reason, but not rooted in an undialectical understanding of *secularity as secularism*.³ This essay clarifies the nature of liberation philosophy’s secular grounds.

While not the sole representative of liberation philosophy, I center the work of Enrique Dussel, as his intellectual production spans both liberation philosophy and liberation theology. His work is thus the most capacious entryway into the relationship between these two movements. I demonstrate how liberation philosophy’s secularity is not one that disavows religion, as with the undialectical understanding of *secularity as secularism*. On the contrary, liberation philosophy’s secular grounds require a constant engagement with religion, not in the hermeneutics of

any specific tradition, but with “the traditional question of the Absolute.”⁴ This way of doing philosophy contrasts with the secularist repudiation of religion that dominates within much of philosophy’s radical circles, which is why liberation philosophy has repeatedly been “ghettoized and relegated to the ‘safe’ area of theological studies,” as Eduardo Mendieta has argued.⁵ It is my contention, however, that liberation philosophy’s secular grounds are an original contribution to philosophy that can provide the foundation for a decolonial and postsecularist liberation philosophy, particularly a liberation philosophy of *religion*. This would be an account of religion with an ethico-political existential dimension as humanity’s liberatory search for meaning, expressed as the search for the Absolute. Moreover, I argue that this dialectical modality of secularity advances epistemic decolonization, for it reveals the undialectical understanding of *secularity as secularism* to be an aspect of coloniality, an obstacle rather than a benefit for Latin American philosophers seeking to gain a better understanding of our historical conditions.⁶

LIBERATION PHILOSOPHY’S SECULAR GROUNDS

Both liberation theology and liberation philosophy emerged in Latin America in the late 1960s within the social and political struggles that sought to improve the living conditions of the vast majority of the region’s population. On the theological front, figures like Rubem Alves, Hugo Assmann, and Gustavo Gutierrez broke with centuries-old theological paradigms to embrace the secular social sciences—particularly Latin American dependency theory—to develop an understanding of poverty as the result of the sinful character of neocolonial oppression.⁷ In the philosophical trenches, Leopoldo Zea and Augusto Salazar Bondy had set the terms of a debate concerning the possibility of an authentic Latin American philosophy.⁸ As a response to this debate, a group of Argentine philosophers that included Rodolfo Kusch, Juan Carlos Scannone, Horacio Cerutti, and Enrique Dussel, among others, developed the basis of a philosophical reflection that would contribute to the struggles that were shaping the course of Latin American history. This is how liberation philosophy was born.⁹

Enrique Dussel quickly emerged as a noted contributor to both movements while maintaining a strict division between the two, with philosophy geared toward a universal secular community of reason and theology toward a particular religious community of faith.¹⁰ Despite such a clear separation, however, liberation philosophy has often been discredited for its close association to its theological counterpart—thereby purportedly lacking originality and depth. Yet I argue that it is precisely liberation philosophy’s secularity that offers one of its most distinctive and original contributions to philosophy, in large part because of its unconventional construction of secularity; that is, it is not positioned in direct opposition to the religious. That such unconventional secularity has yet to receive comprehensive attention is why the seemingly “religious” language of liberation philosophy continues to baffle its critics. Where some see a theology in disguise, I see an audaciously atheist liberatory philosophy, especially when it comes to the philosophy of *religion*.

To clarify this point, it is necessary to articulate how Dussel deploys secularity as a broad framework for liberation philosophy. In addition to the aforementioned interpretation of secularization as a methodological separation between theology and philosophy (the classic faith-and-reason debate), there is a prior and more important understanding of secularization that connotes a certain atheism. One of the first prominent historical examples of this modality is found, somewhat ironically, in the early messianic communities that would go on to form Christianity. When these early Christians defended a belief in the Divine as “transcendental exteriority,” as the Other to the Roman cosmos, they contradicted the latter’s intrinsic divinity in a way that precipitated an accusation of atheism and their subsequent persecution.¹¹ In conceiving of the cosmos as “created, that is, not-God,” these early Christians initiated a process of secularization that would eventually give way to the empirical study of God’s creation.¹² Put differently, because the cosmos is not-God, it can be studied with tools other than revelation. The atheism of a self-proclaimed divinity (the negation of the Roman cosmos) thus becomes the precursor to the methodological separation between reason and revelation, between philosophy and theology as independent domains. This separation would become one of modernity’s essential epistemic divisions.

The historical irony of the Christian origin of secularization was crystallized in the Renaissance, when Christian theology confronted the latest conclusions from the empirical sciences. No longer the wretched of the Roman Empire but an imperial force in its own right, the Church now found itself in a powerful position of social, political, and cultural domination. At this historical juncture, Dussel argues, the Church had the opportunity to deepen the process of secularization that once gave birth to it by articulating that scientific rationality is not “in opposition to the values necessary to faith,” and embracing it.¹³ The Church, however, did not defend such separation between faith and reason—itself an outgrowth of Christianity’s own secularizing emergence—and instead rejected the new scientific forms of knowledge, creating “an antinomy that should never have been: science versus Christianity.”¹⁴ The dialectics of secularization initiated by the atheistic critique of the Roman cosmos thus came to a halt and ended the fruitful complementarity between faith and reason. The Medieval Church’s failure to deepen the process of secularization by rejecting scientific rationality resulted in an undialectical reaction. Solidified as an antireligious *secularism*, this undialectical reaction has reigned in scientific and philosophical circles ever since, most evident in the figures and inheritors of the Radical Enlightenment. Contrary to the first atheist modality and the second modality of complementarity between faith and reason, the undialectical modality of *secularity as secularism* disavows religion as a source of criticality and liberatory potential.

That the dialectics of secularization came to a halt in modern secularism has conditioned the development of both liberation theology and liberation philosophy. Both movements are invested in moving away from secularism as an undialectical modality of secularity, thus jumpstarting the process of secularization from their own respective domains of inquiry. They each diagnose the modern

secular/religious impasse as a type of fundamentalism that must be overcome. To that end, liberation theology famously reached out to the secular social sciences. Liberation philosophy followed suit, but on the other end of the divide. This is why liberation philosophy has been committed to developing a dialectically secular account of religion as a source of liberation that recovers the “atheist” modality critical of false divinities or “fetishes.” Such “anti-fetishism” establishes liberation philosophy’s secular grounds. I shall now briefly outline this project.

AN ATHEIST LIBERATION PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

A liberation philosophy of religion is systematically developed in the fifth volume of Dussel’s first *Ética*, aptly subtitled, “An Antifetishist Philosophy of Religion.”¹⁵ This is a project that includes an analysis of “fetishization” as the process by which an entity encloses itself and assumes itself to be an absolute source of power and legitimacy.¹⁶ It is an account of the self-divinization of the Same at the expense of the Other. This concept of fetishization sheds light on the aforementioned case of Christianity—a movement that started as a messianic and atheist anti-imperialist project but became the religion of the Roman Empire. Such processes of fetishization saturated the Crusades, the colonization of the Americas, and the European wars of religion. Fetishization in this case denotes the self-enclosure of Christianity into the Absolute—i.e., into Christendom.¹⁷

The task of the philosopher of liberation is to diagnose fetishization wherever it occurs. It means being atheist of the fetish that demands compulsory worship.¹⁸ Such atheism, as the “negation of the negation,” is indeed “the first thesis of Liberation Philosophy.”¹⁹ Here, the religious moment par excellence is that which comes *after* the negation of the fetish; it is the affirmation that “Divinity is Other than any system.”²⁰ In other words, the negation of the false divinity is itself substantiated by the positive affirmation that true Divinity can only be found beyond the system, as the Absolute Other. As “infinite exteriority,” the affirmation of the Absolute provides criteria “to accuse any system of being guilty.”²¹ Without such affirmation of infinite exteriority, any given system risks enclosing and absolutizing itself into a self-sufficient false divinity, a new fetish. Liberation philosophy essentially understands religion to be this anti-fetishist practice. It is the affirmation of the Absolute Other as true Divinity, as infinite exteriority, that gives one the footing to be an “atheist of every system.”²²

The radical aspect of this formulation of re-ligion as anti-fetishism is that *secularism* is understood as a new fetish—the merely reactionary undialectical rejoinder to the fetishization of Christianity; part of the problem and not a solution that can disrupt the process of fetishization. This is based on the understanding that secularism similarly does not leave room for exteriority and collapses into a practice of self-divination.²³ Thus, Dussel characterizes such undialectical understanding of *secularity as secularism* as “the false name of fetishism.”²⁴ This intricate formulation—the epigraph to this essay—

criticizes an undialectical understanding of the process of secularization, exemplified by a certain kind of Marxism, for its inadequacies in mounting a full critique of fetishism. For Dussel, the infamous Marxist critique of religion as “the opium of the people” rightly advocates for an atheism of the fetish.²⁵ But in its inability to take the next step of affirming exteriority, Marxist critique closes on itself, thus leaving the possibility to emerge as a new fetish of its own (as seen in Soviet bureaucracy): “Forgetting the second moment has distanced the left from the peoples who explain their daily lives, in the *Lebenswelt*, with symbols, rituals, and cults.”²⁶ This is why secularization (as secularism) became the false name of fetishism.

One of the original contributions of liberation philosophy, then, is the articulation of the second moment that follows the negation of the fetish missing in the Marxist critique of religion: “the affirmation of the Absolute as liberation.”²⁷ For if there is an Absolute, Dussel claims, “it ought to be Other than every historical system.”²⁸ It is the affirmation of the Absolute as infinite exteriority, as “perfect justice,” that can trigger the dialectics of secularization *once again*, where secularization no longer implies fetishism.²⁹

Such articulation of liberation philosophy’s secularity has gone largely unnoticed in its reception, even amongst its supporters. For instance, Eduardo Mendieta’s English translation of this formulation partially obscures the fact that Dussel is here calling for the reinterpretation of the meaning of secularity. Mendieta translates the first clause of this passage, originally in the past tense (“La secularización era el nombre falso del fetichismo”), into the English present tense (“Secularization is the false name of fetishism”).³⁰ In my view, this slight modification makes it difficult to see (1) the fact that the process of secularization at some point went wrong, becoming “the false name of fetishism,” and (2) that restoring the properly dialectical and critical aspect of secularization is one of liberation philosophy’s crucial tasks.

That such articulation of secularity has not received the careful attention that it deserves may also explain why components surrounding this reinterpretation have been a constant source of criticism, especially from other Latin American philosophers. Ofelia Schutte, for instance, finds Dussel’s “critique of secular-scientific education” to be “conservative in its stand against modernity.”³¹ From the very brief sketch I have offered above, it should be clear that such criticism does not take into account the way in which liberation philosophy affirms secularization at the expense of rejecting secularism. In other words, it is true that liberation philosophy is critical of secularism, but because it is not secular *enough*. The rejection of secularism does not come from a reactionary religious intention, but from a radically atheist secularizing position that is just as critical of fundamentalist iterations of religion. This is the sense in which I argue that liberation philosophy’s critique of secularism should be understood as being both *postsecularist* and *decolonial*, insofar as secularism is to be overcome for being “an Eurocentric and metropolitan ideology typical of the colonialist expansion and fruit of the theoretical conception of the Enlightenment and liberalism.”³² In this formulation, liberation philosophy

is prepared to contribute a specifically Latin American decolonial position to the “postsecular debate” regarding the shifting roles of religion and secularity in late modernity.³³

More recently, Nelson Maldonado-Torres has similarly criticized the move in liberation philosophy to understand the affirmation of the Absolute as part of a praxis of liberation from domination. For Maldonado-Torres, this is a conflation between the “trans-ontological” (beyond Being) and the “sub-ontological” (below Being) realms that, in his view, results in the problematic a priori normative grounding of liberation philosophy.³⁴ While this is a point that I am unable to fully address in this essay, as it requires an exposition of analogy and revelation concerning transcendental and empirical alterities, it should be clear that the anti-fetishist methodology is *also* meant to avoid any such problematic collapses. The notion of fetishization is here utilized to understand the false absolutization of an entity. In this sense, the Absolute is what fully escapes our grasp, thereby avoiding false confluences in any historical praxis of liberation. Liberation philosophy does argue, however, that the Absolute is expressed, for instance, in the popular imaginary of the oppressed. And far from being the exclusive domain of theology, it also ought to be the subject of philosophical interest. This is why philosophy cannot avoid “the God of the mythical narrative of the Latin American popular imaginary.”³⁵

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have sought to illuminate the nature of liberation philosophy’s secular grounds. The secularity to which liberation philosophy ascribes is not an undialectical modality of *secularity as secularism*, which disavows religion as a source of criticality and liberatory potential. On the contrary, liberation philosophy cultivates a secularity that retrieves a prior semantic meaning of secularization—an atheism of the fetish. Dialectical in nature, this modality of secularity respects re-ligion as the critique of the fetish.³⁶ It is therefore attuned to the ways in which re-ligion can and must provide sources of criticality and liberation within changing contexts of domination. From the perspective of liberation philosophy, secularism, as the undialectical modality of secularity, proves to be not the solution to fetishization but another shape of the fetish that has absolutized itself into a new totality. Liberation philosophy endeavors to overcome such limiting secularity by leaving room for the Absolute as true infinite exteriority; as the excess that escapes the system and thus grounds an anti-systemic critique. The affirmation of this Absolute, as the regulative ideal of perfect justice, is the religious moment *par excellence*. There is, then, a religious element in all liberatory praxis. With this insight begins a postsecularist and decolonial liberation philosophy, especially a liberation philosophy of *religion*.

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the audience and organizers of the 2019 Philosophies of Liberation Encuentro at Loyola Marymount University, where I first presented some of the ideas defended here and received valuable feedback, especially from Dussel himself. I thank Grant Silva for introducing me to Dussel's work a decade ago and for offering feedback on an earlier draft. Alix Genter also provided helpful feedback on a near final draft. Lastly, my sincere gratitude to the APA Committee on Hispanics for their confidence in the value of my work.

NOTES

- Enrique Dussel, *Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, y la filosofía de la liberación: con respuestas de Karl-Otto Apel y Paul Ricoeur* (Guadalajara, Mexico: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1993), 24. My translation of this passage is "Secularization was the false name of fetishism; and the atheism of the left was a first dialectical moment, whose second moment was the affirmation of the Absolute as liberation." In what follows, all Spanish to English translations are mine.
- Ofelia Schutte, *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation in Latin American Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 174.
- Enrique Dussel, *Pablo de Tarso en la filosofía política actual y otros ensayos* (Mexico City, Mexico: San Pablo, 2012).
- Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*, ed. and trans. Eduardo Mendieta (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), 11.
- Eduardo Mendieta, "Editor's Introduction," in *The Underside of Modernity*, xiii.
- On the secularist obstacle to decolonization, see my "Secular Decolonial Woes" in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 35, no. 1 (2021): 71–92.
- Juan Carlos Scannone, "La filosofía de la liberación: historia, características, vigencia actual," *Teología y Vida* L (2009): 60.
- Alejandro Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy from Identity to Radical Exteriority* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014).
- Scannone, "La filosofía de la liberación: historia, características, vigencia actual," 61.
- Dussel, *Pablo de Tarso en la filosofía política actual y otros ensayos*, 11–14.
- Dussel, *Hacia una Filosofía Política Crítica* (Bilbao, Spain: Editorial Desclée, 2001), 413; Enrique Dussel, *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism, and Liberation Theology*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 188.
- Dussel, *Hacia una Filosofía Política Crítica*, 413.
- Dussel, *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism, and Liberation Theology*, 191.
- Ibid.*, 190.
- Dussel, *Filosofía ética latinoamericana V: Arqueológica latinoamericana: Una filosofía de la religión antifetichista* (Bogotá, Colombia: Universidad Santo Tomás, 1980).
- Ibid.*, 34–35.
- As an act that leaves no alternatives to truth, fetishization also explains why medieval theology is effectively incapable of affirming the autonomy of new forms of scientific rationality.
- Dussel, *Filosofía ética latinoamericana V: Arqueológica latinoamericana: Una filosofía de la religión antifetichista*, 45, 35.
- Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*, 11.
- Dussel, *Filosofía ética latinoamericana V: Arqueológica latinoamericana: Una filosofía de la religión antifetichista*, 59.
- Ibid.*
- Ibid.*
- Dussel offers Hegel as an example of the divinization of secular modernity, where world history and the history of philosophy both culminate in "Spirit worshiping itself in and through [European] man." Dussel, *Filosofía ética latinoamericana V: Arqueológica latinoamericana: Una filosofía de la religión antifetichista*, 44, my brackets.
- Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*, 12.
- Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Marx and Engels Collected Works Volume 3: Karl Marx - March 1843-August 1844* (London, UK: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 175.
- Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*, 12. In his *Las metáforas teológicas de Marx*, Dussel goes on to develop what I argue is a postsecular reading of Marx. I analyze the originality of this interpretation in a manuscript in progress.
- Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*, 12.
- Ibid.*, 11.
- Dussel, *Filosofía de la Liberación* (Mexico City, Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2011), 159.
- Dussel, *Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, y la filosofía de la liberación: con respuestas de Karl-Otto Apel y Paul Ricoeur*, 24; Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*, 12, my emphasis.
- Schutte, *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation in Latin American Thought*, 180, 85.
- Dussel, *Hacia una Filosofía Política Crítica*, 409.
- Justin Beaumont, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Postsecularity* (London, UK: Routledge, 2019); Philip Gorski et al., eds., *The Post-Secular in Question: Religion in Contemporary Society* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2012). I articulate this contribution in a book-length manuscript in progress.
- Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 182–83.
- Dussel, *Pablo de Tarso en la filosofía política actual y otros ensayos*, 39, n. 75; Dussel, *Filosofía de la Liberación*, 167; Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Aquilina Martinez and Christine Morkovsky (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).
- This formulation is not without its problems. I explore the potentially colonialist ramifications of such notion in a forthcoming essay.

Radical Pluralism and the Hispanic Identity

Honorable Mention, 2020 APA Essay Prize in Latin American Thought

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INTRODUCTION

In his writing, "Pragmatic Pluralism, Multiculturalism, and the New Hispanic," José Medina argues for a pragmatic reconstruction of the Hispanic identity given the vast ethnic diversity within Latin American countries.¹ As Hispanic cultural differences have come under suspicion and a post-ethnic American identity is often invoked, Medina urges that a reconstruction of Hispanic identity is needed now more than ever.² To adequately articulate the nature of the Hispanic identity, he suggests that a pragmatic account of *radical pluralism* can allow us to reconstruct an intrinsically pluralist identity that is singular through shared collective experiences. For Medina, radical pluralism offers the best