The Metaphysics of Violence and Nihilism

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Abstract:
The metaphysical essence of nihilism embodies a radical devaluing of reality and a depreciation of life in being ontologically fixated on non-being and at times appealing to positivistic scientism to flatten existence and grasp it simply as perishable. A materialistic take on worldly affairs could also potentially naturalize the concrete and pragmatic political and economic exercising of violence and actualize the unfolding of its will to power. Although religion posits its own variegated values in celebration of nature, life, and humanity as signs of divine creation, some of its interpretations of divinity and scripture could potentially downgrade the worthiness of our sensory and temporary being-in-the-world by only valuing a belief in the supra-sensible and otherworldly transcendence that underpins it. Such penchant in religiosity if left unmonitored spiritually and theologically might result in the praxis of bellicosity rather than contribute to pacifying or overcoming aggression. A revengeful resentment towards worldly existence could sacrifice the value of life in the name of the articles of faith. Taking these situational aspects into account, we reflect herein on the metaphysical conditions in which nihilism and violence become harboured not only in a materialist will to power but also within the folds of religious belief.
Keywords: Nihilism, Violence, Metaphysics, Religion

'...effice ut interea fera moenera militia per maria ac terras omnis sopita quiescant; [30] nam tu sola potes tranquilla pace iuvare mortalis…' (TITI LVCRETI CARI DE RERVM NATVRA LIBER PRIMVS).[1]

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I. Introduction

A metaphysical reflection on violence points to the way nihilism devalues reality and depreciates life via ontological fixations on non-being. Our being-in-the-world as mortals is that of contingent beings held out into the nothing in a temporal and finite actualized existence. A Heideggerian outlook on such ontological-ontic predicament reveals the concealed anguish about existential privation that affects our self-reflection in thinking about being, and the manner it brings forth the care we have for loved ones, beyond empathy or reciprocity, and in ways that transcend obligations. Such embodied and emotive lived experience summons resolve and courage in affirming being despite 'the not' that underpins our reality as it passes. Devaluing our being-in-the-world is opening up a gap in our everydayness that could potentially annihilate our being from within.

The nihilist's focus on the erosion of meaning, the degradation of the worthiness of quotidian life and the un-grounding of the concreteness of our worldly corruptible existence, can become entangled at times with an appeal to positivistic *scientism*,[2] which flattens reality via a quantitative take on the forces in nature. On this view, our lived experience becomes faced with indifference as a vacuous response to mere transferences of physical energies in the transmutation of matter. The appeal to scientific physicalism points to the nihilist's metaphysical fixation on the will-to-nothing. Such materialist framing of worldly affairs could potentially naturalize the concrete, pragmatic, utilitarian, and even opportunistic political and economic exercising of a will-to-power (to use the Nietzschean parlance). Taking these aspects into account, a consideration of the role of religion in placating violence, mediating aggression, taming bellicosity, can itself veil skewed and troubling realities in our human condition and the concretization of religiosity. The reality of violence is not only domesticated in the private personal domain or institutionalized in the

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[1]   The English translation of this fragment reads as follows: '… cause meanwhile the savage works of war to sleep and be still over every sea and land; for you alone can delight mortals with quiet peace…' (This is an Epicurean invocation of Venus in classical Latin poetic verse). See: Lucretius, *De rerum natura* [*On the Nature of Things*] (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library 181, 1975), I. 29-31.

[2]   I am using the expression 'scientism' here in a specific manner to designate discursive or conceptual frameworks or modes of thinking that ground themselves in the natural and exact sciences in view of making statements about the human condition, the meaning of life, and generate 'world-pictures'. Such penchant in thought is meta-scientific in the sense that its propositions emerge from a scientific foundation and yet in their further unfolding they cease being rooted in science. They constitute a body of statements that evoke science while being extrinsic to it. An example of this is when a physicist, or biologist talks about religious faith based on their own scientific worldview, albeit their statements in that context are not the propositions of their respective sciences of physics or biology.

public sphere, whether in its embodied physical forms or discursive expressions but, moreover, some metaphysical outlooks that are derived from science or religion are structured as nihilistic devaluations of our lived quotidian experiences.

Against this backdrop, the structure of this paper is as follows. Part II addresses the role of religious values both to celebrate the nature, life and mankind as signs of divine creation and to downgrade the worthiness of temporary being-in-the-world. Then, it follows a practical method of interpretations of the religious law within the parameters of justice, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and piousness to curb the effect of violence in shaping religious identity. Part III focuses on the manner by which nihilism, within the cult that presents itself as religion, cross its regular boundaries. Part IV explores primitive forms of violence in Cyberspace and how the cyber world has led to dissemination of violence and the contribution of religion to reduction of violence is examined through part V.

II. Religious values: A Swing from Celebration of Worldly Signs to Downgrading

Although religion posits its own variegated values in celebration of nature, life, and humanity as being signs of divine creation, some of its interpretations of divinity and scripture could potentially downgrade the worthiness of our sensory and temporary being-in-the-world by only valuing a belief in the otherworldly transcendence that underpins it. Such penchant in religiosity might possibly result in the praxis of violence if left unmonitored morally, theologically, legally and institutionally. A revengeful resentment towards worldly existence could sacrifice the value of life in the name of the articles of faith and not only in terms of materialist modes of accentuating the workings of modern nihilism. Taking these situational aspects into account, we reflect herein on the metaphysical circumstances under which nihilism and violence become harboured not only in a materialist will-to-power, but also within the folds of what self-announces itself as *religious belief*.

Religious values aim at transcending the worldliness of human affairs in bringing perspectives on life that are driven by an *imaginaire* that pictures idealized otherworldly realms. Such outlooks are practically modulated through legalistic and jurisprudential frameworks, and they are explained in terms of theology and the hermeneutics or exegesis of scripture. However, they are also elevated beyond the spheres of dutifulness, or the promised reward and

punishment, by way of nurturing a sense of justice, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness. Such values are necessitated when communities of faith determine their identities by way of harbouring animosity, suspicion, or hatred towards those who are perceived as being external to their faith, or excommunicated from it through a charge of heresy or transgression. This concealed bent on violence in shaping religious identity can itself be curbed by interpretations of the religious law within the parameters of justice, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and piousness.

The literalist readings of scripture in trans-historical and trans-cultural ways, which eschew rootedness in embodied or discursive handed-down traditions, or avoid measures that are contextualized, run the risks of descending into aggressiveness. This state of affairs becomes aggravated with tendencies that depreciate the lived experience in our being-in-the-world and degrade the value of our concrete worldly sensory and temporal life as mortals, in the name of otherworldly transcendent realities. The worldly realm of our quotidian life in the flesh as mortals with one another on earth and under the heavens can potentially be sacrificed in a quest for a presumed Ur-Reality that is concealed behind the veils of appearance. The aesthetic experiencing of our poetized being-in-the-world ought to appreciate beauty as another essence of truth, and yet, violence shows its initial signs in degrading with indifference or bitterness what is beautiful in life, be it in nature or in the preserves of the high and fine arts.

III. Nihilism and a Cult of Violence

A sacrificial act that seeks transcendence can be pictured as *martyrdom*, albeit without being always substantiated in religious terms via rooted traditions. The source of values would thusly devalue the worldly realm in which such values are supposedly exercised. The origin of values becomes transmuted into an agency that depreciates them and evacuates them from the world. For instance, the names that carry the attributes of mercifulness and compassion can be uttered without carrying the values they ought in essence to sustain. The names become evacuated of their meaning by no longer holding the attributes they name. They are devalued even when uttered and said, since speech occurs alongside an act that negates its meaning. This is when nihilism, within the cult that presents itself as religion, goes beyond where the nihilist of materialism is capable of going. Physicalist nihilism depreciates the valuing of life in a neutralizing overarching manner by contemplating non-being and its

consequences in terms of the meaninglessness of our existence and a potential forceful affirmation of a will-to-power. This will results in angst, in hedonism, in rational coldness and indifference, as well as possibly serving the manifold forms of systemic violence, mental and physical, beyond a demarcation of good and evil, and as a ruthless interplay of brute force. As for the nihilist who retains the ruins of the values that have been devalued, a phonetic naming of the value is a mere echo within the emptiness of the word that is enunciated. The radical negating of existence passes by naming a value while showing its emptiness, hence not simply negating that it exists, but rather bringing it to the fore as what is; hence displaying it in order to annihilate it. The value exists in the name insofar that it is made present in order to be destroyed.

The names of mercifulness and compassion are uttered while slaughtering a human being. The names are posited as values in order to be negated. This is an assault on the names of divinity beyond the gravest of blasphemies. The essence of the bearer of the name is denied its name in the act of violence. The bearer of the name is brought into annihilation in consciousness each time the naming is rendered vacuous through the negating violent action.

A cult of violence that annihilates the names of its divinity declares in concealment the death of its godhead in human conscience. Such acts remove the possibility of giving sense to the Divine Name and, hence, lifting the meaning of the Name from the sphere of divinity and, with that, what is divine and holy is no longer grasped or experienced in the ritual of human sacrifice. In the name of God, the presence of divinity in consciousness is erased. This is a cognitive form of a *deicidium*.[3] To undertake such a negating act in the name of God is to execute it through a particular assumption about what that godhead is for the cult that practices human sacrifice. The godhead is experienced in anthropomorphic terms as being amenable to consciousness, and whose commands are clear without mysteries or arcana. This is the risk that exegetes are exposed to when following rigid literalisms in reading scripture. However, the anthropomorphized godhead is coupled with another take on theism/deism that is utterly fatalistic, and that does not fathom the meaning of the divine names. A tension arises at the site of violence in terms of two irreconcilable accounts of divinity, one anthropomorphic and the other fatalistic in its take on pre-determinism; in both cases, the meaning of the divine names is emptied and the experiencing of the holy is lacking. As if it were the case that in killing the human being the godhead is killed in consciousness and conscience too.

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[3]   In mediaeval Latin this would have amounted to the phenomenon of 'killing a deity' (deicide).

The site of the *nihil* as abyss can only be filled by superabundance in being. This brings about the idea of what cannot be fathomed due to its infinitude that exceeds a totalizing thinking, and points to what is beyond our notions of theism, monotheism, polytheism, atheism.

IV. Modern Technology and Primitive Forms of Slaughter in Cyberspace

In the cybernetic age of 'technicity' beings are *en-fram*ed. This is what Heidegger referred to as *Ge-stell* (en-framing), namely as a dominant mode of revealing truth through the unfolding of the essence of modern technology (*Wesen der Technik*), which turns beings into a *standing-reserve* (*Bestand*)[4] that is orderable and brought to answer to techno-science in a particular way that frames all there is as resources of locked energies that are readied to be acted upon via technical commands. In our age of cybernetics and modern techno-science, be it biological or mathematical-physical, primitive forms of slaughter are practiced by the hand while looking the victim in the eye, and the act of beheading with a knife is disseminated in videographic footage and photographic forms via tele-technological means of communication.[5] The slaughter is executed with sadistic *jouissance* and given an auratic presence in cyberspace that fetishizes the act of violence as a phenomenon of desire in harming the body in flesh and exercising power through humiliating torture. The executioner derives a gratification from the serial act of ritual murder. And yet, despite the sadism disorder that this entails, and in spite of its deviating

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[4]   Martin Heidegger (1954) "Die Frage nach der Technik", in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Verlag Günther Neske), pp. 13-44; esp. pp. 23-28.

[5]   I am referring herein to the international *takfîr* cult of violence, namely the network of factions that associates itself with Islam while being ideologically bent on charging the majority of Muslims with apostasy, and is operative in our era in Syria and Iraq, and known in an abbreviated appellation in Arabic as "*dâ'ish*", and in the Anglophone media and press via the acronyms: 'ISIS' ('ISIL' or 'IS' ['Islamic State']). This cult has exceeded even the cruelty and aggressiveness of the franchises of terror of *al-Qâ'ida* and the organizational groups that resemble it in the Levant, Iraq, North Africa, Afghanistan, Yemen, etc. The killing fields at the hands of *dâ'ish* are not restricted to militancy via conventional weapons, they also use suicidal bombing indiscriminately by hitting civilian populations, and resort to slaughters by hand in primitive public rituals of human sacrifice and revengefulness: beheading, crucifixion, or burning captives alive. Recordings of such acts are disseminated in cybernetic forms through sophisticated videography and photography techniques. They also publicly promote the practice of slavery. We are not aiming in this context to analyse the formation and operational mode of this group via geo-political, economic, and international as well as regional affairs aspects, even though all these are valid and essential to understand it as a phenomenon and to learn how to confront its violence. Our objectives are restricted herein to the way their embodied action and discourse manipulate religious idioms in branding their form of Islamism and in implementing the forcible call of allegiance to their leadership (*al-bay'a*). Even though we have been reflecting on the cruelties of such factions in our age (which may also have in part some root causes in decades of violence against and from within the Muslim communities, be it colonialist/imperialist and/or local oppressions, especially in the Near East), we still heed the wisdom of the ancient Chinese proverb that 'it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness', our focus remains therefore set on reflecting on 'nihilism''.

perversion and paraphilia, the flesh is itself almost turned unreal in the act of butchery and, via its dissemination in cyberspace, which becomes accrued quantitatively as incitement to hatred. Violence is desensitized and metamorphosed qualitatively into elation. The real in-the-flesh is experienced as a simulacrum, and the simulated virtual cyberspace is turned hyper-real.[6] As if it were the case that our existential lived quotidian reality in the flesh and face-to-face with one another is no longer experienced as being *real*. Signs and symbols dissimulate nothing, and it is into this nothingness that what is perceived as reality is held and locked.[7]

The religious cult of violence functions as a designed organization that is precise and minimalist in its puritan formulaic directives, which are constituted from a narrow selected set of literalist verses of scripture that almost transform the religious text into an operational manual. Religious motifs are articulated through structural procedures that are not grounded on canons or jurisprudence via an expedient operative orthopraxy in military command.

The trans-historical character of the decrees that are relegated through traditionalist religious channels of transmission allows contemporary militant groups to apply operational procedures that were established centuries ago in our current age. Such praxis is undertaken without contextual parameters that distinguish the present circumstances from the ancient conditions that shaped the inherited rules. The edicts that have been handed down from the past are applied in our epoch without taking into consideration the way certain events, reports, narratives, and pacts, were originally set in a specific cultural, social, economic and political milieu.[8] The faction that practices such ahistorical

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[6]   We appeal herein to Baudrillard's social and visual analysis of the *post-modern* globalization era of information technology processing and communication, which on his view turns reality into a domain of simulacra and converts the simulated environment into a hyper-reality that gives the image of what is almost unreal. He says: *'Le simulacre n'est jamais ce qui cache la vérité – c'est la vérité qui cache qu'il n'y en a pas. Le simulacre est vrai'* ('the simulacrum is never what conceals the truth – rather it is truth that conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true'). See: Jean Baudrillard (1981) *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Galilée), esp. pp. 9-10.

[7]   Such a state of affairs leads to interpretation upon interpretation in vicious repetition and aimless play of signifiers. Such phenomena were divergently hinted at in the analysis of speech and writing, and of the horizons of hermeneutics in the works of Gaston Bachelard, Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Jacques Derrida.

[8]   An example can de derived herein from the unmediated current application by ISIS in Syria of the seventh-century CE apocryphal 'covenant of 'Umar [ibn al-Khattâb]' (*'ahd al-amwân* or *al-'uhda al-'umariyya*), which was possibly reached at the time with Sophronius, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, in order to regulate the affairs of the Christian (and Jewish) community (as '*dhimmî*' [*ahl al-dhimma*]) in return for protection and toleration under Islamic governance and jurisdiction. The treaty of 'Umar may have been itself negotiated on the basis of an earlier Roman legal code as embodied in the sixth-century CE Codex *Justinianus,* which was practiced in the Byzantine territories and was part of the Corpus *Iuris Civilis*. This is one of many examples of

directives in salvific eschatology does not only direct its violence at individuals who do not belong to the narrowly defined bounds of its own religious identity as a cult of conquest and ritual-killing, rather its violent acts are also practiced against the natural landscape and what inhabits it in terms of living beings. In a radical purging iconoclasm it also destroys the built environment and architectural heritage, especially shrines, mausoleums, and burial grounds of the revered figures of the old religions of the Fertile Crescent. Such dis-honouring praxis is that of a *damnatio memoriae* (damnation of memory) that takes place within the folds of a religious belief that situates itself at the most sinister extremities of radical fanaticism and cruelty. The fanatics abandon their own community by seeing its people as an assembly of 'accursed libertines' and 'legislators of sin'. Such zealots hurl themselves on their erstwhile societies with violence that they construe as a cleansing act from what is now posited by them as a set of abjured symbolic orders, discursive and embodied traditions, speech, deed, values, memory and heritage.[9]

V. Effects of Religion on Reduction of Violence

Being-in-the-world is depreciated when picturing our worldliness as being worthless in comparison with a salvific otherworldly life. Revelation is rendered a channel for such hoped for salvation in the thereafter and in overcoming our attachment to the flesh. Death is a destining to a future otherworldliness, and at times such heavenly passage is assured through martyrdom. However, violence can emerge from the site in which such hopes become misdirected forms of love that negate life and assault the preciousness of being peaceably with one another face-to-face in the flesh, and in safeguarding the dignity of our finite lifetime as mortals. As Nietzsche warned in his mediations beyond good and evil:

> '*Wer mit Ungeheuern kämpft, mag zusehn, dass er nicht dabei zum Ungeheuer wird. Und wenn du lange in einen Abgrund blickst, blickt der Abgrund auch in dich hinein*' ('*He who fights with monsters should look to*

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the trans-historical and non-contextual practice of imposing an ancient edict (from the seventh-century) on modern life (in the twenty-first century).

[9]   This state of affairs is akin to what has been witnessed in the first century of Islam with the *Khawârij* who charged their coreligionists with apostasy and declared *jihad* against them. They even turned violence into an aesthetic experience through their poetry of negation in locales of desolation. For an analysis of their worldview on violence in terms of interpreting their poetry, see: Tarif Khalidi, 'The Poetry of the *Khawârij*: Violence and Salvation', in *Religion Between Violence and Reconciliation* (*Beiruter Texte und Studien Band 76*, Orient-Institut, Beirut), ed. Thomas Scheffler (Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2002), pp. 109-122; esp. pp. 114-115, 119-121.

it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you').[10]

Religion can contribute to reducing violence by being self-vigilant, self-corrective, and insomniac in its watchfulness over its potential descent into animosity and hate. This gains it credibility as an agent that curbs aggression through piety and grace. Such a tall order necessitated evolutions in jurisprudence, mysticism, theology, and institutionalization through the establishment of orders and nurturing contemplative thought that does not lose sight of practical reason, or becomes too fixated on a deontological sense of morals that accentuates the outward manifestation of obedience and duty to the canons and conventions of a given religion. Nonetheless, it is not sufficient to appeal to the directives of the religious law as they are derived through the procedures of jurisprudence and its systems of syllogism and inference, which themselves depend on the hermeneutic and exegetical interpretation of scripture and accompanying traditions in textual readings. Such activities need to be fundamentally guided by pious inclinations towards mercy and compassion that transcend ritualism in speech and deed. A focus on the outwardly public character of acting dutifully in obedience of the religious law can at times veil the cultivation of pious quietude that is necessary for a virtuous life that resists all that is ungodly towards others and self. A religious rituality conceals at times the lack of piety and virtue, and it may even undermine the capacity to pardon independently of any juridical systems. The enactment of justice through the religious law in practical reasoning can turn into a concealed violence if it is not guided by a habituated sense of mercy and compassion. This is a tragic aspect of our discontent that also runs through the way religiosity is put into practice.

VI. Concluding remarks

The danger of nihilism is not restricted to a belief that everything perishes, or that it even deserves to be annihilated, it is rather most manifest in its essence when it acts on such belief and actually destroys beings. Nihilism is not simply an ontological *nihilology* of non-being, or an intellectualized existential angst about the *nihil*, or an epistemic take on the groundlessness of seeking truth, or a mere degrading of values, or simply a fixation on the meaninglessness of our life and the purposelessness of our cosmic being in a world pictured as being absurd. Nihilism is actualizing the annihilation of beings in their being, and in

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[10]   Friedrich Nietzsche (1886) Jenseits von Gut und Böse: Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft [Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future] (Leipzig: C.G. Naumann), Aphorism 146.

this, it is a bottomless form of violence. Ideals are ruined. We experience their disintegration with silence and we withdraw from being in their nearness. We are witnesses to nihilism even if we do not partake in it. It is this danger that Heidegger pointed at in disclosing the en-framing character of the unfolding of the essence of modern technology against the background of his reflections on Nietzsche's meditations on the advent of nihilism and the manifestation of being as will-to-power that wills the nothing in senseless violence. When the essence of nihilism appears in a guise that hints at religious attributions it becomes apocalyptic in a worldly immanentizing of the *eschaton*. The afterlife breaks through our earthly being as an uncanny destiny cast upon us.

"Die Wüste wächst: weh dem, der Wüsten birgt!"
(Friedrich Nietzsche, Dionysos-Dithyramben)[11]

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[11] 'The desert grows: woe to him in whom deserts hide!' (*Dionysus-Dithyrambs*). See: Friedrich Nietzsche, Werke in und Briefe drei Bänden (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1954), Band 2, p. 1243.