

Víctor Pérez-Díaz

# Vulnerable Gods and Mutual Learning between Religion and Secularism

(doi: 10.2383/73712)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2013

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.  
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

## **Licenza d'uso**

L'articolo è messo a disposizione dell'utente in licenza per uso esclusivamente privato e personale, senza scopo di lucro e senza fini direttamente o indirettamente commerciali. Salvo quanto espressamente previsto dalla licenza d'uso Rivisteweb, è fatto divieto di riprodurre, trasmettere, distribuire o altrimenti utilizzare l'articolo, per qualsiasi scopo o fine. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

# Vulnerable Gods and Mutual Learning between Religion and Secularism

by Víctor Pérez-Díaz

10.2383/73712

## 1. A Quasi-Religious Secularism: the Vulnerable Gods of Advanced Modernity

### 1.1. *A Quasi-Religious Secularism*

In the final remarks of his study on *Religion and Human Evolution*, Robert Bellah [2011, 602 ff.] declares his practical intent to favor a dialogue among religions, each understood on its own terms, a universe of multiple traditions and a world civil society with which to embrace them all. Here I consider, in a somewhat analogous spirit, the debate between religion and (modern) secularism, and I explore the possibility of mutual learning between them.

Secularism and secularization correspond to a crucial experience of a limited segment of the Western elites of the last one to two hundred years. Far from suggesting a direction of a world historical process, it has been a rather confined affair, contingent on peculiar and ephemeral conditions. All the same, it is full of significance for those most committed to it, even though it is usually experienced by many less in a mood of willful assertion than one that takes them from one day to the next. But there may be a twist here. Because, although there is every indication that the secularist ambition to provide direction has so far failed, it has left traces of potentially troubling but equally potentially interesting and useful consequences.

One of the indications that secularism is failing to replace or supersede religion (in any one of the dimensions of belief, of belonging/institutions, of its role in social imagery, or of the public space [Taylor 2007]) is due to the fact that it is, quite often, already a form of religious experience itself. Advanced modern societies are frequently understood as godlike by their secularistic elites, even though this understanding seeks to embrace the whole of the social imagery of society and, therefore, comes under the guise of the *self-understanding* of modern society. Such a society strives to exhibit the characteristics of a (quasi-)divine world, self-sufficient, self-complacent, all-powerful, omniscient, surrounded by an aura of sacredness, demanding the full commitment and dedication of its members. At the same time, there is something inherently fragile and vulnerable about this divine world and the divine/heroic figures that populate it. It seems as if they are on the verge of chaos, running up against all sorts of limits in the control (and understanding) of their environment, in the internal dynamics that pull and push society in various directions, not to mention the ordinary individual units within it, who are largely lost at sea.

There are different versions of secularism *qua* religion. If (as Marx [1951] said) history sometimes repeats itself first as tragedy and then as comedy, then a tragic version of religious secularism was created by the variants of gnostic religions of several political movements of the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries with well-known and world-wide catastrophic consequences [Voegelin 2000; Jonas 2001], whereas today, by contrast, we find another more prosaic and restrained version of it. Daniel Bell has pointed to the peculiar process of re-enchantment of the world that has been taking place of late in our advanced societies, which he refers to as the return of the sacred [Bell 1980, 324 ff.]. However, this return of the sacred should refer not only to the revival of genuine religions but also to the spread of this sort of secularism as a new simulacrum of religion. In fact, the West's interpretation of itself in the role of an elusive god lies at the heart of a good deal of its culture and politics. It may even cloud the West's views on the nature of some of its current challenges, including, for instance, on matters of war and peace. Let us take as an example one of the several war situations that the West faces today. Quite often, we do not choose our enemies, our enemies choose us. Right now, the West has been singled out to be defeated, eagerly destroyed by certain Islamic fundamentalists. Why have so many people in the West been so slow to recognize this simple fact and been so ready to forget about it almost as soon as the threat seems to recede? It is hard to believe that this is just a matter of *bonhomie* – of a peaceful disposition. Maybe the main reason lies in a distorted interpretation of their own history that leads many Westerners to entertain grandiose views that mix a justifiable self-esteem with hubris. When leaning on the side of hubris, as it often does, the West sees itself “on top of the world:” of a world

that is gradually being re-made in its own image. In other words, it sees itself as god-like. This suggests to us one of the reasons for the West's reluctance to accept the fact that it is facing deadly enemies: because, who in their right mind would be willing to have God as their enemy?

It's true that this godlike self-image is compatible with a good deal of self-criticism, but there is a caveat. The West works out its self-congratulatory act by splitting into two halves, each intent on criticizing the other under the guise of the religious-minded versus secularists, or the left versus the right, etc. Yet underlying their mutual critiques lies a mechanism of mimetic rivalry. Each side comes out with its own formula for the West to perform its quasi-divine role, to be the leading character in the drama of history and, last but not least, to be responsible for good order and prosperity in the world, much as the absolute monarchs of the 'good old days' claimed to be responsible for their subjects' well-being.

### 1.2. *A Repertoire of Discourses of Justification*

Western cultural elites have provided a complicated repertoire of creeds and moral intimations to back their self-understanding of the West. On the scientific side, the main thrust from the natural sciences has been directed at giving support to Western hubris. It has been strongly suggested that the growth of knowledge has been and will be of quasi-divine proportions and that, having eaten from the tree of science, our earthly home will become, in time, a sort of earthly paradise. The facts that increasing knowledge also means increasing awareness of our ever greater ignorance, and that the knowledge thus acquired remains largely conjectural, in other words, the limits of science (which true scientists are well aware of), are largely overlooked in the public mind. The strong implication is, too, that science promises deliverance from much of our human suffering, and its promise is treated as grounds for an entitlement to be claimed by present and future generations. This has been complemented by the combined effects of economics and other social sciences, and education, all pretending predictive and formative capacities that they lack. However, they raise expectations that a society organized in a scientific manner would be more successful, and able to handle all sorts of problems more promptly and efficiently.

On the humanities side (philosophy, history and the arts), the story has been more confused. The West attempted to blend its classical and Christian legacies, with limited success. This was followed by an uneasy combination of remnants of the old beliefs with a kind of new polytheism. A moral and legal humanism that was more or

less attuned to an appeal to civic and liberal virtues and tended to reinforce a long tradition of common sense and moral sense among large segments of society [Wilson 1997], lived in a state of uneasy coexistence with the various claims of self-centered individualism, with all sorts of communal idols (nation, race, class, and the like), and with the cults of sheer power, wealth and fame.

Now, as a result of their confusion and a series of painful disappointments, many people make do with a form of situational ethics, according to which different rules are applied to different circumstances. This suggests a return to Kierkegaard's aesthetic stages [Kierkegaard 1940] or to Bells' aestheticism [Bell 1980, 338] in which there is a 'yes' and a 'no' to every moral alternative. These may be both explored and enjoyed by turns according to circumstances, for the sake of enriching our experience, engaging in an experiment in living, or fostering our sentimental education. Furthermore, we bracket the fundamental questions about the meaning of the world off, and decide to keep on going while defining the human condition as both aimless and without foundation.

Paradoxically, such cultural relativism may indirectly reinforce the West's self-understanding of itself as godlike through two converging paths. Firstly, cultural relativism reinforces the understanding that we are the ultimate source for the beliefs we hold. We create our world of meanings, and lastly the world *tout court*, as we do not adhere (nor give our assent) to a world which is already there, and may have been given to us by means of faith – a grace bestowed upon us by a God we cannot handle at will, by tradition, or both.

Second, cultural relativism has affinities with a style of politics that conveys a message of politicians' divine lightheartedness. Quite often, political leaders seem to be surrounded, protected and constrained by the media, their own parties and civil servants, while trying to be responsive to the demands and expectations of a volatile environment. In other words, while they attempt to be true to their name and *lead*, most of the time they are no more than survivors and pragmatic manipulators who look for openings in a far too complex and rather opaque world. When they explain to or exhort their public, they resort to the cultural repertoire of their times, and pick up the cultural *topoi* to be applied ad hoc to the different scenes of the *commedia dell'arte* of politics, playing them mostly on a melodramatic key. They are, by turns, Christians, humanists, nationalists, market-oriented, social-minded, family men or women, law-and-order types or empathetic with all kinds of lost souls. They are, say, "inclusive," and "on the move." Still, the key to their success is to keep most people on board and persuade them to go along with the situation.

The implicit background assumptions for this pattern of behavior are a focus on today's events, short memories, and an easy (and, hopefully, contagious) optimism

regarding the future, in which there will either be a solution to every problem or we shall be able to live with problems for which there is no solution. Unfortunately, it must be obvious that only people touched by divine grace can live this way.

Lightheartedness, however, requires fair weather. Faced with rougher, tougher times such as the current ones, the West has to resort to magic tricks, such as finding refuge in repeating the mantra that the West is home to liberal democracy, markets, the rule of law, pluralism and tolerance. This is, no doubt, a healthy combination of institutions and values, which may go by the name of an open society, a civil society (in the broad sense of the term [Pérez-Díaz 2011]), a free society or an order of liberty. However, we find that the tendency of many in the West is to imagine that just by naming things, these things come into being. While the Word of God may have created the world out of nothing, the words of mankind are not that powerful.

### 1.3. *An Elusive Sense of Limits*

The problem is that, although this normative model describes what the West is and what, to a large extent, it tries to be, it remains, at best, only half the story. In reality, Western societies have to come to terms with the fact that they are a mix of open, civil or free societies *and* of something else. The normative model of an open society can be partially realized under certain conditions as the outcome of dramatic confrontations between human agents: an outcome that depends crucially on how these agents interpret the situations they face. However, the normative model of an open society is *not* the only operative model that human agents use in our Western societies. Far from it. An order of freedom provides a framework of rules and dispositions that people may choose to use in a purely instrumental spirit in order to pursue their own goals, whether these are to the benefit of themselves or others, with little thought for the common good. Thus, underlying the normative model of a free society, there is a (different, yet related) normative model of a *societas cupiditatis*. This model includes a wide variety of *cupiditates* such as the maximization of power, wealth and status for oneself, one's closest kin, and friends and comrades-in-arms. Achieving these goals often involves the use of violence and fraud: the key vices of the innermost circles of Dante's *Inferno* (as Bell [1980: xxiii] reminds us).

The tension between the normative order of a well-ordered free society and the antinomian model of freedom to do whatever we may decide is good for each of us as individuals is part of the game of the Western type of society on record. The price to be paid for it *should be* the self-understanding of this society as a very human

(not godlike) and fragile construction, which may self-destruct. And self-destruct it did: in the Twentieth century, the West spawned two civil wars, which became world wars, and engendered two totalitarian regimes, which spread all over the world, threatened liberty and had to be overcome by force. All this was at a time when science, technology, formal schooling, economic growth and media communications (should we say ‘advanced modernity?’) were flourishing.

Although it seems that the West has left such totalitarian nightmares behind, it now faces new and sobering challenges as a result of the increasing complexity of the world, bordering on endemic economic turmoil. Some authors place these within the context of large-scale changes that are pushing mankind beyond any natural ecological carrying capacity (Bellah, for instance, claims that we may be in the midst of a process leading to a ‘sixth extinction’ of animal species [Bellah 2011, 601 ff.]). Whatever the tempo and scale we choose, the fact is that not only the West but all mankind faces grave dangers compounded by fragile institutions and failing characters, for which there are no easy solutions. In a sense, the situation may remind us of the one evoked by Neurath’s image of his ship, hard to rebuild while sailing the high seas [Cartwright et al. 1996, 89 ff.].

Evidence of this failing character can be found just by looking at the most powerful and apparently most successful representative of the West, the United States of America, and observing its performance *à propos* of an incident of *parcours* such as the Iraq war. An incidental war that has taken a few years of US attention (starting in 2003) and a limited amount of its resources, it may serve as a *symptom* of the US’ proclivity to get mired in a strategy befitting a godlike personality – a variety of lighthearted divinity – in the face of challenges that should require a more careful understanding of the situation.

Let us look at some of the tactical mistakes made by the US in the war of Iraq. Although many of them may have been almost impossible to avoid in the heat of the moment, we can take these mistakes as *cues* suggesting that what is at work here is the behavior to be expected from people tempted to play God and overrate their powers. This may help to explain, at least in part, the following list of missteps. 1) The panache with which the mis-assessment of Iraq’s arsenal of weapons of mass destruction was originally made. 2) The carelessness of the diplomatic work carried out ‘from a distance’ at the time of establishing a coalition and persuading world public opinion: the latter was implicitly treated as a chorus that would stick to the script and keep to the sidelines. 3) The (possible) underestimation of danger that led to there being fewer troops than necessary for the task of controlling the territory after the invasion, as if the mere presence of *soldiers armed with sophisticated ‘magic’ weapons, and with ‘a halo of victory’ would be enough*. 4) The rather euphoric expectation that

the troops would be greeted as liberators, also an effect of their 'divine presence'. 5) The excessive trust placed in electronic intelligence 'from a distance:' almost literally 'from heaven.' 6) The almost spot decision to dismantle the Iraqi army, thoughtlessly discarding the comparative advantage of people with (merely) 'local knowledge' (that is, lacking the 'necessary distance'), and of people with 'down-to-earth, (merely) human motivations,' such as family survival and the need for an administrative job and a monthly salary, and therefore, presumably, lacking 'purity of intentions' and 'ideological (holy) clearances.' And still counting. To its credit, however, we must recognize that the US knows what its identity, its history and its borders are, and has proved itself willing and able to apply the means for a robust foreign and defense policy, whereas in the case of Europe all these elements are missing. This suggests that Europe may be attempting to achieve a different variety of divinity, perhaps of the Oriental kind: one that nobody should be afraid of, with ill-defined contours and lacking a strong sense of agency. Alternatively, it may be seeking a divine presence that hints at providing mankind with a genteel, unobtrusive parental or maternal care.

## **2. Secularism and Religion: Learning Humility from Each Other through Mutual Criticism**

### *2.1. Religion and Coping with Reality*

In any event, the whole "winding passage" of mankind (Bell's reference to Dante's passage from hell to purgatory) will have to be traversed step by step. This involves grave dangers and extraordinary risks that test the limits of human control over the world, no matter the extent of our resources, as sheer luck as well as human insanity or malignity will always play a part. Still, having journeyed thus far, we can but hope that humans will take their next steps in a mood of realism, resolution and humility. These virtues will be necessary for society and its institutions to survive, and may require people to go back to Kierkegaard's [1940] ethical and religious stages: to secular civic virtue and to some form of religion.

Religions, or religious-like experiences, rest on the existential, ontological human condition of human beings trying to cope with reality while they search for cues for enacting the proper set of habits and dispositions (virtues) with which to do so. These practices come with a limited yet approximate cognitive assessment of what is going on. They are accompanied by a tentative, usually practical or tacit knowledge, which may be instrumental in acquiring a set of heuristics and theories, which are, in turn, subject to learning from experience. However, the lessons may be for-



gotten just as the habits and dispositions may go astray, and both understandings and misunderstandings, good deeds and misdeeds are bound to occur all the time with no guarantee whatsoever of progress. Even so, learning may take place through dialogue and mutual criticism (brotherly correction?) between the better versions of religion and secularism. This is so because we can assume that the more we learn from our common experience, the more we shall combine the act of learning from others' mistakes with that of learning from others who bring our own mistakes to our attention (bringing in the outside view [Kahneman 2011, 245 ff.]). In other words, learning from the mutual criticism of religious people and secularists, *provided* they share some premises.

Religions' contribution to people's coping with reality comes with a cognitive (symbolic) assessment of what *true* reality means. True reality would supposedly encompass both extraordinary and ordinary experiences. It would include such extraordinary experiences as death, as being part of a meaningful community extending beyond personal life into the past and into the future, and as the search for plenitude. This plenitude could be variously articulated as flourishing, love, peace, recognition and/or intense feelings associated with the double dimension of humans *qua* rational, autonomous animals and *qua* dependent, vulnerable, caring animals [MacIntyre 1999]. And, of course, true reality would include the so-called paramount [Schutz 1967] though in fact often subordinate, experience of everyday life, ingrained in and interconnected with the extraordinary experiences just mentioned.

Thus, religion consists not so much of a set of *symbols* [Geertz 1973] as, first and foremost, a set of *enacted* symbols [Bellah 2011, 11 ff.], that is, of *practices* connected, in a problematical way, with a set of verbal and non-verbal statements [Skinner 2002]. If we accept that the primordial feature of religion is practices, we can now focus on a set of practices, or rather of *habitual* practices that, *qua* virtues, would form the ethical core of some specific historical segment of human societies.

## 2.2. *A Shared Ground: the Common Ethical Core of Different Narratives of Axial Religions and Civil Society*

What we call the axial religions and, in their wake, religions such as Christianity and Islam, for instance, as well as sensible versions of modern secularism, all intimate that we are bound together by bonds of mutual loyalty and respect; just as we are bound to the preceding generation which bequeathed us their world, and to the succeeding one on which we shall bestow our world as their heritage. We could call the feelings involved in these bonds by many names but if we keep to the Western tradi-

tion, we will recur to the familiar Roman names of *religio*, *pietas* and subordination to a being higher than ourselves [Barrow 1949, 22 ff.]. Or, as we move on to a language of ultimate reliance on divine protection, and grace, to the Augustinian name of Love of God. If we do so, we may discover that the return of the sacred is already amongst the people of the West, not only in the form of a moralizing, redemptive and mystical religion [Bell 1980, 348 ff.], but also in the form of a search for grounding both our individual chances in life and our collective chances to continue living as members of a meaningful moral community.

On the other hand, even though the one particular narrative of Western style advanced modernity suggested by the tale of the vulnerable gods has hubristic and delusional effects, there are other versions of a more sober and humble character. Instead of merely *opposing* religions and secularisms, these set out to explore the ways in which religions and secularisms *could* learn from each other, assuming that they share, to a significant extent, a basic core of ethical, pragmatic premises.

Depending on the starting point of the inquirer, these premises will appear in the context of different narratives, and rest on differently articulated ontological and anthropological assumptions. For instance, from a Christian viewpoint, the belief in the incarnation of God – of God assuming His human nature – makes no sense unless this belief incorporates the insight that human nature as such is already *dignified enough* to be able to incorporate the divine presence. We have to assume that there is some common ground here, some analogy and affinity, between the Supreme Being and mere human beings since humans are supposed to have been made in the image of God. This is the case, even though human nature is subject, on the one hand, to animal survival, concupiscent instincts, the temptation of evil, and death, and, on the other hand, to a process of change through exposure to the experience of living and evolution. Several pieces of the Christian narrative provide cues for articulating that affinity, which are displayed in the narrative of a divine providence as well as in that of a natural law which comes to light, somewhat belatedly, through ordinary human common sense and moral sense.

A partially different narrative, whose ties to the religious tradition were originally quite strong but have gradually weakened over the course of time, is the narrative of civil society. Heir to the ancient *polis* or *civitas* as well as to the reform agenda of Christianity in the early middle ages to make the *civitas terrestris* more akin to the *civitas dei*, the project of civil society has become a multi-rooted historical experience whose different social supporters have found common ground in a secular or semi-secular language [Pérez-Díaz 2011]. In this narrative, civil society has a significant and distinctive ethical core: an ethic of individual freedom combined with an ethic of seeking a common good, together with the cultivation of the virtues of fairness,

generosity, care, benevolence and so on. These virtues are supposed to improve the chances of survival, and of coping with reality, of the society under consideration: in the end, it is the reality of the whole of mankind *plus* the earth for which mankind accepts at least partial and provisory responsibility.

If we consider that the ethical core of a (well-ordered) civil society overlaps and is consistent with that of a (well-ordered) Christian society (or equally, a well-ordered Taoist or Confucian society), then it makes sense that, instead of secularists and religious-minded people opposing one another regarding the development of a common ethical core, we consider the possibility of learning to practice the basic, shared virtues in complex ways that encourage a sort of reciprocal learning on the part of both religions and secularisms.

I shall advance two relatively *minor* illustrations of what I am referring to. They are minor, in that I am not attempting to provide evidence of the egregiously mistaken acts of secularists or religious people: therefore I shall not dwell on the Holocaust, the Gulag, the Holy Inquisition or the wars of religion. (The latter, by the way, were messy affairs undertaken largely as a cover for the naked struggle for power of the nation-states of the time [Cavanaugh 1999]). They are illustrations in that they refer not so much to theoretical, dogmatic issues, *per se*, but rather to *enacted* symbolisms, that is, to the *practice* of virtues.

Let us start with the possibility of religions learning from secularism by looking to the Catholic Church to learn from the arguments and demands by some segments of the ‘civil sphere’ for it to properly confront the (relative) spread of the phenomenon of pedophile priests [Alexander 2006; 2013]. This means that the Church must learn to fight such practices in a more thorough way by submitting the guilty party to the application of criminal law; and in a more principled way by emphasizing the need to protect the weakest parties, namely, the victims. Thus the Church would be reminded of one of the most basic premises of its own teachings, as summarized by the symbol of Jesus as the supreme victim, as *agnus dei*.

Vice versa: let us take a look at what secularism might learn from religion. For instance, learning to tame its own inner violence and lack of civility, of the sort demonstrated (and this is a relatively minor item in today’s Western imaginary) by the propensity of some segments of that very ‘civil sphere’ to live in a state of chronic, self-righteous indignation, while enacting the performative contradiction of preaching peace and displaying feelings of hatred. For example, after his encounter with the German Greens, the Buddhist friend of Charles Taylor [2007, 698] was astonished to observe their conspicuous lack of benevolence towards their adversaries. Of course, we could expand upon this reference to include the recurrent outpouring of similar

feelings of hatred and contempt in the rituals of the usual culture wars between the right and the left everywhere.

### 2.3. *Limits of Religions' Moral Reform Agendas: Axial Religions' Limited Fit with the Historical Situation of the Day, and its Variants*

Every religion has an ethical core that allows for a wide array of practical applications. Sometimes religion and the world fit fairly well together, with religion providing a discourse and ritual of justification of the world and its ways. More often, *pace* Durkheim, religion does not fit with the world, or does so only in a limited way. In the case of a partial fit, whereby religion meets the world halfway, so to speak, religion may not involve full rejection of the world but only a gesture towards its reform; nor does it imply a call for the destruction of the world but for its rectification – for social repairs. In this case, the basic human mood inspired by religion may be built not on the expectation of an imminent apocalypse but rather on the idea of better times to come, even though they may be postponed *sine die*; in the meantime, one just follows one's law, for instance, *halakha*, in the Jewish case the best one can, and waits [Wieseltier 2010]. There is the risk, however, that, by waiting, one accommodates oneself to the ways of the world.

As Bellah [2011] reminds us, we can distinguish three main variants of religion. These are: *a*) tribal religions that correspond to human beings in rather simple settings, in order to help them to cope; *b*) archaic religions, in relatively more complex settings which some simplifying power schemas (such as the one composed of emperors/kings together with a priestly class and a warrior class, on the back of peasants and servants) try to make more predictable (with considerable recourse to violence); and *c*) axial religions, in even more complex settings. It is the axial religions that develop the ethical core of all religions. They appeal to judgement or reflexivity and, even more importantly, they engage in a systematic cultivation of a set of moral virtues. At the same time, they deal with the fact that humans show themselves only mildly inclined to develop such virtues: that they are recalcitrant sinners, so to speak. Thus, these religions are permanent witnesses not only to the resistance of *external* reality but to an *inner*, deeply-rooted resistance on the part of humans to become thoroughly moralized [Balthasar 2004, 64], a resistance that is felt both in the workings of human institutions and in humans' dispositions.

The point is that axial religions help humans to cope with reality in the peculiar way of helping them to question the world that they inherit and recreate day after day. Far from letting this question stand on its own, they require people to engage, with all

their body and soul, in doing something about it, and in being responsible for doing so before others. At the same time, religious people are expected to live with the consequences of the world's resistance and their own *inner* resistance to such engagement. The result is an ongoing drama with *multiple plots*. The example of Christianity shows that a religious tradition may admit of many different versions. There are variants wherein religion helps the development of the original ethical core by reinforcing social solidarity (inclusion within a particular group) *against* a scapegoat (excluded from the particular group) and/or an external enemy, and in so doing they justify and encourage the use of violence. At the other extreme, there is the variant of all-encompassing, all-inclusive peaceful religion: for example, Jesus preaching the Sermon on the Mount, love of all humans, including one's enemies. And all shades in between.

The intermediate varieties leave the door open for experimentation with, and a gradual evolution of, quite different moral sentiments. For instance, they may allow *a*) some people to try the Grand Way or the Great Tao, or the Kingdom of Heaven on earth [Merton 2004], while *b*) others stick to a strict application of a code of rules that excludes others from the community of the chosen, and *c*) yet others may avoid playing the game of those whom they consider dangerous moralizers, and make do with a second best, or a lesser evil. They would have learnt from historical experience that they may find a decent and sensible *modus vivendi* in this world by applying a mild reform agenda to several circles of solidarity or inclusion. These circles may include the group of one's closest friends, family and loved ones to whom one offers effective/effusive/unconditional love as well as the one that requires a more guarded form of love, chastened by the experience of dealing with people with a strong *libido dominandi* and/or *libido servandi*.

Some of these experiences may allow for, and evolve into, experiences of indifference or cruelty vis-à-vis strangers. These, in turn, may generate a contrary reaction that gives rise to criticism of that kind of religious experience and, by contrast, to the emergence of some sort of un-religious benevolent humanism. In a new twist, this benevolent humanism may be of the kind Simone Weil [1966, 122 ff.] calls "implicit love of God," or "implicit Christianity," as shown by love of one's neighbor, love of humans in general and love of the order and beauty of the world, from which actual Christian church-goers could, in due time, learn... to become better Christians.

All the above leads us back, again, to how the experience of learning from the debate between religions and secularisms could help us to manage today's situation in the best possible way. The situation can be characterized as either one of low risk and huge opportunity – in a *Candide*-like view of the modern world as the best of all possible worlds – on the basis of ever more science and understanding, self-control

and control of external reality, freedom and democracy, prosperity and mutual respect, etc; or alternatively, one of huge opportunities but a very high risk of disaster.

Let us consider the latter possibility. Robert Bellah, for one, thinks that we have a crisis of incoherence and are, in the words of Mark Strand [2011, xix ff.], “too busy for living” (which I would interpret as ‘too busy for a good, meaningful life’) while dealing, as we are, with the ongoing experiences of the risk of war, increasing inequalities, etc. As mentioned above, he ponders the chances of an ecological disaster that we may be in the midst of [*ibidem* 601 ff.]. These and other similar remarks (though not necessarily catastrophic in character) find an echo in voices coming from different quarters. Take, for instance, the general direction of Nassim Taleb’s recent book *Antifragile* [Taleb 2013]. It amounts to a vehement yet persuasive argument for learning to live with increasing incertitude and ever higher risks of chaos combined with our very limited understanding of the situation that mostly comes into play after the fact. The picture is basically one of elites who are chronically unreliable because of their lack of wisdom (the inability of even the brightest and best to make a correct cognitive assessment of what is going on) and their lack of virtue (beginning with their hubris). The ongoing economic crisis of 2007/2013 would be just an indication of what this is all about.

Far from being an invitation to despair, these are fair and wise warnings that may be construed as indicating that the time is propitious for a genuine, benevolent religion and a genuine, benevolent secularism to engage in a contest of mutual brotherly corrections (as Thomas Aquinas [2005, 195 ff.] would say). This should include a learned debate in which there is an opportunity for the best arguments to be put forward [MacIntyre 1988]. At the same time, I surmise that this is not just a matter of dialectical debates but of rhetorical encounters [Milbank 2006] and also, mainly, of pragmatic engagements in face to face communities and with regard to people whom we feel personally and directly responsible for and committed to. These dialogues and shared experiences could take place between peaceful religious people and benevolent secularists, hopefully aware of the risks posed by self-righteous and dangerous moralizers on both sides.

## References

- Alexander, J.C.  
 2006 *The Civil Sphere*. New York: Oxford University Press.  
 2013 “The Societalization of Social Problems: A Civil Sphere Approach to Financial Crisis, Church Pedophilia and Media Phone Hacking.” Mimeo.

- Aquinas, Thomas  
2005 [1268-1272] *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Balthasar, H.U. von.  
2004 *Love Alone is Credible*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.
- Barrow, R.H.  
1949 *The Romans*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Bell, D.  
1980 *The Winding Passage*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bellah, R.N.  
2011 *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Cartwright, N., Cat, J., Fleck, L., and Uebel, T.  
1996 *Otto Neurath: Philosophy between Science and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cavanaugh, W.  
1999 "Beyond secular parodies." Pp. 182-250, in *Radical Orthodoxy*, edited by J. Milbank, C. Pickstock, G. Ward. London and New York: Routledge.
- Geertz, C.  
1973 *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Jonas, H.  
2001 *The Gnostic Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Kahneman, D.  
2011 *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux
- Kierkegaard, S.  
1940 [1845] *Stages on Life's Way*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- MacIntyre, A.  
1988 *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?* Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.  
1999 *Rational Dependent Animals*. Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court.
- Marx, K.  
1951 [1852] *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: Labor News.
- Merton, T.  
2004 *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. Boston and London: Shambhala.
- Milbank, J.  
2006 *Theology and Social Theory*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.
- Pérez-Díaz, V.  
2011 "Civil society: a multi-layered concept." *Sociopedia.isa*, available at: <http://www.sagepub.net/isa/admin/viewPDF.aspx?&art=CivilSociety.pdf> and <http://asp-research.com/pdf/CivilSocietyREV.pdf>

- Schutz, A.  
1967 "On multiple realities." Pp. 340-347 in *Collected Papers, Vol 1*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Skinner, Q.  
2002 *Visions of Politics, Volume I, Regarding Method*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Strand, M.  
2011 *The Weather of Words: Poetic Inventions*. New York: Knopf Publishing Group.
- Taleb, N.  
2013 *Antifragile*. London: Allen Lane.
- Taylor, C.  
2007 *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Voegelin, E.  
2000 *Modernity Without Restraint*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press.
- Weil, S.  
1966 *Attente de Dieu*. Paris: Fayard.
- Wieseltier, L.  
2010 "A Passion for Waiting: Liberal Notes on Messianism and the Jews." Pp. 131-155 in *For Daniel Bell*, edited by M. Lilla and L. Wieseltier. Privately published.
- Wilson, J.  
1997 *The Moral Sense*. New York: Free Press



## Vulnerable Gods and Mutual Learning between Religion and Secularism

---

Abstract: The author explores the possibility that modern secularism and axial religions engage in a process of mutual learning on the basis of ethical premises they may share, and argues that the outcome of this process depends on the extent they share a sense of the intellectual and moral limits (fallibility, failing character) of all agents involved. He also suggests that a particular version of modern secularism, which corresponds to the social imagery of ‘vulnerable gods’, exhibits in fact an elusive sense of such limits.

---

*Keywords: Modernity, secularism, civil society, axial religion, Christianity.*

---

**Víctor Pérez-Díaz** is president of Analistas Socio-Políticos (ASP), Research Center (Madrid). Member of the *American Academy of Arts and Sciences* and of the *Academia Europaea*. Ph.D. Sociology, Harvard University. He has been Professor of Sociology at the Complutense University of Madrid and Visiting Professor at Harvard University, the MIT, the University of California, San Diego, the New York University and the Institut des Sciences Politiques. Among other books, he is the author of *The Return of Civil Society* [Harvard University Press, 1993], *La lezione spagnola* [Il Mulino, 2003] and *Markets and Civil Society* [Berghahn 2009, editor].