

IN, NOT OF THE WORLD

A Brief Note on the Christian Background of Modern Freedom

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses only on one of the monotheistic tradition, Christianity, of which I take three elements that show how freedom belongs to the core of the Christian narrative and how ‘Christian’ freedom persists in today’s secular (and post-secular) societies. The freedom put forward by the Christian narrative must first of all be linked to the freedom that is characteristic for the monotheistic God. Although, from the very beginning of the monotheistic tradition, its God has been considered free, it is not until the confrontation with Greek philosophy that God’s freedom explicitly will come to the foreground and that it will establish the paradigm of what centuries later will become *modern* freedom. The second element of the Christian tradition persisting to this day is the concept of freedom put forward in the Letters of Saint Paul. The word marked the distance with respect to Judaism. Christians claimed that they were no longer bound to the Law, the Law the Jews had received from God by mediation of Moses. Christians were free, i.e. free from the Law. This idea will survive in the freedom embraced by modernity. The third element is the way Christianity felt free from the world without really disconnecting itself from it. Free from the world, Christianity nonetheless took full responsibility with respect to that world. Or, to put it in an early Christian formula: Christians considered – and still consider – themselves to be in, but not from the world.

RÉSUMÉ : Centré sur la tradition monothéiste chrétienne, cet article présente trois éléments qui montrent que la liberté appartient au cœur du récit chrétien et que cette liberté chrétienne persiste au cœur des sociétés séculières et post-séculières d’aujourd’hui. Le premier élément repose sur le fait que la liberté chrétienne est tributaire de la liberté caractéristique du Dieu monothéiste. Quoique Dieu ait été reconnu libre dès les débuts de la tradition monothéiste, cette liberté n’a été mise en lumière que lorsque qu’elle fut confrontée à la philosophie grecque. Cette confrontation a permis l’émergence du paradigme de la liberté moderne. La conception paulienne de la

liberté de la foi comme libération de la Loi et réalisation de cette liberté est le second élément qui perdure jusqu'à aujourd'hui. Le troisième élément est la compréhension chrétienne de la liberté qui, tout en se concevant comme libre par rapport au monde, se considère néanmoins responsable du monde.

1. *Today's Religions and Their Duty to Think Freedom*

One of the basic objectives of today's politics is to guarantee the citizens' freedom: their private and political freedom as well as the freedom to associate in public organizations. Religious communities are such kind of organizations. Lacking any religious foundation themselves, modern societies nonetheless protect the religious adherence of their citizens. According to their constitutions, religions *are* and *must* be given freedom. In accordance with its main principle, modernity owes them that. This is beyond doubt.

But how do religions themselves relate to freedom? In taking and enjoying the freedom they are given, must they not focus on freedom as well? Do they not have to take into account the ground of both their own and modernity's freedom? For although freedom is acknowledged as its very ground and paradigm, modernity lacks a full insight into that freedom and its foundation. For freedom is free, and strictly speaking, even free from the definition it is given. This is why, also in the eyes of moderns, freedom is never unproblematic. It always is – and must be – an object of reflection and critical questioning. Of course, in everyday reality, freedom 'works.' While using the word, no one raises their eyebrows. It is a common point of reference and, in that sense, it makes our modern world go round. But if one takes a few minutes to really think through what one understands by the word 'freedom', soon a headache comes to say that one doesn't understand it that well.

Religions are, and have to be free, like modern citizens are, and must be. But being free, what precisely are they? Though seldom acknowledged, this question is more familiar to religion than one might be inclined to think. For freedom is at the basis of religion, certainly of monotheistic or, to use a term of Jan Assmann, 'secondary' religions, i.e. of religions that 'believe' and, therefore, reflect upon the truth or untruth of what one can believe. Such religions are what they are, because they have enjoyed – and still enjoy – the freedom with regard to the existing religions of their time and define themselves with respect to the truth they claim.¹ This certainly goes for the

¹ Jan ASSMANN, *The price of monotheism*, translated by Robert Savage (Stanford, CA: Stanford California Press, 2010), p. 12-14; 31-34: ASSMANN, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), p. 106-111.

religion dominating the public domain of the West, both the Christian religions and the variety of traditions of the Islam. And this goes for the Buddhist types of religion as well. It goes in fact for almost all today's religions ruling our cosmopolitan world. They all are, so to speak, 'truth-religions'. Not only do they enjoy the freedom to worship their truth within the boundaries of their communities, in the free competition characterizing the whole of modern culture, they often try hard to convince the entire world of what they claim the truth to be. Being free themselves from the pressure of all untrue religiosity, they recognize the freedom others have to believe in the truth presented to them.

Monotheistic truth religions suppose freedom not only in a *formal* way. Historically, too, they are an important factor in the way the West has evolved towards the non-religious freedom that characterizes the constitutions of modern states. The secular freedom dominating our socio-political realm has to recognize its legacy in the religious freedom it has emancipated. If modernity is the age of freedom, it is not without inheritance from the religions it had freed itself from. And the abyss modernity meets facing the ground – or lack of ground – of its own freedom-paradigm may become less obscure if one takes into account the religious legacy that persists in it.

These are only a few reasons why, in our modern world, religions should not only take their freedom for granted and respect the freedom of others, they also should *think* about freedom, think it *through* and thus contribute to the mission of modernity to organize a continuous reflection on the idea upon which it is founded. In other words, religions should not only enjoy freedom with respect to modernity, they also have to contribute to the modern project by reflecting on the freedom which constitutes both their own and modernity's base. In what sense has religion made man free, and how was that freedom transferred into post-religious modernity?

In what follows, I will focus only on one of the monotheistic tradition, Christianity, taking three elements to show how freedom belongs to the core of the Christian narrative and how that 'Christian' freedom persists in today's secular (and post-secular) societies.

2. The Freedom of the Monotheistic God

The freedom put forward by the Christian narrative must first of all be linked to the freedom that is characteristic of the monotheistic God. Although, from the very beginning of the monotheistic tradition, God has been considered free, it is not until the confrontation with Greek philosophy that

God's freedom explicitly comes to the foreground and establishes the paradigm of what will later become modern freedom.

Let us, first recall what it means for a God to be considered monotheistic. This God is claimed to be a *true* God or, since truth is one and indivisible, to be *the* true God, to be Truth as such. Historically, monotheism has to be defined as the introduction of the truth criterion within the sphere of man's relation to what he considers to be the divine. God is 'not who or what you think He is: only God is God.' Such a device was unknown in the Antique world, where the gods were simply there as immortals living among the mortals or, even as co-citizens (like the Romans treated them).² The *immortals* belonged to the world in the same *immanent* way as the mortals.³ And since the gods were not bound to any truth whatsoever, they were profoundly unreliable for the mortal humans, who nonetheless had to rely on them. Claiming the radical transcendence of the One and Only True God, monotheism declared the immanent gods non-existent. Compared with the unreliable chaos of the immanent world, the transcendent realm of the One God was, given his truth, stable and reliable.

In the time that monotheist truth-tradition settled into Hebrew culture,⁴ another truth-tradition emerged in Greece: philosophy. According to that tradition, it was Being as such which was stable and reliable and, hence, the locus of truth. And it was free, in the sense of being autonomous and having its cause in nothing other than itself.

Monotheism and antique philosophy came together in the late Biblical and early Christian tradition. This provoked a radical change in the concept of both Being and freedom. Philosophy had claimed that Being, although full of birth and death, *as such* was never born and would never cease to be. In that sense it was autonomous, free. The monotheistic God, however, was said not to belong to Being, since it was by Him that Being had been created. So,

² John SHEID, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, translated by Janet Lloyd (Indiana, Bloomington & Indianapolis, University Press, 2003), p. 148-152.

³ See the first chapter, "Understanding Polytheism" in: ASSMANN, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press), p. 9-27.

⁴ Despite the ongoing discussions on the origin of monotheism, a certain consensus is establishing itself that indicates the sixth century BC – the Babylonian Exile and the liberation by Cyrus the Great – as the age in which Jewish culture got more or less its definitive monotheist character. It is during and after the Exile that God received his radial 'unity and truth' character and that religious life was re-orientated to contributing to a social-political project aimed at doing justice to those lack justice (orphans, widows, poor, et cetera). See for example: Robert Karl GNUSE, *No Other Gods: Emergent Monotheism in Israel* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 87-88, 215; Paul JOHNSON, *A History of the Jews* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988), p. 81-167.

according to monotheism, it was ultimately God who was never born and would never die. Being was considered to be inherently finite, mortal, contingent, dependent on the laws of life and death. With respect to these laws, God, as their author, was independent, free.

Thus, it is monotheism that introduced the idea of a *radical* freedom: a freedom not *within* the bounds of being and depending on its laws (as the pagan and philosophical freedom was, for example, as explained by Aristotle), but a freedom that is even free *from* being. This absolute freedom is not of human size. It belongs exclusively and uniquely to the Only God. In this way, at least the idea of a radical freedom was introduced – i.e. the possibility of a freedom which is free even from the basic conditions characterizing human existence. In the modern idea of freedom, something persists of that unconditioned limitlessness that characterized the freedom of the monotheistic God. Filthy rich, floating in my yacht in the Caribbean waters, I am free as God, and – here we touch the contours of our modernity – no one will legally blame me for that.

3. *The Freedom of the Christian*

The second element of the Christian tradition persisting to this day is the concept of freedom put forward in the Letters of Saint Paul.⁵ There, *eleutheria*, ἐλευθερία, is a central idea. The word marked the distance with respect to Judaism. Christians claimed that they were no longer bound to the Law, the Law the Jews had received from God through the mediation of Moses. God himself realized that freedom. Since Israel apparently was not able to live according to that Law, God had sent his Messiah to take upon him that failure and to restore humanity's right relation with God. Christ, the Messiah, has delivered us from our incapacity of being at the level of the Law and fulfilling the promises included in its commandments. This is why, as Saint Paul affirms, since Christ we are no longer 'under the Law.'⁶ After Christ's resurrection, after his triumph over death and sin, humankind lives by God's grace *directly*. This is what Paul called *agape*, love, linked immediately to the *eleutheria*, i.e. the Christian's freedom with regard to the Jewish Law. Christianity claims that people who recognize Jesus as Messiah live beyond the regime of the Law, and, consequently, beyond the authority of death, sin, finitude, lack, and so on. That new condition is one of completeness, of Eternal Life or, in other metaphors, of God's kingdom or the kingdom of heaven.

⁵ See, for instance, Romans 8:21; 2 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 5:1, 13.

⁶ See, for instance, Romans 7.

Given quite *the* untenable character of this idea (death and sin were everywhere, peopled still died, crime and bad behavior were not overcome, *et cetera*), Christianity almost immediately adjusted this idea. Christ, they said, only had *started* this era beyond death, which is to say that first he returned to his Father, but would come back ‘soon’ in order, to judge “the living and the dead”, before finally bringing about the apocalyptic realm beyond death (Eternal Life).

The early Christians felt radically free, free from the Jewish Law and from any law. They lived in the truth, in the realized truth, in the already present eternal truth beyond the confusing (and therefore) untrue world, which still seemed omnipresent. Their *agapeic* community in which they practiced brotherly love and community of goods⁷ anticipated the realm of truth.

In the history of early Christianity, there are many examples of freedom being used in order to turn against the world and to consider the existing society as radically lost – in light of the belief that the End of the World, the Eschaton with its Apocalypse, had already begun with Christ’s resurrection. In such cases, the Christian freedom could turn out to be a kind of anarchy. It gave birth to a tendency in Christianity that denied – and at times even destroyed – existent society. This is what the Parabalani of Alexandria did when, in the beginning of the fifth century, they destroyed the Serapeum, the Temple for Serapis (Zeus), including parts of its gigantic library, the most renowned in the Roman Empire.⁸

Yet, the Christian freedom has not always been like that. Already before the time of the Parabalani – and, anachronistically spoken, other ‘fundamentalist’ movements – the idea of being a Christian freed from the world, had been realized in quite a different, obviously less anti-establishment way.

4. *In, but Not From the World*

This brings me to the third element: the way Christianity felt free from the world without really disconnecting itself from it. Free from the world, Christianity nonetheless took full responsibility with respect to that world.

⁷ Acts 4:32, 34-35.

⁸ RUFINUS, *Historia ecclesiae*, 11. 23-23 cited in: Philip R. AMIDON, *The Church History of Rufinus of Aquileia* (Oxford: Michael Gaddis, 1997); Philip R. AMIDON, *There is No Crime for those who have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), p. 95; 156.

Or, to put it in a very early Christian formula: Christians considered – and still consider – themselves to be *in*, but not *of* the world.⁹

In order to understand what this means, let us consider a few passages from an early Christian text, the anonymous *Letter to Diognetus*. If the dating of the text is correct, the *Letter* offers a presentation of how Christianity defined itself in the midst of the second century A. D. The text does not mention freedom as such, but the idea is definitely there. However, the idea is not taken in the sense of freedom of religion, of the right of having one's own way of thinking and living in relation to the divine. In a way, so the author explains, Christians do not claim a proper 'religion', i.e. their own way of life, of cult, of worship: they do not live differently from others.

For Christians [*Christianoi gar*] are no different from other people in their country, language, or customs. Nowhere do they inhabit cities of their own, use a strange dialect, or live life out of the ordinary. [...] They live in their respective countries, but only as resident aliens [*hoos paroikoi*]; they participate in all things as citizens [*hoos politai*], and they endure all things as foreigners [*hoos xenoi*]. Every foreign territory is a homeland for them, every homeland foreign territory. (V, 1-2; 5)¹⁰

The Christians are free because they are the representatives of another realm, of the kingdom of heaven and of eternal life, the realm freed from the earthly laws of death and sin. But their freedom *from* the world is lived *within* the world. This is why they are full of comprehension for the world that, unaware of this freedom, denies and persecutes Christians. Even in the very hour of their martyr's death, they testify to the 'freedom' sowed in the pagan non-free world. Immediately following the previous passage cited, we read:

They marry like everyone else and have children, but they do not expose them once they are born. They share their meals but not their sexual partners. They are found in the flesh but do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth but participate in the life of heaven. They are obedient to the laws that have been made, and by their own lives they supersede the laws. They

⁹ The expression *in* not in the New Testament, but the idea is. See John 15: 19: "If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." Or John 17: 14: "I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world."

¹⁰ Bart D. EHRMAN (ed.), *The Apostolic Fathers, Volume II: Epistle of Barnabas, Papias and Quadratus, Epistle to Diognetus, The Sheperd of Hermas*, edited and translated by Bart D. Ehrman (Cambridge, MA / London (UK): Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 139-141.

love everyone and are persecuted by all. They are not understood and they are condemned. They are put to death and made alive. They are impoverished and make many rich. (5, 6-13)¹¹

Christians are free from the laws of the world, including mortal fear, and they consider it their duty to put that very freedom in the center of the world, because that freedom is the world's very truth, the creative force which keeps alive all that is. Christian freedom is the soul of the world. A few lines further in the *Epistle*, we read:

To put the matter simply, what the soul is in the body, this is what Christians are in the world. The soul is spread throughout all the limbs of the body; Christians are spread throughout the cities of the world. The soul lives in the body, but it does not belong to the body; Christians live in the world but do not belong to the world. The soul, which is invisible, is put under guard in the visible body; Christians are known to be in the world, but their worship of God remains invisible. (6, 1-5)¹²

In, but not *of* the world, Christians represent the transcendent Creator invisibly at work in the immanent realm of the universe. However, since that universe is inclined to deny its invisible, transcendent "soul", the latter all too often turns out to be the object of repression. Early Christianity acknowledged and embraced this position, accepting their minority position and remaining relatively invisible in a world for which they nonetheless felt fully responsible – as witnessed in the *Letter to Diognetus*.

Things changed when Christianity ceased to be merely one of the many 'philosophies' ('ways of life', 'worldviews') that flourished in the Mediterranean region of Late Antiquity. The Christian 'way' became '*religio*.' On the theoretical level, this occurred at the end of the second century in the writings of Tertullian. On the practical level, it happened later, in the course of the fourth century, when, thanks to the politics of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, Christianity replaced the former *religio romana* and turned it into the *religio romana christiana*, or, as Tertullian calls it, into the "*vera religio veri dei*"¹³.

Then, the invisible soul of the universe – Christianity – redefined itself as having the duty to play a visible role in the world. When Tertullian baptized

¹¹ EHRMAN, *The Apostolic Fathers, Volume II: Epistle of Barnabas, Papias and Quadratus, Epistle to Diognetus, The Sheperd of Hermas*, p. 141.

¹² EHRMAN, *The Apostolic Fathers, Volume II: Epistle of Barnabas, Papias and Quadratus, Epistle to Diognetus, The Sheperd of Hermas*, p. 141-143.

¹³ TERTULLIAN, *Apology; De Spectaculis*, with an English translation by T.R. Glover; Minucius Felix, with an English translation by Gerald G. RENDALL (The Loeb Classic Library 250, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press / London: William Heinemann, 1984), p. 131.

Christianity as a *religio*, it *openly* claimed what in the *Letter* was kept secret, invisible. It sees its truth performed in the works of nature and, even, in the common expressions of everyday language.

Would you have us prove him (God) to you from His own works, in their multitude and character, those works that contain us, that sustain us, that delight us; yes! and affright us? Would you have us prove Him to you from the witness of the human soul itself? Yes! the soul, be it cabined and cribbed by the body, be it confined by evil nurture, be it robbed of its strength by lusts and desires, be it enslaved to false gods,—none the less, when it recovers its senses, as after surfeit, as after sleep, as after some illness, when it recaptures its proper health, the soul names God, and for this reason and no other, because, if language be used aright, He is the one true God. ‘Great God!’ ‘Good God!’ ‘Which may God give!’ is the utterance of all men. That He is also Judge, is shown by such utterance as: ‘God sees;’ ‘I leave it to God;’ ‘God will repay me.’ O the witness of the soul, in its very nature Christian! And then, as it says these words, it turns its gaze not to the Capitol, but to heaven. For it knows the abode of the living God; from Him and from heaven it came. (XVII, 4-6)¹⁴

The most general, the most banal ‘religious’ utterance, the cry ‘O my god’ – humans so often send up – testifies of the God Christianity put forward, the Only One True God. And it is up to Christianity to make that truth accessible to all people. That is why Christianity had to replace the people’s wrong, pagan religion by the *vera religio veri dei*.

5. Religion of a Free Society

In the beginning of the fourth century, the Edict of Milan (313 AD, signed by the Roman Emperors Constantine and Licinius) declared the freedom of all religions in the empire, which *de facto* resulted in favoring Christian religion. At the end of that century, in 380, after its spectacular rise all over the empire (from circa 10% in 310, to 70 or 80% in 380),¹⁵ Theodosius declared Christianity the only official *religio*. The attitude ‘being in, but not of the world’ became the attitude promoted by the official ‘narrative’ of the empire and sustained by its official *religio*. Christianity had freed humankind from the false gods, and in name of the one and only true God they had become free citizens of the world: fully participating *in* the life of that world while at the same time being free *from* it.

¹⁴ TERTULLIAN, *Apology; De Spectaculis*, p. 86-89.

¹⁵ Charles FREEMAN, *A New History of Early Christianity* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 222.

This “paradox” (the word is quoted from the *Letter to Diognetus*) became the paradigm of medieval society. From the chaos caused by the invasion of the German tribes in the fifth and sixth century, it were the monks who – although ‘rejecting’ worldly life in order to live in absolute loneliness – transmitted Antiquity’s interrupted ‘culture’ and built up the new society of what later will be called the Middle Ages. They did it clearly ‘being *in*, not *of* the world’.

After the ‘cultural revolution’ of the twelfth century, when Western Europe changed its culture based on abbeys and monks into an urban civilization based on cities and citizens, the same paradigm continued to dominate. Citizens were free, free in their cities, but since their ultimate reference remained the City of God, they were at the same time free *from* the cities in which they engaged.

When, after the seventeenth century, God’s city ceased to be the general reference for the modern citizens, the paradigm remained valid. Engaging themselves fully in the world, Christians considered themselves at the same time free in the sense of being unbound to that world. In the present day, too, this sociopolitical paradigm still rules: we relate to the world as if we in principle are free from it.

This sociopolitical paradigm, this kind of ‘freedom’ has a positive side: it is impossible nowadays to consider the basic political status of a citizen as non-free. However, it has a negative side as well: human persons participate in the world not first of all in favour of that world, but for their own profit. In the seventeenth century, one invested socially in the social world because of the promised reward in the afterlife, i.e. to save his private soul for eternity. The social attitude in the twenty-first century is formally based on the same paradigm: what we do in public space is basically motivated by our own private benefit. Late modernity’s social life is dominated and ruled by the free market. The citizen’s engagement in society is a way to make them free – and, in the end, a way to make them free from society as such. The social game of the free market has rendered Bill Gates free from society. His choice to invest his billions in non-profit social projects confirms the radical freedom which has resulted from profit-ruled social life.

Being *in*, not *of* the world: it is the condition in which the Christian of the second century supposed himself to be, and it is still the condition of the modern *free* citizen – or, with a word that one has to take with the connotation Hegel has given it, of the modern ‘bourgeois’¹⁶. The paradigm of

¹⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich HEGEL, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, translated by T. M. KNOX, revised, edited and introduced by Stephen HOULGATE (Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 180-186.

modernity's sociopolitical self-understanding is an inheritance of Christianity. Although free *from* the world, modern humans must use that freedom to engage *in* the world.

Christianity cannot lock itself up in its own faith. That faith owes to its own monotheistic character an incessant critical and auto-critical reflex, including a critical reflection on the freedom it has put in the center of its tradition. It is on that very basis, that Christianity has to contribute to today's reflection on freedom as the paradigm of our modernity. It is one of the ways in which Christianity has the opportunity to collaborate fully with modernity in order to realize its project of a freedom-based society.