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This paper follows Hans Blumenberg's argument that gnosticism persisted throughout the Middle Ages due to Augustine of Hippo's accidental incorporation of gnostic eschatology into his theory of *voluntas*. Gnosticism is a radically dualist structure originating in Late Antiquity that splits the cosmos between corrupt *matter* and a divine *spirit*. I take issue with Blumenberg's assertion that modernity has truly rid itself of a concern with *spirit*, or transcendence. By doing so, I am able to take his argument to its logical conclusion: gnosticism persists today through the capitalist descendent of *spirit*—value. Moreover, I argue that the supersession of *spirit* by value in capitalism results in a system built on credit, which necessarily entails postponement of the modern apocalyptic crisis: that is, the payment of debt.

Introduction

> I could conceive of another Abraham for myself—he certainly would have never gotten to be a patriarch or even an old-clothes dealer—who was prepared to satisfy the demand for a sacrifice immediately, with the promptness of a waiter, but was unable to bring it off because he could not get away, being indispensable; the household needed him, there was perpetually something or other to put in order, the house was never ready; for without having his house ready, without having something to fall back on, he could not leave . . ."[1]

Expectation of the "end" has persisted from the time when Abraham's attempted sacrifice was recorded in Genesis 22:1-2 (and arguably long before) until today. Whereas Franz Kafka's story of Abraham portrays the patriarch as perpetually postponing the end,

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[1] Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 42.

medieval eschatology for the most part anticipated the return of Christ and the apocalyptic renewal he would bring. The form eschatology takes, whether deferral or anticipation of the end, is oftentimes a clue to understanding the structures that differentiate one era from another. Therefore, I argue that the persistence of eschatology in the form of postponement is a function of the modern supersession of God by the specifically capitalist value-form.

In *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1983), Hans Blumenberg shows that eschatology persisted throughout the Middle Ages due to the Christian adoption of the Platonic division between matter and Idea. Gnosticism—a movement with a complex history that was oftentimes practiced simultaneously with Christianity—adopted this duality and applied it to divinity: the demiurge, who created the world, came to represent all evil, while the good God who had never had anything to do with this world remained our only hope of salvation through the eventual apocalypse. God would save mankind from the inherent evil of the material world via liberation from the physical body and entrance into the realm of *spirit:* the gnostic rendering of the Platonic Idea. Augustine of Hippo sought to piece God back together and simultaneously vindicate God of blame for evil in the world. To do so, he granted Adam *voluntas*, or free will, by which he became responsible for the introduction of evil into the world through the first (un)ethical choice:

original sin. Augustine thereby placed the guilt for the eventual and inevitable apocalypse on mankind's shoulders.[2]

Blumenberg's argument errs, however, in characterizing modernity as free of eschatology—and thus inherited guilt. *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* is largely a response to Karl Löwith's *Meaning in History* (1949).[3] While Löwith holds that modern ideas of progress are essentially secularized eschatologies, Blumenberg understands the modern age as distinct from previous theological worldviews in that it has freed itself of transcendence. By challenging Blumenberg's assumption that the modern age is entirely immanent, we are able to take Blumenberg's discussion of gnostic eschatology and Augustine to its logical conclusion: eschatology persists in modernity *through* a secular form of transcendence. The transition from anticipation to postponement of the apocalypse, furthermore, is a result of the manifestation of transcendence in each of these two eras: medieval and secular. Therefore, I argue that postponement is an inseparable consequence of the replacement of God by value. The transition from a metaphysics based on matter and spirit to one based on matter and value is due to the incorporation of gnostic duality into secular modernity's own (hidden) religion: capitalism. Since capitalism operates on credit, which simultaneously creates debt and postpones paying it,

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[2] Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 127-136.
[3] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History; The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1949).

the modern individual must perpetually postpone the apocalypse through the same structure that guarantees it will occur.

It did not escape Kafka's notice that postponement is the modern condition. For this reason, he could conceive of Abraham's (attempted) sacrifice of Isaac as perpetually postponed. Abraham postpones so that he may complete his earthly duties: an impossible task, as "the house was never ready." Likewise, Gregor Samsa postpones his self-sacrifice—the moment when he takes a last breath, allowing his family to move on without him—convinced that he may still return to aid his family as the main breadwinner. In *The Trial*, K.'s only hope is to defer the judgment indefinitely.[4] Kafka himself sensed the impending judgment of the world and sought to defer it—all the while knowing that no such deferral is possible. In an essay following the ten-year anniversary of Kafka's death, Walter Benjamin wrote of Kafka: "In the mirror which the prehistoric world held before him in the form of guilt he merely saw the future emerging in the form of judgment."[5] An inherited guilt and debt—the German word *Schuld* means both— haunted Kafka, as it has perhaps always haunted mankind.[6] Indeed, postponement of the apocalyptic crisis inherent to this debt is formative of modern secular religion based on

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[4] Franz Kafka and Nahum N. Glatzer, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).

[5] Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt, "Some reflections on Kafka." *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 128.

[6] Not to mention, the Lord's Prayer is more properly formulated as "forgive us our debts," deriving from the Greek noun ὀφείλημα meaning "that which is owed, a debt." Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, A Lexicon: Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 508.

value, and thus credit. In other words, the persistence of gnostic dualism through value

ensures that Kafkaesque *Schuld* is never overcome but simply "translated."[7]

The Trouble with [g]nosticism

Until the mid-twentieth century, scholarship that sought to account for and describe

"Gnosticism" was based largely on writings by those who had deemed it heretical.

Unsurprisingly, these accounts are oftentimes contradictory or incomplete. In 1945,

however, thirteen ancient books were discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, contained in

which were the texts that would come to be known as the "Gnostic Gospels." Thought to

have been destroyed by the Church in an attempt to censor heresy, these gospels provided

information about a dualist system we now call "Gnosticism" written by so-called

"Gnostics." What the Nag Hammadi texts contained, of course, challenged previous

scholarship.[8]

"Gnosticism" is itself an oversimplification of what was in fact an array of

practices and beliefs. In certain academic circles, "Gnosticism" is understood generally as

a heretical movement that opposed orthodox Christianity. Karen King's view is indicative

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[7] Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy,* 136.
[8] James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York, NY: First Harper & Row, 1981).

of a larger trend in academia—and especially in religious studies—that seeks to show

how 'traditional' epistemological categories such as "orthodox" and "heretical" do not

accurately portray the original complexity and variation of practices that were then

heaped together by early European scholars.[9] For example, those that might have held so-

called "gnostic" beliefs likely identified as Christians, not heretics. Others who exemplify

this tradition include Tomoko Masuzawa, whose detailed critique of the world religions

paradigm found it to have no basis other than its *usefulness* for the Western Christian

tradition.[10] Both are rejections of essentialism, however difficult it may be to completely

avoid this sort of generalization.

  These critiques are indeed necessary if religious studies is to be more akin to

history than theology. The contemporary classification of "Gnosticism" as a "heretical"

tradition is based on the presumption that there was a single "Christianity" defined by

practices that at some point were *deemed* orthodox. This model says nothing about

historical reality, only of later reconstructions and ideologies. Therefore, it is crucial to

distinguish between the set of beliefs and practices that came to be called "Gnosticism"

and Christianity, as well as the ideologies that were used in the process of reconstructing

them. It is this distinction that is oftentimes missing from scholarship that seeks simply to

break down concepts into their smallest possible parts. That these parts, at least in the

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[9] Karen L King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).
[10] Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

popular imagination, were at one time a cohesive whole can teach us something about our own tradition, the one that was responsible for gluing all those parts together. Elaine Pagels argues for precisely such a study: "By investigating the texts from Nag Hammadi, together with sources known for well over a thousand years from orthodox tradition, we can see how politics and religion coincide in the development of Christianity. . . . In the process, we can gain a startlingly new perspective on the origins of Christianity."[11] It is easy to point at the many ways the European Christian tradition created a concept: "Gnosticism." To what extend did a belief in a cohesive whole called "Gnosticism" create Christianity?

In order to at least begin to answer that question—as when answering any question—it is necessary to generalize to some extent. I, therefore, use the words "gnosticism" and "gnostic" with a lowercase "g" to refer to certain phenomena in the ancient world—phenomena that were incorporated into what we now call "Christianity." Discussion of this incorporation focuses most heavily on the period in which the border between what was gnostic and what was Christian was most unclear. Indeed, from the second to the fourth centuries, while it is in some ways possible to distinguish between "Gnosticism" and Christianity as two distinctive traditions, it is oftentimes difficult to distinguish people who practiced them. In other words, the boundaries separating gnostic

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[11] Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), xxxvi.

and Christian phenomena were flexible, porous, and changing. This flexibility, which, at the time, would not have been seen as breaking any rules or customs, was largely possible because Christianity was not united around a single church or doctrine. During this period, Christians were only sporadically persecuted—but oftentimes intensely so—and they were at least *seen* as being relatively tolerant to other races, as well as generous and abstinent. Early Christians also became known for providing social services throughout the Roman Empire. All of these qualities appealed especially to freedmen of the Roman Empire, so Christianity continued to grow despite imperial opposition, allowing it to spread throughout the Roman world as a *universal,* or "catholic" in Greek, religion.[12] The lack of clear governance or doctrine also tended to work in Christianity's favor, allowing it to flourish alongside other practices.

Unsurprisingly, attempts to centralize and create strict rules of behavior in the growing movement were met by resistance from some. These resistors to centralization would, at least retroactively, become known—and oftentimes condemned—as "Gnostics." Arguments against centralization advocated a return to "who we are, and what we have become; where we were . . . ."[13] They sought a "higher awareness," which they called *gnosis.*[14] The word *gnosis* is Greek for "knowledge," which Hans Jonas describes as "the means for the attainment of salvation, or even as the form of salvation

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[12] Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988), 77.
[13] Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpts from Theodotus*, ed. F. Sagnard (Paris: Cerf, 1948), 202-203.
[14] Pagels, *Adam*, 60.

itself."[15] Gnostics, as certain groups that emphasized *gnosis* came to be called, were not a centralized group and not necessarily Christians. The word "Gnosticism," indicating an organized and distinct religion, did not even come to be used until the seventeenth-century theologian Henry More coined it.[16]

Most of what we know about gnosticism is, therefore, from the perspective of the Church, which sought to establish a clear distinction between itself and so-called heretics. The second-century theologian and Bishop of Lugdunum in Gaul, Irenaeus, wrote *Refutation and Overthrow of What is Falsely Called Gnosis* (c. 180 CE) to link all groups that he considered gnostic together, locating their origins in Simon Magus, a Christian convert considered a heretic for supposedly imitating a god. Irenaeus traced a genealogy of heretical movements from Simon Magus to his own rivals, the Valentinians. This tactic, in John Henderson's words, "gave order and coherence to a very puzzling and diverse set of phenomena by linking them together in a chain of succession. . . . The genealogy of heresy having been established, later heresiographers found it both effective and economical to attack later heresies by linking them with already refuted and discredited ones.[17] According to Antti Marjanen, Irenaeus tied all heretical groups

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[15] Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 32.

[16] Antti Marjanen, s.v. "Gnosticism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[17] John B Henderson, *The Construction of Orthodoxy and Heresy Neo-Confucian, Islamic, Jewish, and Early Christian Patterns* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1998), 151-2.

together under the same name—"gnostics"—so that he could then point to the lack of coherence among the various sects.[18] Karen King identifies this strategy as one that "served to demonstrate that the heretics lacked any kind of social and doctrinal unity."[19] From the beginning, therefore, gnosticism was a convoluted and, above all, politically useful category.[20]

Much of the motivation behind Irenaeus' invention can be explained by his rivalry with Valentinus, a member of his congregation who claimed to have access to the secret teachings of Paul. Valentinus was exceptionally popular: Elaine Pagels points out that even Tertullian, a prominent Christian author and heresiographer, "who would bitterly denounce Valentinus's followers a generation later, admitted that their teacher had been 'a capable man, both in intelligence and eloquence.'"[21] However, some in the rising Christian church refused to sanction Valentinus's movement. Christianity had lost much of its original tolerance when Constantine instituted state protections for Christians in 313, allowing Christianity to unify in a previously impossible way. This unification allowed fierce exclusion and suppression of groups that were seen to challenge the young church. Indeed, in 381, Theodosius the Great suppressed many remaining pagan religions

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[18] Marjanen, "Gnosticism," 205.
[19] King, *What Is Gnosticism?,* 31.
[20] The strategy of tying together an otherwise disparate group so that criticism of one applies to all is as fascinating as it is common. The convolutedness of the study of "Gnostics" or other heretical groups can oftentimes be attributed to early heresiographers' employing this strategy.
[21] Tertullian, *Adversus Valentinianos*, as quoted in Pagels, *Adam*, 61.

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by targeting so-called 'heretical' groups. Needless to say, Christians in search of *gnosis* were one of them.

Identifying the precise doctrinal differences between gnostic movements and a "standard" Christianity is where many scholars have erred—largely by relying on Christian sources, such as Irenaeus, to characterize them. The Nag Hammadi texts both contradict and confirm early characterizations. What is confirmed is that gnostic movements were radically dualist, creating a division between *matter* and *spirit* that confines all of mankind to the former, except for the remnant of a divine spark, or soul, which could only be accessed through gnosis. Marjanen, acknowledging the fabricated and motley nature of the religion called "Gnosticism," nonetheless recognizes commonalities among groups that came to be called "Gnostics": "Common to these groups is at least a separation between the Highest God and the creator, a dichotomy between the human body and the divine soul embedded in it, and an idea of saving knowledge (*gnosis*)."[22]Accordingly, gnostics conceive of human nature not as good, but as being constituted by a fundamental lack arising from the world's separation from God. In other words, they were preoccupied with the split between matter and spirit, body and soul, existence and concept, meaning that they sensed the inherent difficulty in these

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[22] Marjanen, "Gnosticism," 204.

dualisms, which, nonetheless, have constituted much of Christian metaphysical thought for millennia.

The gnostic worldview, therefore, tended to be dark, pervaded by and preoccupied with suffering. Gnostic texts emphasized human impotence, as opposed to the Christian view of free will as the means to live a transformed life. Furthermore, gnostics tended to be upper class and well-educated, while, as mentioned above, Christianity appealed originally to freedmen throughout the Roman Empire. Crucially, Christians tended to read scripture literally, while gnostics tended to read it metaphorically—a practice inherited from both Jews and pagans before them, especially Philo of Alexandria. The difference between them was most evident in their disparate readings of Genesis, especially regarding the events that occurred in the Garden of Eden.

Elaine Pagels summarizes the most important doctrinal differences that arose out of the story of Adam and Eve. For the most part, Christians saw in the Genesis story proof of the original perfection of the universe, as well as man's inherent freedom to choose evil *or* good, even though Adam clearly chose evil. Gnostics, on the other hand, pointed to Genesis as proof of Adam's decrepitude as a "human prisoner" in "cosmic confinement"—a creature certainly devoid of free will.[23] Pagels points to "The Hypostasis of the Archons," also known as "The Reality of the Rulers" (ca. 3rd century),

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[23] Pagels, *Adam*, 73-4.

a gnostic exegesis on Genesis, to illustrate Adam's helplessness.[24] In it, rather than choosing, Adam is *doomed* to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Innumerable gnostic commentaries on Genesis exist—the most extreme claiming that the serpent attempts to warn Adam and Eve of the decrepitude of the demiurge's creation, and others which agree that humans are certainly not endowed with sufficient free will to cause all the world's suffering (through choosing evil). Valentinus was part of this latter group: he believed the god we worship is only the creator, while *gnosis* would lead to knowledge of the true God.[25]

These beliefs are most likely rooted in ancient metaphysics, in which the Platonic division between Idea and matter dominated. This reasoning explained the creation of the cosmos as the moment when "rational planning and blind necessity, archetype and matter collide"—in other words, when the Idea (reason) is subjected to matter (necessity). In this Platonic system, the architect of the cosmos, the demiurge, ensures that "everything that could be and every way in which it could be is exhausted by the reproduction of the Ideas"—a conception which explains the origin of the bad in the world as a product of these Ideas' subjection to matter.

The Neoplatonist Plotinus introduced a new understanding of the bad in which the entire world "appears as the great failure to equal its ideal model." By explaining this

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[24] See James M. Robinson, ed., "The Hypostasis of the Archons," in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English,* trans. Roger A. Bullard and Bentley Layton (New York, NY: First Harper & Row, 1981), 152-160.
[25] Pagels, *Adam,* 74-6.

world as a "fall" from the divine Idea, Plotinus paved the way for the absolute dualism that was evident in gnosticism.[26] In Neoplatonism, however, the world was still connected to the divine insofar as it failed to fulfill its design. Plotinus regarded the material world as evil and yet still "looked upon [it] as a graded hierarchy of reflections of the highest realities." In fact, it was this intermediary position that would later aid Augustine of Hippo in adapting gnostic Manichaeism to Christianity.[27] By contrast, gnostic radical dualism posited a world entirely separate from the divine, with the former represented by an evil demiurge and the latter by the good God of salvation. The evil demiurge created the world, while the transcendent God remains free of any association with the bad: "Gnosticism has no need of theodicy since the good God has never had anything to do with the world."[28] *Gnosis* thus becomes the process of knowing God—the *spirit* from which the world fell. "The Gospel of Truth" (ca. 150) from the Nag Hammadi library emphasizes precisely this relationship between God, knowledge, the *parousia*—or the return of Christ—and *spirit:* "Having filled the deficiency, he abolished the form—the form of it is the world, that in which he served. For the place where there is envy and strife is a deficiency, but the place where (there is) Unity is a perfection. Since the deficiency came into being because the Father was not known, therefore when the Father

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[26] Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy*, 127-8.
[27] R. A Markus, *Christianity in the Roman World* (New York: Scribner, 1974), 38.
[28] Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy*, 128.

is known, from that moment on the deficiency will no longer exist."[29] In this text, which is associated with Irenaeus' rivals, the Valentinians, knowledge of the Father results in the "abolish[ment] [of] the form," while the world is described as containing a fundamental lack—a "deficiency."

The connection between the inherent dysfunction of the material world and the need for its eventual destruction is not a gnostic invention. In fact, its roots can be traced to Jewish apocalypticism as conveyed through various *apocalypses*. The most famous of these apocalypses is the Book of Revelation, written by a Jewish author in the first century CE, but numerous other—albeit less famous—Jewish apocalypses were popular throughout early to middle antiquity, including 1 Enoch, 2 Baruch, 4 Ezra, the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, the Apocalypse of Abraham, and the Testament of Abraham. The popularity of these books, which circulated widely from the third century BCE to the first century CE, indicates the prevalence of the apocalyptic imagination in antiquity.[30]

Understanding apocalyptic thought throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages must begin by contextualizing these ancient texts. For example, the Book of Revelation is explicitly addressed to seven churches in modern-day Turkey and depicts a challenge to the authority of the Roman Empire, which was understood to be fully corrupt and evil, by

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[29] Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi*, 24.
[30] Justin J. Schedtler and Kelly J. Murphy, "Introduction," in *Apocalypses in Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, forthcoming) 4.

the "claim of the rightful rule of God and the Lamb."[31] Eventually, God and the Lamb defeat the Emperor and establish their own rule throughout the land (Rev. 21-22).[32] In their compilation of works describing apocalyptic thought throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages, Justin Jeffcoat Schedtler and Kelly J. Murphy argue that "a common denominator among ancient apocalypses is that they view the present order of things as somehow dysfunctional and/or corrupt, and the purpose of the apocalypse is to make this known."[33] In other words, apocalypses, in some sense, express revolutionary desires.

Furthermore, apocalypses, including the Book of Revelation, while certainly entailing destruction and disaster, emphasize a "*revelation of the present circumstances*" through visions given to seers.[34] The book of Revelation not only envisioned the eventual demise of the Roman Imperial system(s), but sought to make known its inherent corruption and perversion. This makes sense of the term "apocalypse" itself, or "*apokálypsis*" in Greek, which means "lifting of the veil" or "revelation." In other words, the apocalypse brings *gnosis*.[35]

Gnostic apocalypticism cannot be understood without this context. Indeed, for gnostics, the fallen world of lost "*pneuma*" eventually requires rescue via its destruction, "the critical process of final salvation, the dissolution of the demiurge's illegitimate

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[31] Ibid., 10.
[32] Ibid., 11.
[33] Ibid., 9.
[34] Ibid., 5.
[35] Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London: Verso, 2012), 131-2.

creation," by the good God via his messenger, Jesus. Marcion, a prominent Gnostic

thinker, saw the contradiction this dualism created for fledgling mainstream

Christianity—that is: "A theology that declares its God to be the omnipotent creator of

the world and bases its trust in this God on the omnipotence thus exhibited cannot at the

same time make the destruction of this world and the salvation of men from the world

into the central activity of this God."[36] Furthermore, that Jesus sacrificed himself for the

sins of man does not make sense if man was always already sinful; neither does Jesus'

return as simply the fulfillment of Old Testament promises. Therefore, Jesus is

sometimes pushed to the background in gnosticism, accorded secondary status to the

gnosis he reveals, or as the harbinger of the destruction of the demiurge's evil creation.

Steven Runciman goes so far as to argue that the decision to deem gnostic movements

heretical can ultimately be explained by the continued Christian emphasis on Jesus'

sacrifice.[37]

Furthermore, the often-contradictory array of Christian documents left

Christianity with the task of explaining why God would destroy the world he had created.

Gnosticism, on the other hand, allowed for a transcendent divinity that "has the right to

destroy a cosmos that he did not create and to preach disobedience of a Law that he did

not [lie] down." The primary gnostic question, therefore, became: why has the world

[36] Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy,* 129.
[37] Steven Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee, A Study of the Christian Dualist Heresy* (Cambridge [England]: University Press, 1947), 172.

persisted? Blumenberg argues that the eventual disappearance of 'Gnosticism' as a religion has to do with the anxiety produced by the indecision over whether to trust the world (since it has persisted) or distrust it (for its evil origins).[38] Other scholars, such as R.A. Markus, argue the opposite: that gnosticism arose out of doubts left by the Christian understanding of the Second Coming that continued not to occur.[39] Either way, what we can be sure of is that anxiety produced by conflicting ontologies resulted in a preoccupation with the supposedly imminent apocalypse—and a desire to postpone it. Gnostic structures and the questions they raised about the nature of the world did not disappear with 'Gnosticism' the religion. Indeed, this fluctuation between certainty and uncertainty of the nature of the world would become the critical difference between the medieval and secular eras when anticipation yielded to postponement of the apocalypse. Augustine would be formative in ensuring that medieval man, above all, was marked by certainty in the world and thus a preoccupation with an imminent apocalypse.

Augustine

Characteristic of what would become early Judeo-Christian history was the simultaneous and often shifting practice of 'religions' that we only later categorized as distinct.

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[38] Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy,* 129.
[39] R. A Markus, *Christianity in the Roman World* (New York: Scribner, 1974), 51-2.

Doctrinal struggles between gnosticism, Christianity, and countless other movements and belief systems would persist for several centuries before Catholicism would be able to stake its claim as the sole religion of most of Europe. By the time Augustine's own thinking on the nature of man, God, and the cosmos took on a coherent shape, apocalyptic thought had become exclusively Christian. After 135 CE, when Hadrian defeated the Jews under Bar Kokhba for a final time, resulting in a diasporic Jewish community, apocalyptic hopes that advocated overturning the current order died out in popularity. For Christians, however, the imminent return of Jesus offered a continual source of apocalyptic hope. In addition, apocalypses written after 70 CE were preoccupied with theodicy more than ever before, just as doctrinal battles were increasingly over the vindication of God and Christ.[40] This world is the one that shaped Augustine of Hippo, who, in turn, would shape medieval Christianity.

Augustine was born in 354 in a town in modern-day Algeria called Thagaste. Since the destruction of Carthage in 149 BCE, Augustine's birthplace had been part of the Roman Empire. The region was an important center of business and trade with the rest of the Roman Empire, resulting in a population that for the most part spoke Latin.[41] As James J. O'Donnell points out, the irony of Africa is that the unity brought to the

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[40] Jacki Wyse-Rhodes, "Fallen Angels, Divine Journeys, and the Meaning of Life: Apocalyptic Literature Beyond Biblical Canons," in *Apocalypses in Context*, ed. Justin J. Schedtler and Kelly J. Murphy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, forthcoming), 18-21.
[41] James J. O'Donnell, "Augustine of Hippo," Web Server: Faculty, last modified 2005, http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/.

continent by the pagan Roman Empire allowed Christianity to take hold.[42] This clash also shaped Augustine's family life from the beginning: his father, Patricius, was fairly irreligious but partial to the pagan traditions that still lingered in Christian-dominated Roman Africa, and his mother, Monica, was a devout Christian.[43] This dual makeup, by no means unusual at the time, would find a homology in Augustine's later writings. Fourth-century Thagaste, like much of the Roman Empire, allowed for mixing between what were only later considered to be separate religions and for climbing hierarchies that would become much more fixed as antiquity transitioned into the Middle Ages. Due to this fluidity, Augustine, who was born into a middle class family, was able to receive an excellent education and eventually become the bishop of Hippo in 395.[44]

While being educated in Carthage, Augustine would come across the Manicheans.[45] Augustine's initial attraction and eventual rejection of the Manichaean theology would be formative to his later work. The writings of the founder of Manichaeism, Mani, were largely responses to the gnostics Marcion and Bardaisan of Edessa. Although the radically dualist system proposed by Mani is by no means entirely a product of reading gnostic texts, the fundamental structure of most sects that would later

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[42] James Joseph O'Donnell, *Augustine* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), 1.

[43] On his deathbed, Patricius would convert to Christianity by being baptized—most likely due to Monica's influence (O'Donnell, *Augustine,* 2).

[44] Peter Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 66.

[45] Indeed, Roman North Africa was torn between three main groups: Cyprianic and Donatist Christianity, Catholicism, and Manichaeism (W. H. C Frend, *Religion, Popular and Unpopular in the Early Christian Centuries* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1976, 13.).

be called gnostic applies to Manichaeism.[46] In Steven Runciman's words: "With Mani,

Gnostic dualism reached its height of eminence. New Gnostic sects would still be formed

here and there, but they contributed nothing new. Manichaeanism absorbed the bulk of

the Gnostically-minded public."[47] At the time, the Manicheans were, like many gnostics,

"half-Christians," men who found the literalism practiced by orthodox Christians

constraining and instead preferred to view Christ as speaking directly to men.[48]

According to Widengren, "what fascinated Augustine was Manichaeism's apparent

ability to suggest a complete cosmic interpretation, endeavoring at the very first

examination to offer a rational explanation of all phenomena."[49] For Mani and his

followers, Christ would enlighten those who listened to *gnosis*, or knowledge. A properly

apocalyptic text, the Manichaean Genesis story depicts Christ awakening Adam to the

true divinity of his soul. Augustine described his attraction to Mani's followers as arising

from their claim to be able to understand God entirely through reason. In Carthage,

Augustine was fascinated with the intense practice of Manichaean missionaries called the

'Elect': they fasted and covered themselves in tattoos. Augustine became a 'Hearer'

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[46] Peter Brown, *Religion and Society*, 96.

[47] Runciman, *The Medieval,* 18.

[48] Peter Brown summarizes Ephrem of Nisibis: "Marcion had divided the sheep of Christ, Mani merely robbed the robber" (Brown, *Religion*, 102). And as Steven Runciman points out, "Manichaean" is the word that came to be used derogatorily as a universal signifier for "any sign of dualism" (Runciman, *The Medieval*, 17).

[49] Geo Widengren, *Mani and Manichaeism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 123.

among these men and women, meaning he observed the 'Elect' in order to glean from them the Truth.[50]

The problem that initially drew young Augustine to Manichaeism was the origin of evil, and as Peter Brown points out, the answer would become the core of Augustine's early thought.[51] Most crucial to Augustinian Manichaeism was theodicy, the vindication of God. Manichaeism held that man was not free; indeed, his soul was trapped within a corrupt body and, thus imprisoned, forced to follow the order of the world of things:

> *I have known my soul and the body that lies upon it,*
> *That they have been enemies since the creation of the world.*[52]

The origin of this antagonism was not the good God but some evil that emerged from the "Kingdom of Darkness."[53]A battle between the Light and Dark had resulted in the imprisonment of particles of light in the bodies of all men.[54] This radical dualism filled young Augustine with an absolute certainty about the corrupt world of things and the nature of the good God who had nothing to do with this evil.

Many years later, as Peter Brown points out, the aspect of Manichaeism that derailed Augustine's faith in Manichaean dualism was the simplistic characterization by Mani of the passive good God, whose kingdom was invaded by the violent forces of evil.

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[50] Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 32-4.
[51] Ibid., 35.
[52] C. R. C. Allberry and Hugo Ibscher, *A Manichaean Psalm-Book* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1938), 56.
[53] A. Chavannes and P. Pelliot, "Un traité manichéen retrouvé en Chine'," *Journal asiatique* 11, no. 1 (1913): 114.
[54] Runciman, *The Medieval,* 13-4.

This doubt began to fester around the time Augustine came across many of the converts of Manichaeism, artisans and merchants whose attraction to Mani's doctrine was built on unwavering belief instead of a quest for truth through reason. As Manichaeism spread, the scholarly Manichaeism represented by Augustine and his friends and followers was pushed to the fringe and replaced by conviction more than reason. Merchants, in fact, were the primary spreaders of Manichaeism, especially throughout Asia. Many of these Manicheans became devout members of the 'Elect,' displaying resolute faith in the writings of Mani, in which the world was presumed to be entirely explainable through the simplistic dualism of Mani's original writings.[55] Brown describes how this stubborn gnostic dualism in which the world is simply corrupt Darkness within which the Light is trapped inevitably contradicted observations of the physical world. For example, Manicheans maintained that "[t]he waxing and waning of the Moon . . . was not merely the distant image of some spiritual event; it was, quite literally, caused by the influx of released fragments of 'Light' flowing upwards from the world."[56] In his detailed study of Manichaeism, Widengren concludes that, although the original intention of Mani—and certainly of followers like Augustine—may have been to explain the universe through reason based on observation, oversimplified myths became the primary means of explaining the contradictions of the world. The clarity of Manichaean ontology attracted

[55] Brown, *Augustine*, 45.
[56] Ibid., 46.

many who sought a clear understanding of a world that was *not* fully explained by

Christianity. Increasingly for Augustine, however, Manichaeism was too fixed and could

not account for his own changing observations: "I could make no progress in it."[57]

Augustine's dissatisfaction with the answers given to him by Manichaeism also

infected his perception of Carthage. After seven or so years teaching and gaining an

impressive reputation in Carthage, Augustine moved to Rome. Young Augustine very

quickly managed to impress the prefect of the city, Symmachus, and thus become the

professor of rhetoric at the imperial court of Milan. Several factors beyond Augustine's

philosophical quarrels can be pointed to as possible motivators of Augustine's eventual

conversion to Christianity. Most important, however, were Augustine's Christian mother,

Monica, and the bishop of Milan, Ambrose. Monica moved to Rome after her husband's

death and immediately arranged a marriage to a Christian wife for her son. By

Augustine's own account, Ambrose provided a sophisticated and highly intellectual

understanding of Christianity. Growing tired of the power game that occupied much of

his time as a professor of rhetoric, Augustine retired to a country villa with several

friends and his mother. There, they read Virgil and discussed philosophy and religion. In

the spring of 387, Augustine publicly converted to Christianity and was baptized by

Ambrose. Soon after, Augustine returned to Africa in order to commit himself to thought

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[57] Augustine, *Confessions* (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953), V, vii, 12.

and prayer and was quickly conscripted as a priest in Hippo Regius. When Valerius, the

bishop of Hippo died, Augustine took his place and remained there until his death.[58]

The Burden of Free Will

Of all of his writings, those works that deal with Augustine's position on freedom

(*libertas*), free choice (*liberum arbitrium*), and the will (*voluntas*) cause the most

confusion for scholars.[59] As is perhaps inevitable for such a massive body of work,

Augustine contradicted and modified previous views on the state of man's free will

numerous times over the many years that he discussed the topic. His early work, *De

Libero Arbitrio* gives a strikingly different picture than his later writing in the midst of

the Pelagian controversy.[60] Augustine wrote *De Libero Arbitrio* after his baptism to

Christianity in 387. This work shows clearly that Augustine was working through this

transition: in it, we can see very clearly remnants of the essentially gnostic Manichaeism

Augustine had left behind. Accordingly, Augustine's writings during this early period are

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[58] O'Donnell, "Augustine."

[59] John M. Rist, "Augustine on Free Will and Predestination," in *Augustine: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. R. A Markus (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1972), 220-3.

[60] Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, ed. Anna S. Benjamin and L. H. Hackstaff (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964).

best understood as an incorporation and reoccupation of the questions and answers he inherited from dualist Manichaeism.[61]

Indeed, significant to Augustine's position on the free will is the context in which this position was formed. The Christian community, faced with a gnostic vindication of God that, as Marcion had pointed out, highlighted the gap in Christianity's explanation of the Genesis, found itself thrown into uncertainty: it would have to find a way to incorporate its eschatological heritage. The conflict growing in the Hellenistic world over this heritage "aroused not the community's hope but its fear, which motivated prayer not for the early coming of the Lord but for postponement of the end."[62] Gnosticism had highlighted several contradictions within Christianity—the most blatant being how one and the same God could create a world he would eventually destroy. Augustine, in mediating these same contradictions introduced by Manichaean gnosticism, sought to instead place this blame on the shoulders of man.[63] He, therefore, introduced "*creatio ex nihilo* [creation from nothing] as *concreatio* [cocreation (of matter and form)]." That is, God's creation does not represent the overcoming of reason (form) by necessity (matter), the Platonic division that had led to the Gnostic split between the good God and evil demiurge. Furthermore, God "had expressly given each of His works the confirmation

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[61] Michael Mendelson, "Saint Augustine (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, last modified 2010, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/augustine/.
[62] Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy*, 131.
[63] Mendelson, "Saint Augustine."

that it was good."[64] Yet if God did not create anything bad, from whence did the bad come?

Augustine's innovation was to give man the "burden" of free will, itself a good thing with which man could do evil. Augustine's rhetorical flourish in *De Libero Arbitrio* allows for this explanation. In Blumenberg's words: "The will that wills itself is only free if it can also not will itself. Here rationality breaks down; reasons cannot be given for self-annihilation: 'Sciri enim non potest quod nihil est' [For what is nothing cannot be known]." Thus, the bad that occurs in the world is of two kinds: 1) moments when the will does "not will itself"; and 2) God's punishment for these moments. However, the indefinitely postponed destruction of the world required a different explanation—a sin that "had to be great, all too great."[65] Augustine thereby imparted to man the guilt of Adam's original sin in order to justify "the lasting corruption of the world" that would eventually require its destruction.[66]

Later on, Augustine would further radicalize this position, writing in the midst of a theological battle with the Pelagian, Julian of Aeclanum (b. 380). Pelagius (c. 360-418), who loaned his name to the movement, was a Christian ascetic who criticized Augustine's position on free will. Pelagius held a much more optimistic view than

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[64] Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy,* 132.
[65] Ibid., 134.
[66] Ibid., 135.

Augustine, emphasizing man's free will in opposition to Manichaean determinism.[67]

Julian followed this line of thinking, becoming the most prolific Pelagian to take issue

with Augustine's Manichaean influence.[68] Julian's main argument was the following:

God created each soul anew, and thus man carries no inherited guilt from Adam. He did

make men susceptible to evil, but this evil, unlike in a Manichaean ontology, is not itself

a substance. Adam, endowed with a free will like all men, did not pass on his sin to the

rest of mankind. Instead, Julian held that each man was judged fairly and individually by

God.[69]

Augustine's position would move further away from such optimism. Augustine's

Manichaean background and reaction against the Pelagians would result in a dark view of

mankind. Having already imparted upon all of man the guilt of Adam's original sin,

Augustine would next take away from man a will to do good altogether and replace it

with free choice (*liberum arbitrium*). This *liberum arbitrium* would always tend toward

evil except in rare moments when grace could overcome man's otherwise immutable

tendency to sin so that man's free will, or *voluntas,* could do good. Adam was endowed

with the freedom (*libertas*) to use his will for good, but in choosing evil, he stripped the

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[67] Mathijs Lamberigts, "Pelagius and Pelagians," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 264.

[68] As Lamberigts points out, Julian almost never referred to Pelagius himself, although his ideas are clearly drawn from Pelagius (271).

[69] Lamberigts, "Pelagius," 271-2.

rest of mankind of this same freedom.[70] Furthermore, Augustine split mankind between

the condemned, for whom *voluntas* tended toward evil, and those for whom God would

hold back this tendency and who would be saved.[71] This inherited sin would rob the—for

the most part condemned—medieval man of his freedom and simultaneously impart upon

him the guilt of original sin. This inheritance was such that it would require the imminent

destruction of the world. And indeed, as Karl Shuve points out, "Although the Jews of the

Second Temple Period wrote the first apocalypses, it was the Christians of Late Antiquity

who transmitted those texts to the modern world and ensured that apocalyptic thought

would remains popular down to the present day."[72] In attempting to overcome

Manichaean gnostic eschatology, Augustine ensured that Christianity would not

overcome its gnostic heritage but only "translate" it.[73] Specifically, the Middle Ages

would be marked by the certainty of a rightly condemned man: in his guilt and in his

punishment.

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[70] Rist, "Augustine," 220-3.
[71] Mendelson, "Saint Augustine."
[72] Karl Shuve, "The Transformation of the Apocalyptic Heritage in Late Antique Christianity," in *Apocalypses in Context*, ed. Justin J. Schedtler and Kelly J. Murphy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, forthcoming), 2.
[73] Blumenberg, "The Legitimacy," 136.

Certainty and Anticipation

In one sense, it is absurd to make overarching statements about the Middle Ages—or, for

that matter, any other period since, it can be argued, each period contains everything

human to one degree or another. However, the fact remains that many fields of study

operate based on the differentiation of the medieval period from the current 'secular' era.

What constitutes this difference? Charles Taylor's seminal work on secularism begins

with the question, "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in

our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even

inescapable?" Taylor argues that every corner of the world bespoke God's influence,

presence, and design. Throughout nature, society, and especially the "enchanted" "world

of spirits, demons, and moral forces," God was manifest.[74] Augustine's conception of

nature is inseparable from the medieval world of miracles: "Isn't the daily course of

nature itself a miracle, something to be wondered at?"[75] Since nature is miraculous, God

is active throughout it.[76] Furthermore, those who had performed gospel miracles became

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[74] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 25-6.

[75] Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. Marcus Dods and Thomas Merton (New York: Modern Library, 1950), X.12.

[76] Miracles, therefore, are "to be understood primarily in terms of their impact on the observer." Augustine introduces a subjective element to miracles that would later be adapted by Thomas Aquinas in the secularization of nature. Although largely formative of the Middle Ages, Augustine foreshadows secularization in many ways. Perhaps it is this split—between medieval and secular—that has resulted in so much scholarly work on Augustine in particular.

Peter Harrison, "Miracles, Early Modern Science, and Rational Religion," *Church History* 75, no. 03 (2006): 496

the predecessors of the Church, establishing the medieval Roman Church as a continuation of such miracles.[77] In other words, for someone within Christendom in the 1500s, God's presence was seen at every turn: atheism would have been inconceivable since it seemed to contradict lived experience.

In other words, the Middle Ages are marked by certainty—in God and in the inherited world that God gave men. The obsession with demarcating and eliminating heresy indicates a desire for universal unanimity. Since the medieval worldview was certain, indeed unnoticed, counter-ideologies appeared to contradict fundamental tenets of existence for medieval man. Original sin, the inherited sin that would eventually require God punish mankind by ending the world, became part of official church doctrine, and the practice of infant baptism was adopted in order to counter the effects of inherited guilt on infants who oftentimes died immediately. Much debate centered around free will in particular. The official Church position alternated between semi-Pelagian and semi-Augustinian positions until the Council of Orange in 529 settled on the latter, making God's grace necessary even for the beginnings of faith. In such a world, where *independent* free will was stripped from mankind and replaced with the burden of original sin, the certainty of the eventual final judgment was not an avoidable—or even necessarily undesirable—event. As Norman Cohn argues in *The Pursuit of the*

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[77] Harrison, "Miracles," 496-7.

Millennium, throughout the Middle Ages anticipation of Christ's imminent return preoccupied—and continually disappointed—people on the margins of society, even more so in places where "there existed a surplus population, rural or urban or both." Cohn's seminal work shows that these movements were, following all apocalypses, expressions of dissatisfaction with the current order. As such, the large majority of people in medieval Christendom, poor as many were, did not hope to overthrow the monarchy or other structures that governed their lives, since these monarchs were seen as sacred.[78] Nonetheless, Millennialism, the belief that Christ would return with the millennium, did not disappear, largely defining medieval popular politics and spirituality—even though official doctrine increasingly had no place for it.[79] Especially after the millennium, when Christ failed to appear, there was an increased focus on Christ's humanity and suffering.[80] Travis Ables documents the metamorphoses of Christian views on the apocalypse throughout the Middle Ages:

> . . . first, there was the intense fear of Christ's judgment in preparation for the end of the age, which changed to contrition for his failure to appear (perhaps he had not returned because the church was not yet ready?). This took the form of a desire to share in Christ's sufferings, the better to express penitence and the better

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[78] Norman Rufus Colin Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millenium* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1957), 314.

[79] Cohn, *The Pursuit*, 14; Travis Ables, "The End of the World . . . Again? Apocalypticism in Medieval Christianity," in *Apocalypses in Context*, ed. Justin J. Schedtler and Kelly J. Murphy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, forthcoming), 9.

[80] The 431 Council of Ephesus condemned officially belief in the Millennium, which Norman Cohn points out is a logical stance for the Catholic authority to take since apocalyptic hopes tended to push for an overthrow of the current status quo (Cohn 14).

to prepare for the apocalypse (again!), which most Christians still believed was just around the corner.[81]

In brief, the Christian Middle Ages are characterized by an eschatological expectation that was not eliminated by being disappointed but instead continually transformed.[82]

Whereas nowadays we are unsure of the nature of death, the medieval Christian knew that death served as a doorway to an afterlife and that the Last Judgment would bring about this afterlife for all of mankind—although, of course, for some this afterlife would be eternal damnation.[83] Since mankind could be sure of the occurrence and cause of the apocalypse, there was no point in praying for its postponement.

Uncertainty

What has happened to this absolute certainty of God's existence—and with it, anticipation of the end of the world? In secular modernity, we have transitioned back into a culture of postponement. We are, once again, thrown into the uncertainty that made

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[81] Ables, "The End," 9; summarizing Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 1–2.

[82] Furthermore, it should be noted that the message of Christ's sacrifice—dying so that we may live— indicates an affinity between what are (nowadays) oppositional: living and dying. An apocalypse also unites these two oppositions: out of death and ruin, new life emerges.

[83] Those who expected such a fate—damnation—perhaps would have prayed for postponement, but by no means was this expectation common.

many in Late Antiquity pray for the postponement of the end.[84] The stages of this

transition are telling and provide some insight into the nature of postponement.

Blumenberg maintains that the Middle Ages' failure to overcome gnosticism with

Augustinian theodicy inevitably resulted in a return to the question of the nature of the

world and its eventual destruction. Within the certainty of medieval realism gnostic

dualism had been absorbed into an eschatological prayer for the end. But, as Blumenberg

argued, increasingly a new answer was given to the gnostic question, that of nominalism.

Nominalism's answer was that the world of things, the particulars, were not derived from

any abstract universals. In fact, nominalism to some extent returned to Augustine's use of

gnostic dualism. In Blumenberg's words, "nominalism could provide for all questions

regarding the reason and purpose of the Creation only the Augustinian *Quia voluit*

[Because God willed it]."[85] God is pushed out of the world, becoming a *deus absconditus,*

and thus the world becomes knowable, not through God, but through man. The reverse is

also true, that God is now "a hidden, radically transcendent deity who is known through

faith and revelation—not through nature."[86] Our understanding of nature, therefore,

becomes "secularized," or free of God's perceived influence. Indeed, Thomas Aquinas,

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[84] See Kiarina Kordela's *Being, Time, Bios: Capitalism and Ontology* (2013) for another "translation" of gnostic postponement in capitalist modernity. Kordela locates the postponement described by Blumenberg in the shift from sovereign power to a biopolitics that seeks to delay (in other words, repress) the inevitability of death.

[85] Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy,* 151.

[86] Stephen A. McKnight, "The Legitimacy of the Modern Age: The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate in Light of Recent Scholarship," *The Political Science Reviewer* 19 (1990): 182.

expanding upon Augustine's earlier definition of a miracle as having a subjective

element, argues that miracles act "beside the order planted in nature."[87] He thus posits a

consistent order within nature that occasionally can act otherwise—producing a miracle

in the eye of the beholder. Over time, nature would become more and more the object of

study by natural philosophers seeking to determine its rhythms. Some of these

predecessors to modern science were even those employed by the Church to determine

exceptions to the normal workings of nature.[88]

     The shift from a nature in which God is continually manifest to one that more or

less operates on its own is the difference between medieval and modern man. Taylor

holds that, whereas the Middle Ages were characterized by the "porous" self, which is

"vulnerable, to spirits, demons, cosmic forces," the modern "buffered" self "has been

taken out of the world of this kind of fear."[89] Medieval man was enmeshed in a world

inseparable from the cosmos, while the modern individual no longer inhabits a haunted

world: "the buffered self can form the ambition of disengaging from whatever is beyond

the boundary, and of giving its own autonomous order to its life. The absence of fear can

be not just enjoyed, but seen as an opportunity for self-control or self-direction."[90] Taylor,

therefore, understands the separation made between the self and the world—a world that

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[87] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3b, 100, 5 volx. Trans English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1934), 4:58.
[88] Harrison, "Miracles," 504.
[89] Taylor, *A Secular*, 38.
[90] Ibid., 38-9.

is no longer "enchanted"—that would have been impossible during the Middle Ages. His depiction of this transition likewise shows how such a "buffered" self *becomes* an individual in a way inconceivable to a medieval peasant, whose entire moral and physical being was determined by a God whose transcendence was manifested in every corner of the world. However, Taylor equates disenchantment with an absence of fear when, in fact, as I will show, the "buffered" self is as uncertain in the world as ever before.

Now that God is no longer evident, his existence for humans is predicated on a Kierkegaardian "leap" of faith.[91] In other words, no longer is belief empirically or manifestly proven; instead, faith steps in to leap from a concept of God to positing his actual existence. René Descartes' original doubt and answer to this doubt is characteristic of such a leap of faith. Descartes' solution to his doubt—to posit a conception of a perfect God as proof and, therefore, an effect of such a perfect God—is the symptomatic disavowing move of the modern age. Because there is no longer an absolute correlation between mind and body—that is, God is no longer omnipresent and self-evident— Descartes *must* make a leap from mind to body, concept to existence. In order to do so, he posits a perfect, benevolent God as the first cause of his conception of such a God (since no conception could exist without something greater than it to cause such a conception).[92]

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[91] Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).
[92] Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*, trans. F. E. Sutcliffe (London: Penguin Group, 1968), 95-131.

Descartes thus unconsciously proceeds from concept to existence, while simultaneously consciously positing this existence—God—as *a priori*. Cartesian man, the "buffered" self described by Taylor, is thus sufficient to prove entirely within himself God's existence; modern man holds a newfound power over the world.

James W. Laine's adaptation of E. Valentine Daniel's characterization of "mood" and "mind" religions uncovers yet another crucial layer of the underlying difference between medieval and secular worldviews. Laine takes Daniel's development of Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic semiological argument regarding "Firstness," "Secondness," and "Thirdness" even further in order to argue against the recent trend in scholarship claiming that so-called Eastern "religions" are not religions at all. Instead, Laine, following Daniel, contends that the difference so often noted between West and East is oftentimes more related to a difference between "mind" and "mood."[93] Daniel and Laine differentiate two types of weddings: "a Hindu wedding conducted in a culturally alien environment in which the religious elements begged an explanation and exegesis, and a wedding in South India, where similar rituals needed no explanation because they had the quality of timelessness, and were taken-for-granted and seamlessly interwoven with a whole range of cultural interactions."[94] In other words, the first type of wedding, which took place in New Jersey, when confronted by its own alien-ness, became self-aware and separated

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[93] James W. Laine, "Mind and mood in the study of religion," *Religion* 40, no. 4 (2010): 240-2.
[94] Ibid., 241.

itself from its rituals. These rituals, therefore, needed explanation beyond what was required in South India, where the rituals went almost unnoticed, enmeshed as they are in the culture of the place. Turning to the West, Laine points to the Protestant Reformation as a possible 'culprit' in what many scholars describe as the Western movement from "the older traditions, characterized by assured gesture, choreography and *mood*" to "something characterized by *mind*" . . . "intellectual, constructed, self-conscious and awkward."[95] Thus, we can find in Laine's elucidation of "mind" and "mood" religions an exact parallel to the structural distinctions between the "porous" and "buffered" selves described by Taylor. Whereas the "porous" self—enmeshed in a religion of mood—is marked by a certainty so unquestionable that it goes unnoticed, the "buffered" self has constructed a religion of mind: precisely because it is constructed, it lacks the hegemonic certainty of medieval Christianity.

    Taylor, therefore, errs in describing the "buffered" self as free of fear. Whereas he correctly holds that the medieval world was a marked by fear that manifested as an omnipresent sensation of inherited doom, he incorrectly assumes that the "disenchantment" of this world (Taylor borrows Max Weber's term) resulted in a man newly liberated from fear.[96] Fear has not disappeared; it now manifests as uncertainty. During Late Antiquity, when doctrinal battles over the nature of God and the universe

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[95] Ibid., 242.
[96] Taylor, *A Secular*, 25.

created uncertainty, there arose a desire to postpone the *parousia*. Likewise, the transition from medieval to modern, from a world presided over by a transcendent guarantor to the necessity of a leap of faith, would once again result in a desire to postpone. But what is being postponed if God is no longer self-evident and omnipresent? In other words, what, if not the Christian God, will intervene and bring about the secular apocalypse?

Postponement

If religion, at least in the West, has become self-conscious and intentional, do we no longer have a religion beyond our conscious awareness? What, in other words, is the "mood" of secular modernity? Max Weber was one of the first to connect religion and economy, although he never meant to suggest that the economy itself could be understood as a metaphysical structure.[97] Moving beyond Weber's thesis,[98] I argue that the new "mood" religion of the previously Christian-dominated world is exchange. Whereas God—as well as spirits, demons, angels, omens, and curses—inhabited every corner of medieval Christendom, buying and selling—in other words, exchange—would

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[97] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner, 1958).
[98] See H.M. Robertson's *Aspects of the Rise of Economic Individualism: A Criticism of Max Weber and His School* (1950) for a critique of Weber's emphasis on Protestantism as qualitatively different from Catholicism. Robertson shows through Aquinas that there was no essential distinction between Catholic and Protestant understandings of the "calling" in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. That no qualitative difference existed between the two religions in terms of this concept only goes to show that the true shift occurred in the economy: that is in material gain becoming an end-in-itself.

come to inhabit every nook and cranny of capitalist modernity. This new capitalist

religion would contain its own remnant from Augustine's failure to rid himself of gnostic

eschatology.

Hans Blumenberg, on the other hand, holds that the late medieval period

successfully overcame gnostic eschatological concerns. Since God was pushed out of this

world, eventually disappearing, modernity would asserts its own immanent progress:

> Regarding the dependence of the idea of progress on Christian eschatology, there
> are differences that would have had to block any transposition of the one into the
> other. It is a formal, but for that very reason a manifest, difference that an
> eschatology speaks of an event breaking into history, an event that transcends and
> is heterogeneous to it, while the idea of progress extrapolates from a structure
> present in every moment to a future that is immanent in history.[99]

While Blumenberg is correct in that eschatology always requires transcendent

intervention, he errs in two assumptions: 1) that transcendence is always an exterior

function; and 2) that the secular era has truly rid itself of transcendence. In brief,

Blumenberg views the secular era as truly immanent when, in fact, we have entered a

new stage in which transcendence resides *within* immanence. Benjamin writes, "God's

transcendence is at an end. But he is not dead; he has been incorporated into human

existence."[100] This stage is that of capitalist modernity, in which the function of God has

been replaced by value. The secular God is manifest throughout the material world in the

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[99] Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy*, 30.
[100] Walter Benjamin, "Capitalism as Religion," in Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1, ed.
Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press,
1996), 289.

space left by the old God. Instead of being universally apparent and manifest, however, the secular God is hidden. Jacques Lacan famously corrects Friedrich Nietzsche's assertion that "God is dead" to "God is unconscious."[101]

In order to understand how the economy came to encompass all aspects of life previously occupied by Christian religion in the West, it is necessary to understand capitalism as a metaphysical structure that deals accordingly with the radical split between *matter* and *spirit,* the same split that preoccupied gnostics. In capitalism, spirit becomes *value*, the metaphysical function characteristic of capitalism. Heiko Feldner and Fabio Vighi describe this turn from spirit to value:

> In *Capital,* Marx projects a social totality greater than the empirically verifiable world. The object of this representational strategy is an abstract concept which brings into view a *negative objectivity*, i.e. a mysterious set of forces and effects that we can neither see nor touch, but nonetheless know have a constitutive influence over our existence. The concept designed to perform this representational manoeuvre is "value." It designates the historically specific *form* our social being assumes in capitalism, which remains intangible while its presence is experienced existentially.[102]

Before Marx would fully elucidate his views on capitalism, he—not coincidentally—began with a critique of religion. Alberto Toscano's detailed analysis of Marx's changing

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[101] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Vintage, 1998), 59.

[102] Heiko Feldner and Fabio Vighi, "The matrix cannot be reloaded: a Lacano-Marxian perspective on the current economic crisis," in *States of Crisis and Post-Capitalist Scenarios*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 13.

For another lens on the current economic-apocalyptic crisis, see Feldner and Vighi' *Critical Theory and the Crisis of Contemporary Capitalism* (2015), which illuminates the historical causes of the most recent global economic crisis and analyzes the situation according to Lacan's critique of *connaissance* and *savoir-faire*.

views on religion complicates the typical Marxist characterization of religion as the "opium of the people."[103] While Marx holds from the beginning that religion owes its being "not to heaven but to the earth," he also acknowledges the "'social necessity of religion,'" as it "provides an inverted picture of the world *because the world itself is inverted.*"[104] Marx the materialist located the true source of religion in the world, which itself located its source in religion. He critiques thinkers such as Ludwig Feuerbach whose "work consists in resolving the religious world down to its secular basis," eventually concluding that the critique of religion serves as "a cloak for real political struggle" and, therefore, "remains within the ambit of theological reasoning."[105] As such, in order to truly change the world, the world itself has to be the target of critique.

With the further recognition of the significance of the "existing mode of production and intercourse" to the "autonomisation" of religion, Marx contends that "Christianity is . . . *a theory (or logic) of capitalism.*"[106] However, consistent with his earlier views on the insufficiency of attacking religion alone, Marx does not advocate for political emancipation from Christianity. Instead, he holds political emancipation and

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[103] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 53-4; As has been pointed out by many scholars, Marx himself used opium for chronic pain and, therefore, is better understood to mean that religion is a great comfort—not an abused substance to which people are addicted.

[104] Alberto Toscano, "Beyond Abstraction: Marx and the Critique of the Critique of Religion," *Historical Materialism* 18, no. 1 (2010): 8.

[105] Ibid., 10.

[106] Ibid., 13, 14, 16.

human emancipation as entirely distinct. Counterintuitively, in a secular state, religion gains new life: on the one hand, "religion continues to be practised in private"—here, we can see a parallel to religion of mind described by Laine—and on the other hand, "the state maintains religious *form* by embodying the alienated freedom of man in something external to him."[107] Marx's final step, as best exemplified in *Capital,* is to extend the "affinity between seemingly secular and theological phenomena" to the economy. This correlation stems from his understanding of commodities as "'suprasensible or social" things which turn "'the social relation between men" into "a relation between things." Marx thus eventually grasps the "autonomy" of this "'religion of everyday life'"—the true religion of mood—in which men are dominated by abstractions, which themselves arose from the "social relations" of capitalist production.[108]

The domination of abstractions in human social relations, which Marx called commodity fetishism, is a result of the appearance of commodities as independent holders of value.[109] Producers and consumers alike see the commodity's value as arising

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[107] Ibid., 23.
[108] Ibid., 25.
[109] As William D. Hart has shown in his essay "Secular Coloniality: The Afterlife of Religious and Racial Tropes," Marx's use of the word "fetishism" to describe the mystification of social relations involved in commodity production comes from a colonial discourse that characterized African religions as "perverse superstitions" (18). By using the language of fetishism to describe the religious nature of commodity production, Marx joins a colonial and racist discourse from which "notions are carried over, unconsciously and uncritically, into secular discourse" (4). As Hart further points out, by divorcing Marx's *description* of commodity fetishism from the word "fetish" and thus the implication of a "pre-logical atavism," we are able to more accurately describe the domination of abstractions in capitalist society as a "necessary mode of human perception" (19). In other words, mystification is inherent to the capitalist subject; William D.

from various qualities of the materiality of the object, or use-value. Marx's analysis, however, demonstrates that the actual force that creates and determines value is labor time, which equalizes all particular skills into one abstract human labor. This labor time takes the form of the exchange-value, the only value that matters in the relations between producers. Since producers only interact to exchange commodities, their interactions take on the form of social relations between commodities, while their own relations become purely material.[110] Thus, "to them [the producers of commodities], their own social action takes the form of the action of objects, which rule the producers instead of being ruled by them."[111] In other words, the true determinant in the capitalist market is value—and yet crucial to its accumulation is the illusion that *we* control the market.

Characteristic of capitalist exchange is what Aristotle called *chrematistics*, which involves accruing money for money's sake. This form of exchange occurs in the form M-C-M', in which money is exchanged for a commodity, which is then exchanged for more money; in other words, money becomes more than itself.[112] While *oikonomia*[113]

Hart, "Secular Coloniality: The Afterlife of Religious and Racial Tropes," in *Race and Secularism in America,* ed. Jonathan Kahn, Vincent Lloyd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

[110] "The equality of all sorts of human labour is expressed objectively by their products all being equally values; the measure of the expenditure of labour power by the duration of that expenditure, takes the form of the quantity of value of the products of labour; and finally the mutual relations of the producers, within which the social character of their labour affirms itself, take the form of a social relation between the products." Karl Marx and Ernest Mandel, *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1992, 164.

[111] Ibid., 323.

[112] "But in buying in order to sell . . . the end and the beginning are the same, money or exchange-value and this very fact makes the movement an endless one." Ibid., 252.

necessarily must come to an end when the commodity is used up by the consumer, *chrematistics* has no immediately apparent end. Thus, M-C-M' allows for the limitless accumulation of wealth, or surplus-value. However, Marx argues that "the [increase] in value of the money . . . cannot take place in the money itself," since the amount of money is limited by the specific use-value of a particular commodity.[114] Neither can it occur in the exchange-value of a commodity, which is already equivalent to the money form. In order to explain the unbounded increase of value inherent to M-C-M', Marx locates the source of this change in the one "commodity whose use-value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value, whose actual consumption is . . . a creation of value": that is, labor-power.[115] However, man has *always* labored, and yet surplus-value has not always been a byproduct of the labor-power; what, therefore, has changed in the shift from feudalism to capitalism?

In the feudal economy, the serf does not own his labor-power, so he cannot sell it as the 'free' laborer can. Marx writes: "Labor-power can appear on the market as a commodity only if, and in so far as, its possessor, the individual whose labor-power it is, offers it up for sale or sells it as a commodity. In order that its possessor may sell it as a

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[113] Marx holds that prior to capitalism, exchange occurred according to the formula C-M-C: that is, a commodity is exchanged for money, which, is then exchanged for another commodity. The formula ends here, as this second commodity is used up by the buyer. Aristotle called this form of exchange *oikonomia*, the simple management of household.
[114] Ibid., 270.
[115] Ibid., 170.

commodity, he must have it at his disposal, he must be the free proprietor of his own labor-capacity, hence of his person."[116] Marx's understanding of freedom, then, is that it is a limited one: "[F]ree in the double sense, that as a free man he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that on the other hand he has no other commodity for sale, is short of everything necessary for the realisation of his labour-power."[117] The checked freedom of the laborer hearkens back to man's freedom as defined by Augustine. Rist summarizes Augustine's position on man after the fall as "free from virtues and free to do evil."[118] In other words, man is free of freedom and instead is endowed with free choice (*liberum arbitrium*), but within this limited freedom, man can only tend toward evil unless aided by God. Kojin Karatani reformulates and expands Marx's understanding of the free laborer to all capitalist subjects in order to argue that, in fact, all capitalist subjects sacrifice themselves for surplus-value: alternating endlessly between the position of the (un)free laborer and the (apparently) liberated money owner.[119]

In other words, the capitalist continually enters into exchange (M-C-M'), which involves taking both selling (C-M) and buying (M-C) positions in order to contribute to

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[116] Ibid., 271.
[117] Ibid., 272-3.
[118] Rist, "Augustine," 223.
[119] Kōjin Karatani, *Architecture As Metaphor: Language, Number, Money*, ed. Michael Speaks. trans. Sabu Kohso (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 174.

the "ceaseless augmentation of value."[120] Crucially, the position of selling is the position

from which all one can do is sell; this is the position of the (un)free laborer. On the other

hand, the position of buying—which is really the moment immediately preceding

buying—is the position from which one has the "freedom" to exchange for any

commodity, which, as we know, is a category that increasingly runs the gamut of

possibilities: from goods to services to experience. The miser, as Karatani points out, is

the (unproductive) capitalist caught up by what Karatani calls the "fetishism of money"

inherent to the buying position.[121] Money, the universal equivalent, has taken on the

character of something worth collecting for its own sake. The miser is overtaken by the

ability to "[own] 'social privilege,' by means of which one can exchange anything,

anytime, anywhere . . . A miser (money hoarder) is a person who gives up the actual use

value in exchange for this 'right.'"[122] This compulsive accrual and saving of money—for

its own sake—is indeed a form of "religious fanaticism" in that "what truly informs the

motives of the miser is a *religious* problematic."[123] Given the freedom to buy or sell, the

miser will always prefer to avoid the moment when buying cedes to selling—when

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[120] Marx, *Capital*, 255.

[121] We can see here that Karatani is following Marx's use of the word, "fetishism" and thus unintentionally falling into the same racist colonial discourse Marx did. As Hart points out, secular discourse gives colonial stereotypes and "tropes" "a second life, an expanded and endlessly productive life" (Hart, "Secular Coloniality," 24). Marx's use of the fetish gave Karatani and countless others (including myself) the ability to use the word with impunity, divorced as it now seems to be from its original colonial context. A first step is to show that no concept is without history.

[122] Karatani, *Architecture*, 173.

[123] Ibid., 172-3.

money passes from one side to the other. We can understand the motor of capital,

therefore, as run by this fetishism of money, which motivates the accumulation of money

for its own sake, and the "rational" capitalist dictate to sell (C-M) that results in the

perpetuation of the cycle M-C-M' (or "M+ΔM"), endlessly producing surplus-value.[124]

Caught in a structure that favors buying but requires selling, a more universally

practiced form of postponement has arisen: credit. Credit is nothing other than a

simultaneous creation of debt and delay of its payment. The buyer remains in possession

of—or possessed by—the money and thus accumulates a debt. Karatani elaborates on the

function of credit: "[C]redit takes the form of exchange where, though the actual payment

is temporarily suspended, the counterbalancing/settling of accounts will occur later. Of

course a bank note (or a check) is credit, and, for that matter, money is itself already a

kind of credit."[125] Credit is, therefore, the "postponement" of the moment when money

must be ceded *and* the simultaneous creation of a compulsory component in exchange:

the payment of debt. And indeed, as Karatani notes, money already carries this

compulsory power to continue the process of exchange. Credit, in particular, is what

allows capitalists to "begin new investments without having to wait for the outcome of

the cycle M-C-M."[126] Karatani turns to Kierkegaard's description of the "leap of faith"

necessary to acknowledge Christ, appearing "in all his 'lowliness,'" as God: "there is no

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[124] Ibid., 174.
[125] Ibid., 177.
[126] Ibid., 178.

ground that we can appeal to in order to acknowledge Christ as God," just as there is no ground we can appeal to in the endless accumulation of money.[127] Credit, by definition, requires a "leap." In other words, credit simultaneously perpetuates the growth of capital through postponement and ensures its own lack of foundation.

It is in the transition to an economic structure built on credit qua postponement that the nature of our current apocalyptic crisis changed. The impending payment of debt is, in the properly apocalyptic fashion, twofold: 1) the moment of realizing that nothing backs the credit system upon which we had relied for our growth; and 2) the moment when, looking at last to the lack of ground below, we fall.

Augustine ensured that gnostic eschatology would last by imparting to medieval man the guilt of original sin. Today, we all carry the modern equivalent—debt— perpetually postponed by the very mechanism that created it. Instead of praying for the end of the world and the return of Christ, as did medieval man, we continue to fuel the motor of capital in the hopes of perpetually postponing the apocalypse. We have forgotten that the Roman Empire did indeed fall; indeed, this forgetting is formative of capitalism's perpetual growth. However, whether in the near, far, or indefinitely postponed future, capitalism is, in Jacques Lacan's words, "headed for a blowout."[128]

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[127] Kierkegaard, *Practice,* 36; as cited in Karatani, *Architecture*, 182.
[128] Jacques Lacan, "Du Discours Psychanalytique," Lecture given in Milan, May 12, 1972, in *Lacan en Italie, 1953-1978* (Milan: La Salamandra), 10. ["On Psychoanalytic Discourse," trans. Jack W. Stone].

Conclusion

In his mysterious posthumously published essay, "Capitalism as Religion" (1921), Walter

Benjamin describes with remarkable insight (and foresight) the structure to which we are

all unsuspecting devotees today. Benjamin was aware of the religiosity of the economy

far beyond what Max Weber had ever meant to suggest. The religious nature of

capitalism was threefold for Benjamin: 1) it is cultic in that it lacks theology or dogma

and gives significance to things only "in their relationship to the cult"; 2) it is permanent

in that there are no "weekdays," or breaks, from the cult; and 3) it "makes guilt

pervasive."[129] It is on this last characteristic that Benjamin most focuses—notably using

the German word *Schuld* for both guilt and debt. Benjamin continues:

> The nature of the religious movement which is capitalism entails endurance right
> to the end, to the point where God, too, finally takes on the entire burden of guilt,
> to the point where the universe has been taken over by that despair which is
> actually its secret *hope* . . . It is the expansion of despair, until despair becomes a
> religious state of the world in the hope that this will lead to salvation.[130]

The gnostic *apokálpysis* that would end the world through *gnosis*, or knowledge of the

world's fundamental deficiency, thus persisted into secular capitalist modernity through

the economy, in which spirit became value. Apocalyptic anticipation has arisen

throughout history by those who are most dissatisfied, indicating their wish for renewal,

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[129] Benjamin, "Capitalism," 288.
[130] Ibid., 289.

for an awakening to the failure of the current model. Capitalism, founded on a descendant of the metaphysical split between matter and spirit—or value—projects a ground it may never have had. The despair of which Benjamin speaks is none other than apocalyptic knowledge of the groundlessness of our religion of everyday life. The modern condition is both anticipation and delay, apocalyptic hope for a new world and dread of the inevitable crisis built into the unparalleled growth of capital. Credit "entails endurance right to the end"—although deferral is not permanent it remains oblivious to the judgment it brings upon itself.

Indeed, unlike the Old Testament Abraham, Kafka does not move on from setting his house in order to the immediate slaughter of his son—which, crucially, is halted by an angel of God. Kafka, a victim of modernity, postpones and thus spells his own doom. The modern subject's eschatological postponement amounts to the necessity of an eventual judgment. Despite our best efforts, God will not provide a sacrificial ram to slaughter in our own son's stead. Following Slavoj Žižek's example, the inevitable end of our current crisis of capital is much like the fate of Wile E Coyote chasing the Road Runner. His eyes fixed solely on the goal—Road Runner—Wile E Coyote runs off the cliff, but doesn't fall until he at last looks down and notices that the ground is no longer there.[131] We did not

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[131] Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 351.

slow down as we approached the cliff, running blissfully forward until there was nothing

but air beneath us. The moment of *gnosis* is the moment we fall.

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