BECOMING-BUDDHIST, BECOMING-JEWISH, AND BECOMING-CATHOLIC: SPIRITUALITY AS DIVINE MADNESS

Thomas A. James

TEMPLE TRACTS

Becoming-Buddhist, Becoming-Jewish, and Becoming-Catholic: Spirituality as Divine Madness

Thomas A. James

Issue 1, Volume 5

Shelf Reference: Book 20

Author

Thomas James is pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Southfield, Michigan. Previously, he was on the theology faculty at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. Publications include *In Face of Reality: The Constructive Theology of Gordon D. Kaufman* (Wipf and Stock, 2011), and, with Chris Baker and John Reader, *A Philosophy of Christian Materialism: Entangled Fidelities and the Public Good* (Ashgate, 2015).

Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction

Not so long ago, seven percent of Americans described themselves as "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR), way more than the number of those who described themselves as Jews, Muslims, or Episcopalians.[1] And by all accounts the number is still rising. The rise of the SBNRs has provoked intense debates among scholars of religion and among religious practitioners. United Church of Christ pastor and blogger Lillian Daniel, in a 2011 Huffington Post essay that went viral and lead to the publication of a popular book entitled *When 'Spiritual But Not Religious' is Not Enough* (2013), struck a chord among the affiliated when she wrote:

> On airplanes, I dread the conversation with the person who finds out I am a minister and wants to use the flight time to explain to me that he is 'spiritual but not religious.' Such a person will always share this as if it is some kind of daring insight, unique to him, bold in its rebellion against the religious status quo. Before you know it, he's telling me that he finds God in the sunsets. These people always find God in the sunsets. And

[1] Mark Oppenheimer, "Examining the Growth of the 'Spiritual but not Religious, *The New York Times*, July 18, 2014. www.nytimes.com/2014/07/19/us/examining-the-growth-of-the-spiritual-but-not-religious.html?_ r=0

> in walks on the beach.[2]

If Daniel's contempt is not obvious, she goes on to write that she has "no interest" in an orientation that simply endorses the most extreme features of American individualism:

> There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff or, heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.[3]

Empirical research, however, does not entirely support this characterisation of the "spiritual but not religious" demographic. Linda Mercadante, in her 2014 book, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious*, finds from a large number of in-depth interviews with self-identified SBNRs that many of them have had frequent involvement with religious communities of various kinds, moving in and out of religious participation as felt need and interest dictate.[4] Mercadante also finds that, while many SBNRs have what would have to be called idiosyncratic beliefs, there is almost unanimity on certain core beliefs across an SBNR spectrum which includes many different styles of participation and attitudes toward traditional religions, as well as four distinct generational cohorts (Silents, Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials). Among these shared core beliefs is a rejection of what Mercadante calls the "theistic package", beliefs centred on a personal transcendent being that governs, judges, and redeems the world.[5] For SBNRs, the transcendent God is rejected for a number of reasons: its perceived authoritarianism, its traditional link

[2]Lillian Daniel, "Spiritual But Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me," *Huffington Post*, September 13, 2011. www.huffingtonpost.com/lillian-daniel/spiritual-but-not-religio_ b_ 959216.html

[3]Ibid.

[4]Linda A. Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 163.

[5]Ibid., 92.

with exclusive masculinity, and its problematic relationship with a naturalistic view of the world, for example. And with this rejected notion of divine transcendence there tends to be packaged the notion that there is something fundamentally wrong with human beings that needs to be addressed and corrected. As an alternative to this theistic package, the divine is seen as immanent within the world, and human beings are seen as inherently good, and often they are seen as complete just as they are.[6] Mercadante shows over several chapters, with lots of citations and lengthy quotations, that there is a coherent logic that connects these rejections as well as the alternative affirmations SBNRs make.

The interesting implication of Mercadante's work is her finding that there is something of a theological "there" among SBNRs, and she laments that very little attention has been paid to it.[7] So, in this essay, I want to ask what is going on in SBNR at the theological level: not just detailing claims made by SBNRs, but theologically interpreting the SBNR experience. Using Mercadante's work as well as my own ruminations on transgressive spiritualties—that is, spiritualties that do not confine themselves to particular religious traditions—I will offer an account of that which, within persons and communities, compels a breaking free from the boundaries of traditions and institutions. Such an interpretation is potentially important because it amounts to a re-mapping of the plane or the field on which these orientations, the "religious" and the "spiritual", engage each other. If we think of these categories as markers of community orientation in the one case and individualism in the other, we will likely see a deficiency or lack in SBNR, as Lillian Daniel does. It will signify a shallow insistence on being self-made persons, failing to appreciate and appropriate the value of formation in the context of a community, that is, of being shaped by "something you did not invent for yourself". I do think these denunciations have a point, but I am convinced that there is something deeper going on as well, something

[6] Ibid., 137.
[7] Ibid., 7.

that resonates with larger, more pervasive realities than simple individual preference.

So, drawing on the collaborative work of philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari, I will characterise adherence to a religion as the habitation of a "territory" (etymologically, "religion" or *religio* means something like "adherence") and the SBNR phenomenon as comprised of multiple vectors of "deterritorialisation", or lines of flight away from adherence which are not indeterminate but are rather in each case a determinate and concrete "becoming-other".[8] As we will see, it is not simply a matter of "inventing" a spirituality all by oneself (as Daniel has it), but of recognising in oneself a multiplicity of desires and tendencies which cannot be housed entirely in one institutional framework—or, indeed, in one self. This internal multiplicity tunes itself or resonates with multiple traditions and beliefs, so that spirituality aims at shifting assemblages of practices and ideas drawn from a variety of sources rather than self-contained or bounded forms or formations of practice and belief.

Behind this re-mapping lies a broader thesis about Western culture. It is that the rise of the SBNRs is not simply an articulation of American individualism but is, in fact, an expression of a theological event in the West to which many both inside and outside of religious institutions are attuning themselves. It is not a punctiliar event that we can mark on a calendar and safely pass by. Indeed, we are in the middle of it, and have been for two hundred years or more. The event I am referring to is what Nietzsche and many others following him have called the "death of God", meaning not the end of belief in the divine but the diminishing influence of what Mercadante calls the "theistic package", the erosion of adherence to a singular transcendent anchor or ground or canopy (all vertical metaphors) that can unify and order all forms of spiritual experience. Borrowing language from recent continental philosophy, it

[8]The concepts of territorialisation and deterritorialisation are developed most fully in Deleuze and Guatarri, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1977), 240ff.

is the death of "ontotheology" as a presumption that all reality can be understood in terms of a singular point of reference. It is this singular point of reference that engenders and supports exclusive loyalty to bounded territories: one God, one self, one empire. From the point of view of adherence to this transcendent point, lines of flight cannot help but appear "faithless", or perhaps "individualist".

But as this point collapses into what Deleuze and Guattari called a "plane of immanence", and the vertical is exchanged for the horizontal, faithful, sedentary existence within a boundary tends to be traded for nomadic wandering across a smooth, unstriated and unbounded surface.[9] This spiritual nomadism, in other words, is an expression of the collapse of transcendence into immanence, and therefore indicates something about a culture that is living through the death of God.

But that is not all. As Mark C. Taylor has pointed out, the death of God means also the death of the self, or of the Western subject as a coherent locus of identity, as well as of sustainable normative judgments of value and meaning.[10] The spreading out of one's identity across a smooth, unstriated surface is a loss of the bounded and boundaried self. The end result, if this line of flight is not arrested, is what Deleuze and Guattari designate as "schizophrenia", a madness that expresses the "molecular" condition of all of us (since all of us are composed of these multiplicities) but that becomes clinical when larger-scale ("molar") formations like persons and communities are not acknowledged. Since the body is itself a molar formation, the end result of unarrested deterritorialisation is death.

So, my thesis is two-fold. First, there is an ontological grounding of SBNR, so that the latter expresses a reality that is not reducible to a shallow narcissism: it is attuned to something larger. But, second, no one can be exclusively and exhaus-

[9] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 35ff.

[10] Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 127.

tively "spiritual but not religious". In other words, SBNRs, those who embody a purely spiritual trajectory and eschew all forms of territorialisation, strictly speaking, do not exist. As self-identification is sought, as lines of flight are halted and madness and dissolution are translated into pragmatic good sense and sustainable forms of life, what often happens instead is a reterritorialisation of these disruptive or transgressive forces on a particular figure of the Western liberal subject, the consumer. So, on the one hand, there are movements of deterritorialisation, and on the other hand there is quite often a reterritorialisation of those forces on a particular figure of subjectivity, one that serves a broader global system of production and distribution. Religious traditions are dissolved and re-formed to suit the needs of consumer-oriented capitalism—they are deterritorialised and de-formed so that the force of traditional (and "traditionalistic" in the Weberian sense[11]) formations is dissolved (notions of the common good, for example) and reterritorialised or re-formed as exchangeable modes of consumption.

To see how any of this works, of course, requires that we consider particular examples.

[11]For Max Weber's conception of "traditionalistic" economic practices, see *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, ed. Hans H. Gerth (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1968). For his famous contrast between traditionalistic and rationalistic economic practices see *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology, Vol. I*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 583-589.

Chapter 2

Phenomena of becoming-other

In Yann Martel's novel *The Life of Pi* a fourteen-year-old Pi Patel, who lives in Pondicherry, India, explores and falls in love with three religions almost at the same time: his "native" Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. Each of them, he finds, offers irreducibly distinct insight and experience of the divine. His parents, not to mention the priest and the imam he comes to know in his curiosity, are confounded by his insistence on adhering to all three faiths. Especially in the case of Islam and Christianity, each faith insists on exclusive adherence, so that it is hard to maintain that one has fully grasped the claims of any of them if all of them are embraced.

From one standpoint, Pi's experience could be understood in terms of a child-like naïveté, the product of a God-intoxicated young heart and mind that cannot comprehend or appreciate the subtleties of each of the three traditions. But what is interesting is the disconcerting effect this naïveté has on Pi's adult critics, and to some degree on the reader. If Pi is unsophisticated, as the naïve interpretation would have it, he is surely unable to discern or derive a common or universal feature of the three faiths so as to reconcile them. So, what he does is quite simply embrace them all, as they are, untranslated and unreduced to their least common denominator.

How could this be, when they are so different? And he doesn't encounter them all at once, exactly: rather, his encounters are distributed across a narrative in which his identity and self-understanding shift. Each time he discovers for himself a new faith, he undergoes something of a "conversion", as if he is coming to the truth about God for the first time. But of course, the conversion is not complete because it does not compel him to renounce or even to distance himself from the other faiths he has encountered previously. From the point of view of his adult critics, Pi's journey is disconcerting and frustrating because it appears not to be moored—it seems to flit from one religious territory to another. It is boundary-less, and thus in a sense appears "mad". His parents only hope that he will outgrow it, settling on one or the other of them, or perhaps (even better) none of them.

What I want to suggest is that Pi gives us a picture of a spirituality that is constituted as a perpetual becoming-other. His journey is a not one that is marked by definite points, characterised by a sedentary home and by staging posts along a definite pathway toward a definite destiny (that is, by a beginning, middle, and end). Rather, it is a series of vectors or lines of flight, of becoming-Christian, and becoming-Muslim, and then becoming-Hindu. None of these becomings are ever completed, and none envelops his whole person or his whole self. It is as if his religious experience is composed by multiple becomings that do not coalesce into a single enduring pattern and are not resolved by an ordering that puts each in an assigned place. It is not so much a matter of transcending plurality or of grounding it in something more fundamental (that is, a God beyond or a common human experience), but of living it, precisely as plural, ungrounded and fully immanent to the multiplicity of practices he takes up.

The example of Pi is fictional, of course, but the naïve kind of madness it articulates offers a way of construing what is going on in some notable real-life examples. We can begin by making some general remarks about the glitzy ones: celebrities

embracing aspects of religious traditions without ever making them their abiding "home"—in other words, without "converting". Back in 2004, Madonna, and many other celebrities, were actively embracing the Kabbalah tradition of Jewish mysticism. We learned then that there is an element of exploitation involved in the marketing of Kabbalah and perhaps in its selective adoption. But the re-mapping of the concepts of religion and spirituality I am undertaking here suggests that one need not "convert" to Judaism in order to be characterised in part by a becoming-Jewish, nor (to take another example) need one officially "take refuge" in the Buddha in order to be composed in part by a becoming-Buddhist when one takes up Zen meditation practices. Indeed, conversion would actually curtail the becoming-other in each case. In each of them, it is not a matter of establishing a new religious identity that endures across time and that is characterised by sedentary points within a territory, but of a vector that transgresses boundaries and eludes settled points. Becoming-other is always partial, mobilising what Deleuze and Guattari call pre-individual, molecular desires rather than molar identities, and never establishes a settled destiny. A becoming-Jewish doesn't result in Judaism, and a becoming-Buddhist does not make one a Buddhist.

But of course, this intensifies the question about exploitation. Deleuze and Guattari, it should be noted, characterise becoming-other as minoritarian by nature.[1] It is a matter of lines of flight from an established territory with its striations or orderings that establish dominance—that grid and arrange space according to a majoritarian centre. Majority and minority are not functions of raw numbers, but of relationships between the centre and its peripheries. So, in a predominately Christian culture, religious becoming-other is always a becoming-Jewish, or a becoming-Buddhist, or in a Protestant culture, a becoming-Catholic. It is always in this sense heretical, constituting a line of flight away from the established territory and its normativity.

[1] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1987), 232.

But, again, is this exploitation? Or, might it be characterised as a kind of solidarity? Is it an appropriation of the other—one might say expropriation—mining peripheral traditions for useful materials to be used under the supervision of the majoritarian centre? Or is it a matter of taking up the perspective and cause of the other, even if in partial and unsettled ways? What I will suggest at this point is that the question is undecidable in terms of pure becoming-other. Later, we will add to our conceptual repertoire in order to establish some criteria for discernment.

In the meantime, it might help clarify the import of the concepts we have introduced so far to note that Deleuze and Guattari do not use their categories to map religious practice, like I am doing, but rather to trace the fluidity of *political* identity. Key examples in their work that are, in fact, more than arbitrary examples are "becoming-woman" and "becoming-animal".[2] In each case it is a matter of a minoritarian movement: a becoming-minor, a line of flight away from a majoritarian or normative centre toward periphery that has no settled place. Women and non-human animals, for Deleuze and Guattari, represent the periphery of normative human community that are nevertheless always tantalisingly present. The vectors of becoming-woman and becoming-animal cross and disrupt the identity of the human community as normatively male and non-animal (that is, as severed or excluded from animality). One could also include other minoritarian vectors: becoming-black or perhaps becoming-African or becoming–Latino.

A culture is characterised by multiple becomings that resonate in, among, and within individuals. There are specific and determinate though non-destinal lines of flight that cross our molar identities; there are nomadic trajectories that complicate our settled senses of self. This may become exploitative (for example, a becoming-native in the form of tomahawk chops and of a recalcitrant Redskin nation). But the

[2]Ibid., 238-9. See also Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 67ff.

movement itself is fundamentally an unsettling of the stability of the centre, and thus expresses a fundamental opening onto solidarity that is physical and even cosmic. Later, we will see that the difference between exploitation and solidarity has much to do with whether becoming-other is reterritorialised on the figure of the consumer.

But what does this transgressive and minoritarian movement have to do with SBNRs? Mercadante's research indicates that much of the non-religiosity of the SBNRs is influenced by contact with non-Western traditions of one or more types.[3] These encounters relativise what they see as authoritarian claims on the part of Western religious traditions (and, by extension, of all religious traditions), but they also seem to stimulate interest in the various ideas and practices embedded in a variety of religions, including Western ones. Mercadante reports that many of her interviewees have felt that they need some kind of spiritual "home"— they have sought to undergo a definitive conversion—but that they ultimate fail in being able to follow through with it over the long term.[4] So, it is not necessarily a lack of engagement as it is what we might call a kind of promiscuity that is easily tantalised but not able to sustain commitment.[5] In the context of North American, post-Christian culture, this phenomenon appears to exemplify a transgressivity and becoming-minor that does not reach a settled destination. Indeed, its central feature appears not to be either where it is coming from or where it may (or may not) be going, but the trajectory or movement itself.

Before moving on to the next section, I will consider an extended example, in a way a real-life Pi: the Catholic theologian Paul Knitter. Knitter, unlike Pi, is no dilettante in religion: he was educated at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome and

[3]Mercadante, 85.

[4]Ibid., 63-67.

[5]Mercadante does not herself use this sexual metaphor, but I think it is a useful one if we do not moralise it too much. Indeed, there is a theologically if not morally positive meaning to promiscuity in some quarters which are not too far removed from the concerns of SBNRs. See, for example, Laurel Schneider's account of Christ's "promiscuous incarnation" in *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (New York, NY: Routledge Press, 2008), 1-3.

at the University of Marburg, studying under Bernard Lonergan. Throughout his career he has been an interpreter of religious pluralism, and this has led him into concrete engagements with other religious traditions. In his book, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian*, Knitter frames his engagement with Buddhism using a conceptual distinction drawn from the work of Notre Dame theologian John Dunne. Dunne writes:

> The holy man or woman of our time is [...] a figure like Gandhi, a man who passes over by sympathetic understanding from his own religion to other religions, and comes back again with new insight to his own [...] Passing over and coming back, it seems, is the spiritual adventure of our time.[6]

The distinction is between moments of a two-fold movement that describes Knitter's own sense of his spiritual journey: passing over and coming back (or "passing back"). He reports two interesting things that have happened in the course of this career: first, he has found that he is troubled by a number of key features of his own tradition. He writes about God, the afterlife, Christology, and prayer, detailing some of his problems, which we will not delve into here. But the second thing that has happened is that, in the course of his study of other religious traditions, he finds in Buddhist teaching some hints at a very different kind of wisdom that offers the prospect of thinking about these issues in fresh new ways.[7] So, over the course of years, he begins to explore Buddhist thought and practice. He does so whilst attempting to maintain a delicate balance: on the one hand, he is exploring Buddhism from the standpoint of a dissatisfied Christian, seeking in its wisdom something that can help him deal with definite puzzles and problems that are rooted not in Buddhism but

[6]Quoted in Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian* (Croydon, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2013), 217.

[7]This is a pattern that shapes the main chapters of the book. For a striking example dealing with the problem of transcendence, see ibid., 3-9.

in Christianity. On the other hand, he is seeking to understand Buddhism on its own terms, aware of the pitfalls of trying to expropriate features of a culture or a tradition for purposes that are alien to it. So, he really tries to "pass over" into Buddhism rather than simply to visit it in a touristic manner or to plunder it in an imperialist way. And then he "passes back" to Christianity with new insight gained from his immersion into Buddhist thinking and practice.

It is an interesting question as to why Knitter bothers to pass back. If Buddhism can help resolve some of the most puzzling and troubling features of his Christian faith, why not simply convert? And the answer turns out to be simple: there is much about Christian faith that he continues to find compelling, things that are not in Buddhism at all. Often in the book, these features have to do with justice-seeking and with Jesus' preferential option for the poor.[8] In any case, it is clear that Knitter is not interested in converting. He doesn't try to weigh the merits and assess the blind spots of both traditions and then choose one over the other. Both traditions speak to and engage him, albeit in very different ways. We might say that Knitter's spiritual life is mobilised by a plurality of desires (to be very crude and inexact, desires for Buddhist peace and for Catholic justice) that cannot be grounded or territorialised in terms of a single, bounded religious space. His life is crossed by multiple vectors of spiritual desire. These vectors are deterritorialising in the sense that they represent a becoming-other with respect to the majoritarian tradition or territory that cannot contain them—a becoming-Buddhist, for example, that does not (necessarily) result in converting to Buddhism as a form of adherence (that is, a religion).

But, given this multiple engagement and this multiplicity of spiritual desire, is there a spiritual home? Is there a proper noun which identifies Paul Knitter's religious belonging? Through most of the book, there appears to be. Indeed, the language of

[8] Ibid., 226-227.

"passing over" and "passing back", though fraught with dangers to identity, clearly still expresses it. There is a "back" to pass into at the end of the day, a home, a form of adherence that grounds or territorialises all of the passing back and forth, codes them all as somehow belonging within the provenance of a kind of Christianity. Here is a Christian who is seeking to learn from Buddhism about how he might become better at being Christian.

But something happened to Paul Knitter as he was finishing up his *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian*, something that actually seems to undermine the confident, if dangerous, language of "passing over" and "passing back". At the conclusion of the last chapter, Knitter reports that in 2008 he "took refuge" in the Buddha and said the "Bodhisattva vows" that are part of the Dzogchen Buddhist community in the United States.[9] Now, after having taken refuge in the Buddha, which identity comes first? Throughout the book he has been claiming to be a sort of Buddhist Christian, a Christian whose faith has been modified by his engagement with Buddhism. But now he is simultaneously, and with no priority or hierarchy ordering his multiple belongings, a Christian Buddhist. In Father Dunne's terms, Knitter's multiple engagement has really become a spiritual adventure, because there is no longer a single home to "pass back" to. His journey has ceased to be a pilgrimage between settled points and has taken on the character of nomadism.

Knitter's description of what this looks like in practice deserves to be quoted at length:

> *I can't keep them apart.* It's not that they are blurring into each other and becoming just one practice. No, they remain clearly distinct. But [...] I have not been able to honor their distinct identities by practicing them [...] separately [...] Rather, for me, when I'm at Mass, it's with

[9] Ibid., 216.

> Buddhist ears that I hear the words of the Scripture readings or the sermon (though I usually resort to Zen mindfulness of my breath during many sermons). I feel the powerful symbols of the Eucharistic liturgy with Buddhist sensitivity. I'm constantly translating Christian into Buddhist and Buddhist into Christian but in what feels like a natural flow back and forth, like a conversation. On the meditation cushion, whether daily by myself or during a retreat [...] the same conversation goes on.[10]

What I suggest is that Knitter has broached a new conceptuality that expresses the becoming-other that has been crossing and de-forming his identity all along. "Flow" is another word for vector that is not defined by destination: flow occurs across smooth, unstriated space. It is inherently nomadic rather than sedentary. By contrast, the language of passing over and passing back that Knitter uses throughout the book is territorial language, the language of adherence: sedentary, bounded and striated. And what we find is that such territorial language does not fully account for what happens to him. Instead, he seems to be crossed by an irreducible plurality of vectors, becomings, that are not grounded by a stable home or oriented by a settled destiny. Again, instead of a pilgrimage, we have a nomadic wandering.

Of course, this is a bit of an exaggeration. We should note that there are in fact limitations or constraints on Knitter's nomadism. In fact, this is not a pure wandering across an altogether smooth space. As we will see in the third section of this paper, an unimpeded flow would mean that molar formations or assemblages (like selves) are either not formed or they are dissolved. Pure deterritorialisation would mean death. As a first approximation, then, what we could say is that we have an open-ended interaction between specifically Christian and Buddhist desires. To be a little more precise, we need to get clearer about some of the concepts that we are using. I will argue, in the end, that in effect what we have in Knitter is an interac-

[10] Ibid., 219. Italics original.

tion of two traditions that have both a “religious” and a “spiritual” relation to each other. Each, in other words, functions in a dual way: as a line of flight away from an established religious practice or adherence, and as reterritorialisation, an arrest, of the line of flight embodied in the other. But first, a more detailed look at the notions of territory and deterritorialisation.

Chapter 3

Re-mapping religion and spirituality

Though it is not entirely accurate, I am identifying religion as adherence or fidelity to some kind of transcendence. This definition is not accurate because it is much too oriented by Abrahamic examples of religion. But it works for my purposes because I am trying to talk about an event within religions in the West. The point I want to emphasise is that religion as fidelity to transcendence is inherently sedentary. To grasp this point, we have to distinguish "sedentary" from "static". Fidelity to transcendence is anything but static: indeed, the founding myths of Abrahamic religions always involve some form of pilgrimage or itineracy, and this founding journey is re-iterated in calls to the faithful to engage in spiritual, moral, or even geographical pilgrimages. But the journey of religion is sedentary in an important sense: it is defined by settled points through which movement passes. Movement is understood and organised, therefore, not in terms of its own internal dynamism but in terms of its fixed origin and destination. This is possible because the territory in which religious pilgrims journey is already gridded or striated. It is the striation of religious space which defines points, much like x and y axes define points in Euclidean geom-

etry.[1] The pilgrim journeys, but the journey is one that is defined, laid out, perhaps unknown to the pilgrim but known and determined by a transcendent authority.

It is important to see that this striation of space, this definition and demarcation of a discrete territory, is a function of transcendence. Without a transcendent reference point, a point of view that is separate (perhaps distant) from the space of human habitation, there would be no way of marking boundaries and delimiting territories. Space would be "smooth" rather than "striated". Human beings would flow across it indeterminately, in movements not defined by settled points. Deleuze and Guattari write about the striation of space in political terms. It is the function of empire (or, simply what they call the "state apparatus") to "capture" space. The state is a form of authority and of power that transcends partial fidelities and shifting loyalties of tribes and alliances between them in order to produce an enduring governing institution. The state has to capture, to block or to arrest, the flow of human movement, including not just travel but also commerce, fidelity, and even love.[2] Smooth space is dangerous, raw, wild, crossed by uncontrolled and undestined flows. From the perspective of the nascent state, it has to be domesticated, captured, subdued. This subjugation is achieved, I am suggesting, by a transcendence that is isomorphic with the transcendence of Western religions. So, in Deleuzian terms, there is an alliance between the state and religion, each serving as an apparatus of capture.

Though SBNRs are not necessarily inclined toward political anarchism, their rejection of transcendence is a rejection of religion as an apparatus of capture. Spirituality is a thus inherently a transgressive function. Deleuze and Guattari contrast the sedentary existence of life in striated territories with a "nomadism" that takes lines

[1] Deleuze and Guattari make much of the power of non-Euclidean geometries (especially Reimannian) to describe the smooth space of the nomad. See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 485-488.

[2] Ibid., 424ff.

of flight away from them, that "deterritorialises".[3] If religion marks territories on the basis of a transcendent authority, spirituality deterritorialises, issuing a nomadic existence that may borrow various features from settled religious territories as it passes through them, but is defined not by the points through which it passes but by its own internal dynamism. It is the vector, the line of flight, the becoming, that matters, not the points or territories through which it may, or may not, pass.

If religion, like the state, is characterised by fidelity to transcendence, spirituality is characterised by an instance upon what we might call radical immanence. As we observed earlier with reference to Mercadante's findings about SBNRs, there is a correlation for many between rejecting a transcendent being who governs and orders the world both causally and morally and embracing a view of the world as infused with the divine and thus already good and complete. This is what Deleuze, in praise of Spinoza, calls an "innocent" view of life that rejects "sad passions". Immanence dissolves separation and perhaps even distinction between God and the world, and thus also undermines idealistic distinctions between "what is" and "what ought to be" in favour of a materialistic and joyful affirmation that delights in difference, dissonance, and even conflict between physical forces and desires.[4] With no transcendent reference point, there is no pressure toward unity, nor to conformity to an ideal. In SBNR speech, this is often expressed as discomfort with moralising "judgment".[5]

As sedentary existence is connected to the social form of the state, Deleuze and Guattari connect this nomadic existence that wanders across smooth space with a different social form: one that they call "the war machine". If the state is an apparatus of capture, the war machine leverages nomadic forces in order to "ward off" capture. The war machine resists territorialisation and the centralisation of authority

[3]Ibid., 358-360.

[4]Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1988), 4, 17.

[5]Mercadante, 81.

internally by distributing power among tribal leaders and by constantly mobilising energies against territories (states) in the form of raids. And, unlike the state, which exists within a border, the war machine flows nomadically across the smooth space of a landscape not already gridded by acknowledged political boundaries. This is the terror of the war machine.[6]

Though the spirituality of SBNRs bears little obvious resemblance to primitive war-making, I would suggest that its noncompliance with and its critique of established religion are isomorphic with the war machine as a political form. It does not want to form a new religion, despite the rather impressive list of agreements among SBNRs Mercadante reports. Rather, the rhetoric of "spiritual but not religious" seems motivated by a critique of the religious function of capture. The spiritual desires that circulate among SBNRs are mobilised to resist territorialisation.

As I pointed out in the introduction to this paper, the death of God does not necessarily mean the end of belief in the divine, but rather the erosion of belief in a singular transcendent being who governs the universe. As Mark C. Taylor suggests, the death of God in this sense tends also to be the death of the self.[7] Just as a post-theist culture comes to embrace an ungrounded multiplicity as ultimate, thus refusing a singular source or principle under which all must be subsumed, so also the idea of a singular and stable self that governs the multitude of flows, desires, and processes that pass within and through human beings becomes implausible. The rejection of transcendence means: no God, no state, no self. When this happens, people begin to see themselves as multiplicities. There is no single overarching narrative that tells our story, because there is no one story to tell. Rather, we are at the crossroads of innumerable vectors of desire: we are "crossed" by multiple lines of flight, multiple flows and forces. We can appeal here to obvious examples like sexual

[6]Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 380.
[7]Taylor, 127.

desires, desires to discharge waste, desires to eat, desires to read, to know, or to sleep. For Deleuze and Guattari, these desires erupt from different functions of the body, each working in its own way, each "doing its own thing". At a fundamental (molecular) level, the body is not organised: it is smooth, crossed by a contingent and always shifting array of physical urges to connect and disconnect, to flow and to arrest flow.[8] Since there is no overarching narrative, there is no one way to order or direct the desires that compose us.

This micro-physics of desire, if you will, implies not only multiplicity, but constant change. The molar self is composed of a multiplicity of molecular forces that will not be coerced into a unity, and that means that we want an irreducible multiplicity of things. Deleuze is influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche on this point, and often draws on his rhetoric of "divine madness".[9] For Nietzsche and for Deleuze, divine madness is the insistent innocence, the refusal of guilt, about the multiplicity of desire. The term is apt here because it expresses a Deleuzian account of reality as not grounded or anchored in a singular transcendence but nevertheless immanently pervaded by powers and forces, by disruptions and eruptions that can count as "divine", and also because it offers a dramatic picture of a non-religious spirituality. Divine madness is SBNR spirituality taken to consistency: (1) refusing to settle into an order or hierarchy of religious truths or values, (2) embracing a perpetual nomadism about religious identity, and (3) rejecting ideals of harmony or harmonisation in favours of encountering and engaging multiple desires. As we saw in the case of Paul Knitter (whose madness is curtailed, as we will see), desires for wisdom and peace (Buddhist desires, if you will) are not reduced or ordered to desires for justice and love (Catholic desires), or vice-versa: they simply co-exist, without priority and with be-

[8] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 149.

[9] For Nietzsche, this "madness" is frequently associated with a Dionysian affirmation of difference. See, for example, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kauffman (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1974), 279-280. For Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche, see Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1983), 189-190.

ing subjected to demands for balance, harmony, or order. This is "madness" for the simple reason that it entails the loss of a coherent self. As Deleuze writes, the self is "dissolved" in the pre-personal forces, the vectors of desire, that pass through it.[10]

A clarification to this conceptuality of territorialisation and deterritorialisation, molar formations and molecular activity, striated and smooth spaces, must be made, however. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, where Deleuze and Guattari introduce their political typology of states and war machines, they are careful to argue that these are not stages in global history nor in the history of a particular nation or geographic area. It is not, for example, that nomadic tribes that drive a war machine across smooth spaces are subsequently displaced by the state which captures and striates space. There is nothing evolutionary about the relationship between the two types. Rather, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the state is always already there in human history, however far back we look. It did not evolve out of prior political forms but is created all at once as soon as the striation of space occurs. They even argue that the war machine is developed precisely to ward off the state function—it attacks external states and it prevents the eruption of the state form within itself.[11] But, of course, it is not as if the state form pre-exists the war machine, either. Rather, Deleuze and Guattari argue for a kind of equiprimordiality of the two political forms, and thus of smooth and striated space. For Deleuze, this is actually true not only in human history but in the very nature of physical reality: we can even speak of an ontology of equiprimordial smooth and striated spaces that is expressed in all kinds of human and non-human geographies.[12]

I highlight this point because I believe it makes a big difference for how we understand the relation of SBNR to religious adherence. Anecdotally, having been associated

[10]Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 79.
[11]Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 356-357.
[12]Ibid., 427-437.

with churches for many years, and as a pastor for the last ten years, I have noticed many, many parishioners, often quite committed to a particular congregation, espouse similar if not identical views and attitudes as those Mercadante finds in her interviews with SBNRs, especially on the topics of religious authority, transcendence, and human goodness. Many of these adherents do not describe themselves as SBNRs, but as "a little unorthodox" or with some similar avowal of independent thinking. Pastors often react to these kinds a little like Lillian Daniel, dubious about their alleged independence, when so much of their thinking lines up so nicely with broader cultural trends. But that is precisely my point here: there is something astir in religious institutions that connects with larger social and intellectual trends. To put it in dramatic but, I think, descriptive terms, the death of God is a social reality in the churches as well.

Using Deleuze and Guattari's conceptuality, we could say that the SBNR phenomenon expresses a reaction against a molar formation (Western religion, or the "theistic package") which functions as an apparatus of capture to striate the space of religious experience and participation in the name of a singular transcendence which is seen to anchor, orient, or order the chaotic (smooth) terrain of religious desire. As a form of rejection, of course, it does not pre-exist religious adherence. Instead, SBNR is in some respects a phenomenon of Western religion, a "war machine" that seeks to ward off the restrictions of territorialisation that the latter imposes. As with the two political forms Deleuze and Guattari bring to light, the state and the war machine, it is hard to see how one could come first: they each seem to presuppose the other.

Chapter 4

Madness, death, and lived spirituality

The title of Deleuze and Guattari's two-volume collaborative masterwork is *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Schizophrenia, or "madness", names for them not primarily a clinical condition but a fundamental, "molecular" condition of all of us. Provocatively, they write at the beginning of the first volume, *Anti-Oedipus*, that one can learn a lot more about the human condition by spending five minutes with a schizophrenic on a stroll than by listening to hours of a neurotic's confessions from a couch.[1] Aside from criticising traditional psychoanalysis, what they mean is that clinical schizophrenia points to the truth about everyone: the transcendental conditions or conditions of possibility for selfhood are multiple, and behind the molar formations of selfhood that we construct are swarms of pre-individual forces and desires that are not susceptible to unification or any kind of imposed coherence. Yes, we can be formed as coherent selves to some degree, but ultimately we always escape ourselves, our desires pursuing lines of flight that cannot be housed within fixed boundaries of self, community, territory, or religious identity.

[1] Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 2.

But Deleuze and Guattari are careful to distinguish this pervasive schizophrenic condition from clinical schizophrenia. In the latter, molar formations are not acknowledged at all. In the psychotic, there is no ability to distinguish the molecular from the molar, and the sense of the perduring realities around him or her is lost. Worse yet, if the molar is lost, or is completely and without remainder dissolved in the molecular, selves are lost. This ultimate dissolution is but another name for death. Deleuze and Guattari often write about this as the threat of the "black hole", where all distinctions are submerged in the pure indeterminacy of chaos.[2]

So, in order to forestall this unhappy result, we inevitably seek to reterritorialise our desires. That is, though they are by definition lines of flight away from boundaried centres or territories, their energy is re-absorbed in some new coding or new way of locating or territorialising. In their most famous example, the deterritorialising force of capitalism, which breaks through and away from nationalistic and/or traditionalistic constraints on commerce and exchange, both radically expands possibilities for economic growth and threatens the dissolution of meaning and value.[3] So, in order to curtail its potential madness, the forces of capital are reterritorialised in a variety of ways: on global patterns of distribution or concentrations of wealth and privilege, or on ideological figures that prop up the international system. A likely suspect of the latter sort is the figure of the consumer, who ironically thinks of him/herself as free just to the extent that s/he is manipulated into harbouring endless desires for more consumable goods. In effect, we lose our formed selves in the acids of free-flowing capital, but we gain them back in a new way: under the figure of the consumer.

In fact, the figure of the consumer suggests a way in which the transgressive spirituality of SBNR may be lived. In order not to be carried away endlessly by non-destinal lines of flight, spirituality is captured or reterritorialised on a new identity that en-

[2]Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 334.
[3]Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 222-239.

dures through multiple becomings. We can here invoke once again the example of Madonna and many others who consume Kabbalistic symbols. No matter which tradition is mined or expropriated, it is not as if a person's identity is forever deferred or deflected by constant shifts in attention, by different values inculcated in the different traditions she may engage: always, these engagements are made to serve and support, indeed to elaborate, a particular identity or shape of subjectivity. Always, traditions are utilised at the whim of the consumer, and in the process they support the consumer's fantasy of being free and independent, standing above or over and against as a kind of master of the traditions that are expropriated.

As I mentioned earlier, this kind of reterritorialisation of transgressive spirituality on the figure of the consumer involves exploitation. It is easy to see why. Madonna and her ilk make use of those symbols of meaning they find sufficiently enticing in their "exotic" qualities to create a sense of novelty, adventure, or even (ironically) authenticity. As "exotic", these symbols lie on the periphery, and those who expropriate them are not interested in the wider network of cultural values and meanings in which they are embedded. In other words, the figure of the consumer allows becoming-Jewish to remain a matter of exploitation, cherry-picking the enticing features of a peripheral, minor tradition without developing sympathy or solidarity. However, there is a pathos for the consumer here as well. As well as expropriator, the consumer here is also dupe: s/he harbours this illusion of mastery by means of two ideological blind spots. S/he is not able to see that the figure of the consumer is in fact a reterritorialisation: that being a consumer of spiritual goods has not made him/her free of religion so much as it has replaced traditional religions with another kind of formation that is more insidious for being invisible; and secondly, s/he is not able to see that the drive to consume itself serves the purpose of sustaining a system of production and distribution which relies upon and dictates his/her operation as consumer. As Marx pointed out, a capitalist system tends toward over-production,

and, in order to sustain the system, desires must be indefinitely extended. Simply put, desires must deterritorialise. The reterritorialisation of desire on the figure of the consumer is the way the system manages this dangerous force that it must create in order to survive.

There are, of course, other ways that spirituality may be lived—that is, that lines of flight may be reterritorialised. Two that I will not develop, but just mention, are (1) a reterritorialisation on the figure of the sceptic, and (2) reterritorialisation on some religious tradition without holding to its exclusivity as a carrier of truth or right practice. This latter possibility significantly weakens the "NR" aspect of SBNR, but the negative is maintained at least as a caveat, an openness of the religious practitioner to entanglement with secular or other religious perspectives and commitments.[4]

[4] An example of how this might be developed can be found in my collaboration with Christopher Baker and John Reader, *A Philosophy of Christian Materialism: Entangled Fidelities and the Public Good* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Press, 2015).

Chapter 5

Conclusion

I want to conclude by considering in a little more detail a fourth option for living the spirituality embedded in SBNR. I mentioned earlier in relation to Paul Knitter that when someone engages multiple forms of adherence, multiple religions, each can serve as both "religion" and "spirituality" in relation to the other. In other words, there can be constant cycles of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation that are kept in motion by multiple adherence in a situation of religious hybridity. So, instead of pursuing lines of flight across a completely smooth surface, losing the self in an endless array of becomings-other, what we may have is a limited cycle, or spiral, of becoming-other in which one's identity is not so much dissolved completely as kept in motion by constant interaction among multiple desires.

How might this work? In Knitter's case, we may look to the words I quoted earlier:

> *I can't keep them apart.* It's not that they are blurring into each other and becoming just one practice. No, they remain clearly distinct. But [...] I have not been able to honor their distinct identities by practicing them [...] separately [...] Rather, for me, when I'm at Mass, it's with Buddhist ears that I hear the words of the Scripture readings or the

> sermon (though I usually resort to Zen mindfulness of my breath during many sermons). I feel the powerful symbols of the Eucharistic liturgy with Buddhist sensitivity. I'm constantly translating Christian into Buddhist and Buddhist into Christian but in what feels like a natural flow back and forth, like a conversation. On the meditation cushion, whether daily by myself or during a retreat [...] the same conversation goes on.[1]

One experiences each kind of practice in terms of the other. Buddhist desires compel lines of flight from the territory of Christian practice, and Christian desires compel them from the territory of Buddhist practice. Each tradition is major and minor in relation to the other: each is orthodox, and each is heretical.

Like reterritorialising on a single religious tradition, hybridity tends to fall short of the "NR" aspect of SBNR. For people like Knitter, it is not so much that they lack religious commitment, but that they have too much of it for just one tradition. But, again, the excessive is precisely what SBNR is in relation to religious adherence. Note that the integrity of each is undermined by their constant interaction: Knitter is "not able to honor their distinct identities". The continual exchange does more that create a dual identity: it tends to create one that is constantly in flux.

What I called the underlying thesis of this paper—that SBNR is an expression of the death of God—finds confirmation in Knitter's example. The title of Knitter's book—*Without Buddha I Could not be Christian*—says a lot. What interests Knitter in Buddhism initially, and what sustains his interest to no small degree, is its ability to sidestep a series of problems he has with his "home" religious tradition, or territory. Interestingly, these problems are with a transcendent God, with exclusive religious authority, and with the idea a deformed or incomplete human nature that makes us long for another world or at least another self. These are the very same concerns that

[1] Knitter, 219. Italics original.

Mercadante finds among SBNRs who overwhelmingly reject "the theistic package"; the very same concerns that animated Nietzsche's critique of Christianity in such books as *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Anti-Christ*; and the very same concerns that continue to surface in the West's long endurance of the death of God.

Bibliography

Baker, Christopher, Thomas A. James and John Reader *A Philosophy of Christian Materialism: Entangled Fidelities and the Common Good* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015)

Braidotti, Rosi, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013)

Daniel, Lillian, "Spiritual But Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me," *Huffington Post*, September 13, 2011. www.huffingtonpost.com/lillian-daniel/spiritual-but-not-religio_ b_ 959216.html

Deleuze, Gilles, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1983)

Deleuze, Gilles, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1988)

Deleuze, Gilles, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994)

Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guatarri, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1977)

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1987)

Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994)

Knitter, Paul, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian* (Croydon, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2013)

Mercadante, Linda A., *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014)

Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kauffman (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1974)

Oppenheimer, Mark, "Examining the Growth of the 'Spiritual but not Religious, *The New York Times*, July 18, 2014. www.nytimes.com/2014/07/19/us/examining-the-growth-of-the-spiritual-but-not-religious.html?_ r=0

Schneider, Laurel, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (New York, NY: Routledge Press, 2008)

Taylor, Mark C., *After God* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2009)

Weber, Max, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, ed. Hans H. Gerth (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1968)

Weber, Max, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology, Vol. I*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978)

Thank you for reading.

If you enjoyed this e-book please write a review.

Please tell your friends and colleagues about this book.

Temple Tracts are free to download, short accessible e-books presenting engaging analysis on key debates in religion and public life.

Find out more and download the other books in the series at

williamtemplefoundation.org.uk/temple-tracts

Sign up for our free e-newsletter at williamtemplefoundation.org.uk

Follow us on Twitter @WTempleFdn