



A Study on the Relationship between Religion and Power in Antonio Negri's Philosophy and its Political Significance

Lim Yi Hui

Graduate School of Religion, Chung Yuan Christian University, Taiwan
yihui_0423@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Existing research on the political theory of Antonio Negri mainly focuses on *Empire* and its sequels, or his involvement in the *autonomia* movement in the late 1970 in Italy. However, Negri's other works composed during his imprisonment and later - especially those philosophical writings concerned with theology - are often overlooked. This study is an attempt to deal with the relationship between religion or theology and power in Negri's works, and to investigate the compatibility and contradiction between his perspective and Christian theology.

Keywords: Negri, Materialism, Religion, Theology, Power, Multitude.

Introduction

The political theory of Antonio Negri gave rise to heated discussions with the publication of *Empire*, his collaborative work with Michael Hardt. Academic discussions of Negri's thought mainly focus on *Empire* and his works published afterwards, concerning the analysis of global political order and capitalism. Some scholars also investigated the origins of his theory, such as the influences of the Italian *autonomia* movement and French philosophy.

These studies are important to comprehend Negri's thought but often overlook the relationship between his theory and religion. There are significant concern with religion and theology in his philosophical works, especially those written after he was jailed in 1979.

There is a noticeable shift in his academic orientation although it is not a totally discontinuous rupture in Negri's thought. His early works, which have given substantial space to the history of modern state, are primarily criticism on capitalist ideology and can be read as a kind of his 'first foundation'.

Even though the analysis helped to clarify the development of modern philosophy and history, Negri himself still points out their limitations in forming a revolutionary alternative and hence the necessity to build a 'second foundation' for a future project of liberation¹.

The primary aim of this study is to find out the role of religion and theology in his political philosophy, including religious and theological factors adopted in his writings and his comments on religion, particularly Christianity. His works that constitute his 'second foundation', especially his reinterpretation of Spinoza's philosophy and the book of Job, will be the focus of this study.

Spinoza, the Atheist

One of Negri's renowned contributions is his reinterpretation of the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza. He affirms that Spinoza is highly influenced by the cultural components in the seventeenth-century Amsterdam, that are Judaic, Renaissance-humanistic, Scholastic and Cartesian. However, Spinoza's conception of being separates itself from the Judaic tradition which is bound by theological finalism. In a similar way, Spinoza is nurtured in an environment that is dominated by Counter-Reformation and Cartesian Scholasticism, yet he strives for a theoretical framework that free from the ideology advocated by the philosophical and theological mainstream².

Negri's historical interpretation of Spinoza's corpus reveals the evolution of Spinoza's philosophy. Spinoza and his friends formed a philosophical group after he was expelled from the Judaic community of Amsterdam. Negri find that the Spinoza's circle features the combination of rationalism and religiousness. Such a vigorous synthesis is explicit in Spinoza's early work, *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*. The initial pantheist basis is surpassed by *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*. However, it is an ambiguous and incomplete work. After years of reflection, a clear transformation of Spinoza's ontology eventually occurs in *Cogitata Metaphysica*, the appendix of *Renati des Cartes Principia Philosophiae*, anticipating the transition from the 'first' Spinoza to the 'second' Spinoza. The key concept in Spinoza philosophy, power (*potentia*), is positively defined and expressed. Being is not subjected to transcendental Power (*potestas*) and is free from any hierarchical ontological system².

[Note: *Potentia* and *potestas* are two antagonistic concepts that traverse Negri's interpretation of Spinoza philosophy. However, both Latin terms may be translated by English word 'power' and

hence difficult to be distinguished. In this article we follow the practice established by Michael Hardt in his translation of Negri's *The Savage Anomaly*, in which 'power' corresponds to *potentia* (indicates immanent, constitutive, revolutionary, democratic force) while 'Power' corresponds to *potestas* (indicates transcendent, mediating, reactionary, suppressive force).]

Does it imply that there is a correlation between religiousness and Power and therefore the religiousness in Spinoza's early work has been abandoned in his mature philosophy?

Indeed, the pantheist characteristics has been gradually overcome throughout the evolution of Spinoza's philosophy and his unique ontology can only be established when the pantheist premises diminish. Nevertheless, we cannot deny that such a progress would not happen without religiousness and tension that arises from it, just as what Negri insists: the 'second' Spinoza would never existed without the 'first' Spinoza. If this is the case, why does Negri often emphasize that Spinoza's metaphysics is a wholehearted atheism and materialism?

According to Negri, the 'second Spinoza' first becomes vivid in *Theologico-Political Treatise*, in which a positive ethics is established³. There are interesting passages that analyze prophetic and apostolic imagination, and also the social order rooted to the imagination. The negative imagination, which becomes superstition, lead to war and insecurity. It has to be separated from the positive imagination that will bring peace and sociability. To prevent imagination from corrupting, the foundation determined by reason is essential². Why would Spinoza take the risks of being accused of atheism (it was a serious offence in the seventeenth century!) to affirm the primacy of reason which leads to demystification of theology?

The stated intent of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* is the struggle against monarchical absolutism and the defense and expansion of the freedoms of the republic². At the time Spinoza was composing the work, Orangists were eager to restore the monarchical regime justified by a specific theology, namely Scholasticism of Calvinism. Seventeenth-century philosophy that is grounded in both the Catholic and Protestant vindication of the theological tradition attempts to revive reactionary thought that defend Capitalist and State ideology. Such an attempt is legalized by the corrupt imagination and superstition which is reinforced by fear. Opposing the complex "philosophy-productive imagination-republic", the complex "theology-corrupt imagination-monarchy" serves Power. Spinoza's philosophy makes a stand against the latter: "He reconstructs the world outside the fear of God, outside of the rule (which is substantial to religious experience and thought) of divine transcendence and human contingency"².

Based on Negri's interpretation, the core of *Theological-Political Treatise* is Spinoza's atheist metaphysics; only on this ground a constitutive democracy may be truly achieved. What

troubles Spinoza is the sectarian battle and the similarity between religious authorities and political authorities, especially their alliance that is aimed at securing *ancien régime*. By refusing Platonist ontology and Christian theology, Spinoza developed his "materialist conception of man as appropriative power (*potentia*). Making man not the expression of nature but the producer of the world"². What a radical ontology that turning the hegemonic philosophy upside down!

When capitalism is deviating its initial revolutionary intention and turns into a repressive political structure, its legalization is completed by combining with contractualism and theology, as what is reflected in the Hobbesian contract theory and Rousseauian general will theory. In spite of joining the camp supporting the order of bourgeois State, in his unfinished yet powerful text, *Political Treatise*, Spinoza theorizes a real democracy, which

"...is not a democracy that conceals and mystifies the relations of production, nor one that legitimizes existing political relations; it is a democracy that founds a collective doing in the development of individual powers, that constructs political relations on this basis and immediately frees them from the slavery of the relations of production"³.

In contrast to the belief of contractualism, the constitutive principle held by Spinoza refuses to alienate the power of individuals and their natural right in order to construct the State.

By rereading Spinoza's works, Negri suggests that the power is the real foundation in metaphysics, inverting the relationship between power and Power under the Aristotelian and Thomistic tradition of philosophy and theology⁴. Such metaphysics directly consists in Spinoza's perspective on constitution. The conception of State is grounded in the power of the multitude, without being mediated by Power. Negri's reinterpretation of Spinoza reveals that "Spinoza's true politics is his metaphysics"². Negri admits that the influence of religion has not vanished even in the second Spinoza, yet it takes the form of experience rather than traditional ideologies nor doctrines. To better understand his viewpoint on the connection between theology and Power, another Negri's extraordinary work should not be missed.

Job, the Blasphemer

The Labor of Job is a book seldom noticed by most scholars who are interested on Negri's political theory; the apparent reason is that the study of an ancient text is far away from contemporary political theory. The most interesting point is that Negri mentions "materialist redemption" in his preface to the 2002 edition, and emphasizes the splendor of Job and the huge impact of this biblical figure on himself. Since Negri always claims to be an atheist or a materialist, it seems awkward that he has used the paradoxical term "materialist salvation" and even suggests that "the problem of salvation is all the more

important for those who have been Marxists⁵. Why doesn't he separate himself from theology all over?

The book of Job is well known for the theme of suffering of man and its justice, which is unfolded in the debate between Job and his friends. Negri describes Job's misfortune as a sentence that followed by a trial in which his friends are trying to justify the sentence. They establish "the dogma of retributive justice", which means that "man receives a reward or a punishment according to his works" and "only God knows which works deserve reward and which punishment"⁵. According to the logic of theodicy, Job deserves unhappiness due to his sin before God and this is an absolute justice. Despite Job's protest against the hypocritical discourse that levelling his real and painful experience, the retributive conceptions gains its apologia from classical philosophy, capitalism and even Christianity⁵.

The problem of retributive justice is that it claims that the relationship between life, labor and value is reasonable since it is guaranteed by a common measure. However, Job's misery is immeasurable, so the rationality and justice based on measure is meaningless to him. When the measure has ceased to be effective and rationality has become invalid, theodicy has to be verified by another way. For instance, through the over determination and mystification of divine benevolence and God's will, the lawyers argue that men could not but surrender himself to God.

"Thus one returns via a mystical path to the objectivity of retribution. As always, religious thinking that aims to mediate God and world, justice and labor, turns back upon itself, involving itself in the nullity of circular argument. Over determination and mysticism follow orders by retribution, that is, by a eudaimonistic conception that turns religion into an instrument of Power. It becomes an apologia not for the wealth but for the rich, for Power"⁵.

Job refutes the legitimacy of God as a supreme judge: It is not a fair trial! God has destroyed the fruits of labor even though Job is guiltless. "Divine omnipotence seems amoral to Job; the power of God over the universal empire appears despotic"⁵.

The conflict between man and God has escalated into a war. The power of Job rebels against the Power of God. In contrast to the typical impression that Job is a patient and submissive saint, Job actually "expresses his irritation, his impatience, his repugnance for virtues such as moderation and equanimity, and is against all compromise in terms that could hardly be harsher..."⁵. By reducing the fierce blasphemer to a moral paradigm, most theologians pacify the powerful struggle of Job. This is quite similar to what Job's interlocutors have done. They are the proponents of transcendental and mystical foundation, whereas Job stands on the ground of materialism that opposes to the transcendental mediation.

The challenge of Job finally forces God, who has remained silent on Job's suffering, answered him out of the whirlwind.

God boasts about His mightiness and mocks the insignificance of man by demonstrating the strength of Behemoth and Leviathan. Many commentators understand the "whirlwind tour" as the experience of the sublime which renders human fearful and obedient to almighty God. Notwithstanding the violence of cosmic evil in front of him, Job insists that mystery must be revealed. "And God appears to him. Job can see him"⁵. The "vision" of God is the climax of the book of Job.

Negri disagrees with common interpreters who read "seeing God" as the reflection of Job's own repentance and thinks that they "do what Job's interlocutors... had done: they confine to a given form and measure his experience within the dimensions of the theologically known"⁵. From Negri's perspective, "seeing God" is the experience of redemption for Job, and such an experience signifies Job's victory and the death of God, as God could no longer close His eyes to Job's misery and have to justify himself. "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God..." The verse 19:25-26 is embodied in the "vision" of God. Negri believes that the Messiah is portrayed throughout the book of Job, through the arbitrator Job's pain is converted into a creative event.

The idea of the mediator is that of a power that can only free itself from chaos without repeating Power's destiny. The idea of the Messiah is that of an attempt to experience the relationship between man and God outside all determination, outside all teleology⁵.

Negri's interpretation of "seeing God" is truly fascinating yet controversial. Boer points out two problems of the reading. First, similar story which oust God from divine position while humans in turn rise up and participate in creation is a recurrent Marxist theme. Second, Negri could be too optimistic about the potential of human beings along with Marxist tradition.

The concept of "Messiah" Negri derives from the book of Job is also contentious due to its ambiguity. Harding thinks that the texts Negri picked up "do not... refer to a Messiah... but do refer to some figure who will nullify the measured gap between the human and the divine"⁷. On the other hand, Kotsko thinks that "Job eventually becomes his own messiah when he embraces the redemptive, divine, and creative power to which the death of God gives him access—and insofar as Job represents all of humanity for Negri, humanity as such becomes its own redeemer"⁸. Perhaps an interpretation closer to Negri's thought is suggested by Barber and Smith: "This redeemer, the Messiah, exists within – furthermore, is generated by and seen through – Job's immeasurable pain"⁹. They elaborate their point by developing the notion of "fabulation":

"Negri calls the Messiah an 'idea,' but in fact it is more precisely an image. It is something which is seen by Job, who fabulates the image... His particular fabulation arises within the poverty of his existence, but within this pain he gives content to the *to-come*..."⁹.

Throughout his commentary on the book of Job, Negri links the parable of Job to human labor and economic life. The significance of the triumph of Job is that he, as the representative of all mankind, is emancipated from the logic of retributive justice. Labor is liberated from the chain forged by capitalist command and free from being exploited by Power.

"It is through the body that redemption is accomplished, via that body that has been tormented and modified by labor... In Job the Messiah is the sign of the resurrection of the flesh, just as within communism the Messiah is the sign of the resurrection of labor...."⁵.

Resurrection plays an important part in Negri's commentary on Job but it might be a hasty and flawed argument. Boer casts his doubt on it: "...the doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh is an important materialist affirmation, but it comes from Paul's letters in the New Testament, not from Job... the belief in resurrection emerges a few centuries later"¹⁰. Despite the relevancy of the theme resurrection to the book of Job, Negri's discussion about resurrection evinces his position on religion, particularly Christianity.

Negri raises the problem that the affirmation of "flesh" and "nature" by Christian doctrine almost sinks to oblivion over the centuries. The disappearance of the flesh is "probably contemporary with and complementary to the affirmation of the secular sense of the world, and to the bourgeois conception of the world"⁵. The doctrine of the resurrection of the body is contrary to the popular belief in immortal soul.¹¹.

Negri appreciates the effort of theologians in the nineteenth century who brought the topic of the resurrection of the flesh to the theological debate, restoring the "eschatological dimension of Christ's teachings and of primitive Christian theology"⁵.

He agrees with Oscar Cullmann's position that a materialist line exists in the New Testament tradition, and it is against another line that is dualist and idealist. Unfortunately, "Christianity has lost its revolutionary force to the extent that it has forgotten the eschatology and materialism of its origins"⁵.

Nevertheless, the resistance to spiritual dominance in Christianity present in an oddity, namely theology of liberation. Negri acknowledges that theology of liberation has introduced a fresh understanding of the book of Job. "It does so by problematizing the relationship of man and God, and by showing, as in Job, the alliance between God and Satan and the scandal of the 'silence' of God in the face of the suffering of man"⁵. Negri recognizes the intersection of the Marxist thinkers who suffered from fascism and the Christian authors who live in poverty. Such a "convergence... of materialist and religious thought in this reinvention of value"⁵, is very prominent.

Negri poses the issue of the decline of the Left in his commentary on the book of Job. The crisis of labor and its value

pushes him to find a new path to overcome the failure of Marxism. "The problem of salvation is all the more important for those who have been Marxists. The problem of salvation is all the more important for those who have been Marxists. The reference to Job is central... for those who were convinced that truth was rooted in the power of labor..."⁵. He has not only examined the close relationship between Christianity and Power through the lense of the biblical text, but has also reflected on contemporary Marxism as well as Capitalism. Therefore, given that religion and materialism are taking different paths, it is still possible that they share a common concern. Job is the figure that symbolizes the reconstruction of a world without illusory measure nor immeasurable exploitation.

The (in) compatibility between theology and revolutionary politics

According to Negri, theology is related to revolutionary thinking in the sense that love has priority over reason and results in liberation. There are two options coexist in theology:

"The first is one in which poverty is equated with power, and so the relation between theology and politics is possible because poverty is the capacity to express different forms of love, the organization of passions, and ultimately the unfolding of desire. In the second, poverty is that flat and desperate situation that only the transcendental can redeem. It is clear that it is only the first conception of poverty that can make *amor*[love] operational. That is, it is clear that only the nonmystical determination of poverty can give love a political role"¹².

The first path was taken up by the theology of liberation, which views poverty as a revolutionary power, struggling against the spiritualistic definition of poverty¹². Negri insists that the poor person is not the object but the subject of love. This conception of poverty is actually confirmed by

"Christ's mysticism and theology..., such that in each poor person one discovers the figure of Christ. But in common usage, traditionally and in the triumphal history of Christianity, the hegemonic affirmation is that the object-like status of the poor. The very name of the poor is rendered unusable by pity"¹³.

The passage implies a discontinuity between Christ and Christianity while the history of the latter rarely complies with the conviction that the poor person is the subject of love. This may explain why Negri accepts the conception of poverty grounded in Christ's mysticism but reject mystical definition of the poor.

In Negri and Hardt's collaborations, especially *Empire* and its sequels, they criticize both religious and secular political transcendence which subordinate society. They believe that the true democracy only relies on immanent politics, and it is expressed by the multitude. The multitude organizes themselves autonomously and is not subject to any transcendental control

despite their heterogeneity. Therefore, such a political philosophy contradicts to a specific Christian theology, no matter how much Negri and Hardt sympathize with those Christians who share their political vision¹⁴. The multitude is an imminent political subject that does not submit to theological finalism¹⁵. Nonetheless, some reflections that come from the field of theology is trying to make theology be a comrade of the multitude, or at least not to be associated with oppressive Power.

Considering that the desired "living future" which is described in *Empire* and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* is not involved with transcendence, Taylor still suggests the liberation of multitude has a certain form of transcendence. However, this form of transcendence is totally different from another two, which are the "transcendence of command" and the "transcendence of ordering function". The former is the despotic regime that was opposed by early modern bourgeoisie in the feudal society while the latter is the dogma of hegemonic capitalists and colonialists. Taylor thinks that these two forms of transcendence have been reinforced by Christian discourse in history and even now Christianity is still facing the challenge to distance herself from them¹⁶. By using some religious terms to portray the multitude sometimes, Negri and Hardt show that they have borrowed some mythological ideas from the tradition of transcendence. What they really against are in fact the aforementioned transcendence of command and also the transcendence of ordering function. In addition, Taylor describes Negri's discourse on the immeasurable and time as transcendental materialism or material transcendence¹⁶.

Negri and Hardt thinks that Taylor's view is worth discussing, including the distinction drawn between two formes of transcendence, and the transcendent aspects that present in the democracy project of the multitude. Many academics are keen on dealing with the transcendence of command, which is connected to the concept of sovereignty. Attention focused on this kind of transcendence easily conceals another kind of transcendence, which is the transcendence of ordering function, but Negri and Hardt "prefer to call it a juridical and capitalist transcendentalism... The ordering function is carried out primarily by the transcendental rule of law and property"¹⁴. While they recognize there are some transcendent factors exist in the multitude since the multitude has its own aim and desire, but they would rather describe it as a "materialist teleology of the multitude" to avoid confusion. Moreover, calling some characteristics of the multitude as transcendence could easily give the impression that somebody or the elite is going to take the lead or rule over the multitude¹⁴.

Consequently, we understand that the reason why does Negri say that the project of exodus from globalized capitalism is not going to be fulfilled by a Messiah. Rather he "think of messianism as a collective and immanent logic found within the unfolding multitude"¹². This seems to be contradicting to the special emphasis on Messiah in Negri's commentary to the book

of Job. In point of fact he insists that we should not passively waiting for a heroic event or rely on a Messiah to rescue us from our current situation. The Messiah in the book of Job, as portrayed by Negri, is shaped by the creative power that comes from the pain and poverty of Job and becomes divine. The multitude of the poor, at the same time, is the subject of love, as Negri and Hardt state in their another collaboration, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*:

"People today seem unable to understand love as a political concept, but a concept of love is just what we need to grasp the constituent power of the multitude... We need to recuperate the public and political conception of love common to premodern traditions. Christianity and Judaism, for example, both conceive love as a political act that constructs the multitude"¹⁷.

Costa, Keller and Mercedes think that the end of *Multitude* implies a kind of love that is consistent with the love in the core message of the gospel. However,

"Christianity has too often perverted God's love, thwarting the elemental inclusivity such that God's mercy extends only to the "righteous" while God's justice is exercised only on the "wicked"... A human love patterned on this model permits and justifies human violence toward others in the name of God and Christ"¹⁸.

The eschatological interpretation of love according to the gospel but not apocalyptic is necessary. The hope of realizing the greatest commandment of God to bring the kingdom of God into this world is similar to the project of the multitude, insofar as it is open to future. The politics of love is full of uncertainties but it will be continuously examined and reformed by whoever makes their effort to practice it¹⁸. Negri and Hardt respond positively to Costa et al. and they affirm such a conception of love is tied to the autonomous power of the multitude without being manipulated by transcendence¹⁴.

Different from the political theology that Carl Schmitt derives from the sovereign and transcendent God, Robbins thinks that Negri and Hardt's theory gives us new insights into political theology, namely the immanent political theology founded on the constituent power of the multitude, not the exceptional power of sovereignty¹⁹. Crockett expresses a position similar to Robbin's: Regarding Negri and other thinkers who associate themselves with philosophy of religion and theology, the key is "how the relationship between religion and politics can be understood and configured, and what tools are offered for theoretical as well as practical transformation"⁴.

On the other hand, Kotsko comments that Negri's commentary on the book of Job sounds less convincing when he jumps to the atheist conclusion, but it does not mean that we should insist an apologia for the Christian orthodoxy. He introduces a "materialist theology" produced by "a studied indifference toward God" and its aim is to "experiment with ways that God

could function differently" and get beyond the bitterness of atheism or the pride of traditional theology, just as the philosophical works of Derrida and Agamben on religion has shown⁸. Despite Kotsko's kind intention to solve the clash between religion and atheism, it seems to me that the tension would not be relieved when the most basic beliefs are contradicting each other. The insistence of God, either positively or negatively, might be an obstacle to a very accurate and comprehensive reading, but I am afraid that such a "neutral" concept of God will compromise the great passion in the works of these philosophers and theologians as well. In my opinion, Boer provides a more convincing perspective:

"Negri is pushing towards is what may be called a relativisation of theology. By questioning the continuity of theology in secularisation and especially by arguing for the profound rupture of a materialist approach, he effectively negates the claims made on behalf of theology to be the *fons et origo* of all (political) thought..."¹⁰

Conclusion

In *Empire*, Negri and Hardt not only view Saint Francis of Assisi as an exemplar of the communist militant, they also make an analogy

"that refers to the birth of Christianity in Europe and its expansion during the decline of the Roman Empire. In this process an enormous potential of subjectivity was constructed and consolidated... This new subjectivity offered an absolute alternative to the spirit of imperial right - a new ontological basis... In the same way today, given that the limits and unresolvable problems of the new imperial right are fixed, theory and practice can go beyond them, finding once again an ontological basis of antagonism - within Empire, but also against and beyond Empire, at the same level of totality"²⁰.

In conclusion, Negri thinks that the transcendence of religion, particularly Christianity and her theology, has acquiesced in the despotic Power or even directly become a part of the oppressive Power. However, if Christianity reexamines her own tradition and its ethical and political consequences, she may still liberate herself from being a puppet of imperial Power, and stand together with the multitude to construct a radical democracy.

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