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William E. Connolly

A Letter to Augustine¹

I write to probe the legacy of power, and piety still lodged in modern life. I neither follow you in your faith nor exercise scholarly neutrality with respect to it. Here too I share something with you amid my dissent from you. I admire your willingness to interpret the other openly from your own vantage point. This forthrightness takes you half way down the road to agonistic respect for the adversary. If only you had more resolutely resisted the temptation to convert these relations of strife and independence into dogmatic assertions of the superiority of the true faith. But the earthly penalties and burdens of your faith are extremely high.

We must, according to your Christian faith, live with the belief that we deserve death, that we are sinners from birth, that most of our bodily impulses and earthly desires are sinful or readily become sins, that we are relatively incapable of controlling ourselves, that we need massive reformation of ourselves, that the church is better equipped to give us the true doc-

trine than we ourselves. In short, we must swim in a sea of self-loathing in order to secure faith, that is, hope in the salvation you promise. We must constantly confess to your god, while constantly confessing that each preceding confession was incomplete.

Did you confess everything, Saint Augustine? Do you, perhaps, owe us a confession? Typically, when your texts voice the slightest doubt about some dogma essential to salvation (god's existence, his omnipotence, his interest in our salvation, his exemption from evil, the possibility of grace), you place those thoughts in the mouths of heretics or infidels and surround them with condemnation.

Although you confess how your reflections on time, the trinity, the self, and scripture run into imponderable mystery, you refuse, after the day of your baptism, to gather those thoughts together, to consider the horrendous price believers and nonbelievers pay on earth for this doubtful faith of yours, to honour as worthy

¹ This letter is a shortened version of a letter published by W. E. Connolly in *Identity/Difference*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991.

adversaries those who reject this belief on the grounds of the mysteries it embodies and its barbarous effects on life. You insist upon converting mystery into faith, rather than treating your own stance as a projection of your reflections into being (?) and encouraging others to enter into discourse with you on this level. Some pagans showed more respect for their fellow humans in this than you were able to muster.

Of course, you give a reason for lifelong uncertainty about the issue that is most important of all to those who regard salvation as the very purpose of religion: finite beings can never know the will of an infinite being. But that does not suffice, for there are plenty of instances where you purport to know plenty about this being and its will: that it created the world; that it gave us free will; that Adam blew it; that we are cursed with inherited sin; that we depend on grace; that this infinite being is omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent; that it is a saviour; and, above all, that there is no way this being is responsible for evil in the world.

So, is there perhaps another, more insidious, reason lurking inside the reasons you give for human uncertainty? Does not this doctrine of lifelong uncertainty instil doubt, dependency, and anxiety from

birth to death? If, by contrast, people new one way or the other, then the political controls of the church (and the state, when the two are allied) would be weakened. For, people who knew in advance that they were eternally damned or, that they were promised salvation, might well evade the rules imposed on them here on earth. You need, it seems, grace with uncertainty in your political theology.

While I endorse non-theistic reverence, I acknowledge that it, too, is a contestable response to the mysteries of existence. There are theologies that treat god as “absence” in a way that comes rather close to the position I endorse. Even your theism can contribute to this discussion when couched in a mode that affirms the deep contestability of the view it endorses. It might, for example, treat as worthy of consideration and debate Nietzsche’s view that “The ‘father’ in god is thoroughly refuted, likewise the ‘judge’ and the ‘rewarder’ Also his ‘free will’ ...It seems to me that the religious instinct is growing powerfully but is rejecting theistic gratification with deep distrust”

I look forward to any reply you might make to these pleas and insistences.

Faithfully yours,
William E. Connolly

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