Post-Secularism, Immanence, and the Critique of Transcendence

An Encounter with:

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Daniel Colucciello Barber, most recently a fellow at the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry, has offered his most incisive and challenging contribution to date in Deleuze and the Naming of God. While it is a strong contribution to the study of Deleuze’s thought, the book is concerned with far more than the singular themes of Deleuze, immanence, or post secularism. By attempting to summarize, critique, and discursively situate Barber’s work, in the following pages I aim to show that while the book appears in a prominent series on the work of Gilles Deleuze, it has consequences within and well beyond the fold of Deleuze studies. Building upon his previous work on Heidegger, Deleuze, and Yoder, and his book On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion, and Secularity, Barber’s work in Deleuze and the Naming of God takes up the central theme of immanence once again, and extends the critique of transcendence that has been a central point of his work to date.

I. Immanence, Imagination, and the Naming of God

The introduction to Deleuze and the Naming of God sets the book up against the backdrop of Nietzsche’s affirmative proclamation, “God is

1. Initially presented as a dissertation in 2008 in the Department of Religion at Duke University, Deleuze and the Naming of God has undoubtedly undergone many transformations since it was named “The Production of Immanence: Deleuze, Yoder, and Adorno.” Supervised by a committee of theologians Stanley Hauerwas and J. Cameron Carter, and philosophers Michael Hardt and Kenneth Surin, Barber’s revision is a fresh departure from the often wooden genre of the doctoral dissertation, and an interdisciplinary feat, being at once philosophical, theological, and critical of the discursive conditions of each discipline.
dead!” (1). Contemporary attitudes, ranging from militant atheism to Christian fundamentalism, seem to loom in the background of Barber’s meditation on the death of God, a meditation which follows Nietzsche’s call “for a liberation of existence from this divine essence” (1). Here the reader learns that the cryptic phrase, “the name of God” does not entail a simple affirmation of a deity, but rather a productive and creative act of naming the “otherworld”—an act which is too often restricted by the attribution of solidity to its object. Barber writes that “[t]he production of God is the production of a value that devalorises the act by which the value is produced; the God that is imagined captures and imposes itself on imagination” (4). This imposition is what Barber associates with transcendence, given that attributing fixity to the transcendental divinity of God robs the act of the naming of God of its freedom, creativity, and revolutionary potential.  

In light of this critique of transcendence, Barber affirms immanence as having the potential to transcend the limitations of transcendental thinking about God and the world. Immanence takes on a very particular meaning for Barber, beginning from the “relation between the act of imagination and the making of the world” (4). Barber makes

2. It is important to note here that the imagination that Barber promotes, and the naming of God which he seeks to open, are not bound to the Enlightenment project of disenchantment and demythologization. If anything, Barber affirms a mystical (re)mythologization of the world using the language of Christian theology, while including a pointed critique of Christianity, all in the same breath. Barber’s critique of the secular then, is connected to his critique of transcendence insofar as “the secular presents itself as the medium by or in which difference is overcome and a better, more peaceable, and truly human future is produced” (8). Barber’s post-secular stance is deeply connected to his critique of not only transcendence, but also to his critique of the relationship between “Christianity, religion, and the secular” (the subtitle of his earlier book). To properly contextualize Deleuze and the Naming of God, this post-secular stance must be made explicit, particularly because of Barber’s desire to situate Deleuze’s immanence beyond the crippling dichotomy of Christianity and the secular (9).

3. On the concept of immanence, readers may find it helpful to look to Barber’s earlier work in On Diaspora. For Barber, the perspective of immanence sees “the cause of being and the effect of being … belong[ing] to the same plane” (On Diaspora xi). Understanding that “each being is co-constitutive of every other being” means opposing any thought which would require a transcendental reference point in which the immanent effects of being would be over-determined and thereby reduced by a grand singular cause of being (xi). For Barber, rejecting claims to transcendence means that “it becomes impossible to name being as such,” entailing that the affirmation of immanence “puts in play a relay between namelessness and excessive signification” (xi). On one hand the concept of immanence risks becoming transcendent to what it names, and so this threat must be countered by asserting that “immanence, properly speaking, is nameless” (6). On the other hand, while affirming “the irreducibility of immanence to a name” we must also affirm the unavoidable act of naming, and not merely because it is unavoidable (6).Naming, while it risks being reductive, is a positive and productive operation which assists in the imaginative world-making that Barber develops in his introduction. Presumably, the imagination derives its productive and creative energy from the non-
clear that he opposes any reduction of the imagination by any understanding of the world that rests upon transcendence as a key category. This is the case because of both the world-affirming importance of immanence, and the importance of the naming of God—a naming which finds a grammar for divine mystery within and beyond religious language.

However, on a critical note, despite this claim to radical immanence there remains something about the naming of God that will always invoke transcendence. Barber’s constructive work shows how the naming of God does not require transcendence, but his work struggles with the remainder of transcendence within the act of naming God. Even when the naming of God is taken from the hands of theology and made open, there remains a mysticism and a poetry to Barber’s work that defy any reductive understanding of immanence, and so he enriches the concept, and shows how immanence is saturated with a meaning that can help emancipate contemporary theology and philosophy from its deadlocks and antinomies. The radical move that Barber seeks to make, then, is “to name God while affirming immanence” in order to inaugurate a break and rupture with the given—whether the given is the given political situation, the given discourse on ontology, or the world as it is immediately given (6).

II. Deleuze’s Differential Immanence

It is appropriate to call Deleuze and the Naming of God a book about Deleuze, and yet it is important to name the ways in which Barber is embarking on his own creative project that is informed by Deleuze, yet independent of Deleuze. Deleuze and the Naming of God contributes to the creative reimagining of Deleuze’s work, without belonging to the genre of descriptive secondary work.

Chapter 1, titled “Beginning With Difference: Heidegger, Derrida, and the Time of Thought,” seeks to provide the background to Barber’s attempt in Chapters 2 and 3, to develop the constitutive relation between difference and immanence. “Differential immanence” names the identification of immanence with difference through the primacy of relation over thinghood: “before there are things there are differences” (16). The idea that “immanence is without object” points to the idea that immanence names a differentiation which permits the constitution and determination of objects (16). Appropriately then, Barber identifies decisive ‘relay’ between the excessive signification and namelessness of immanence. This relay seeks to avoid the two threats to immanence: “that of letting namelessness transcend names and that of making names transcendent to the nameless” (9).
differential immanence with the need for re-expression or repetition with difference, with the goal of “imagining change without the transcendent” (17). In Chapter 1, Barber begins with Heidegger’s text, *Identity and Difference*, and unpacks the relationship between thought and being by showing how, for Heidegger, the difference between thought and being is not reducible to the difference between transcendence and immanence. Barber then points out how Heidegger is able to show that while thought and being are differentiated, they remain on the plane of immanence. As a consequence, the immanent critique of transcendence does not necessarily entail an acceptance of reality as it is given as the critique of immanence, from the position of transcendence, might suggest. Instead, the political possibilities of the affirmation of immanence are located in the potential for immanence to generate difference, precisely because difference is constitutive of immanence (28). Rather than accept a perspective which would hold up transcendence as the sole provider of the difference necessary for novelty and change, Barber draws from Heidegger’s affirmation of the “unthought” as problematizing transcendence and unveiling the sameness of thought and being on the level of immanence (29). The chapter then concludes, helpfully, with five main theses which I summarize and quote as such:

1. The sameness of thought and being occurs on the level of immanence rather than transcendence.

2. “Immanence is not identity, it is rather the affirmation of difference.”

3. Immanence critiques the given through its affirmation of difference.

4. Differential immanence cannot permit the prediction of what will arise from difference and therefore calls for inquiry into the role of time.

5. Affirming difference requires a critique of Derrida’s *différence*. (37-38)

Where this first chapter contextualizes differential immanence, the second chapter provides the most sustained work on Deleuze’s own body of work. In “Deleuze: The Difference Immanence Makes,” Barber begins by showing how Deleuze’s concept of immanence owes much to Deleuze’s interpretation of Spinoza. Drawing from the symbiosis of unity and difference in substance, Barber shows how placing unity before difference introduces transcendence and privileges “the (unified) one over the (differentiated) many” (41). If Barber is correct that “to precede is to transcend” then we cannot place the oneness of unity before the distinctiveness of difference, or we reduce the real differences named by the concept of difference to the homogeneity of unity (41).
simultaneous singularity and multiplicity of substance in Spinoza is
resourced by Deleuze in order to make “difference intrinsic to, constitutive
of, the immanent relation of substance and attributes” (42). Barber then
extends this connection in order to problematize both singularity and
multiplicity in Deleuze’s concept of immanence.

Following from his introductory section on Deleuze’s immanence,
the bulk of the second chapter provides a painstakingly detailed analysis
of Deleuze’s “assertion of the expressive doubling of immanence” (47),
followed by an inquiry into Deleuze’s temporal determiners of “Aion” and
“Chronos,” drawing in particular from Deleuze’s Logic of Sense (61). The
third chapter, “Stuck in the Middle: Milbank, Hart, and the Time of
Chronos,” then furthers this inquiry into the consequences of temporality
for immanence, and addresses the conflict between Deleuze’s
philosophical immanence and the theological concept of the “analogy of
being” (analogia entis). Where Deleuze’s immanence rejects all over-
determination by transcendent categories, the analogy of being rests on a
symbolic relationship between divine transcendence and human
immanence.4

III. Post-Secular Critique

Despite Barber’s claim that the chapters on the theologian John
Howard Yoder and the philosopher Theodor Adorno are “supplemental,”
their importance for his argument cannot be overstated (15). Deleuze does
not give all of the resources necessary to enrich the concept of immanence
in the way that Barber attempts (especially in the area of political action).
In order to truly problematize the discursive conditions of both the secular
and philosophy, significant engagement with theologians and non-

4. Barber states that his decision to engage in discussion with the theologians John
Milbank and David Bentley Hart in particular arises from their commitment to both
theological orthodoxy and philosophical language and discourse (Naming of God 77). On
the question of ontological violence in particular, Barber provides a strong response to
Milbank’s theology of origins. Where Milbank posits that “ontologies of peace” require
“accord” and harmony in their understanding of ontological origin, Barber shows how
Deleuze’s so-called “ontology of violence” does rest upon an understanding of
ontological origin as constituted by discord and “interstice” but does not result in a lack
of political possibilities for action and emancipation (83-85). Milbank’s concern that
without the promise of hope provided by a harmonious origin there can be no political
action, is well-countered by Barber’s argument for differential immanence as a source for
political possibility. This willingness respond critically to theologians who may offend
secular sensibilities shows Barber’s commitment to postsecular critique—a position
which holds that the secular “still inherits many of the habits of imagination produced by
theology” (78). For more on the postsecular critique see Asad, and Anidjar (particularly
chapters 1 and 2 respectively).
philosophers is necessary. More pointed than the critical sections on John Milbank and David Bentley Hart, Barber’s chapter on Yoder offers a sustained reading of a Christian theologian, much to the benefit of his argument for an immanence that does not recognize the artificial bifurcation of philosophy and theology.

In the fourth chapter of *Deleuze and the Naming of God*, “Yoder: From the Particular to the Divine,” Barber shows how the productive and creative concept of immanence is linked to not only the naming of God, but also to the secular. In his endeavor to “take seriously the sort of historical pressure that Christianity still exerts on the contemporary imagination” Barber turns to an unlikely theologian (106). The American Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder (1927-1997), who wrote in the Anabaptist tradition on themes of Christian ethics and ecclesiology, is not an orthodox choice as a dialogue partner for a continental philosopher such as Barber. Initially, Yoder does not stand out as being a philosophically minded theologian, and yet Barber discovers an underlying method in Yoder that lends itself to his post-secular perspective. Barber sees in Yoder a commitment to the particularity of Jesus which opposes transcendence and “refuses to put him [Jesus] in the service of a more generic ontological claim” (110). This secular character of Yoder’s Jesus is found in the world-oriented focus on Jesus’ politics, rather than a more classical understanding of Jesus as the *logos* of the Gospel of John 1:1. “Yet rather than begin from a position of transcendence … Yoder just begins with Jesus” writes Barber (110).

This aspect of Yoder’s thought arises historically from the christocentrism of the Anabaptist tradition, from the time of the Protestant Reformation. Being a part of this tradition—specifically the Radical Reformation, or what has been called the “left wing of the Reformation”—Yoder’s work has placed the “politics of Jesus” at the centre of Mennonite theologizing since the publication of his book of the same name in 1972. This political emphasis, often made at the expense of metaphysical and cosmological readings of Jesus, has deeply affected the theological self-understanding of contemporary Mennonites (Yoder’s own tradition), and has been significantly influential across denominational lines. Barber’s chapter represents a unique phenomenon for this tradition, of which I am a part, because of his philosophical reading. *Deleuze and the Naming of God* comes at a key point in time for scholarship on Yoder, first because of the

5. Barber’s work has become significant for several Mennonites since the publication of his essay in *The New Yoder* and his book *On Diaspora*. Consequently, the reader of this review can expect forthcoming reviews of *Deleuze and the Naming of God* from two additional Mennonite scholars: Melanie Kampen and David Driedger, each of whom have followed Barber’s work with philosophical and theological interest.
surge in interest in connecting Yoder’s work with philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Pierre Bourdieu, and secondly because of the recent controversy surrounding the inconsistent relationship between his theological writing and personal life.6

For Barber, Yoder’s christocentrism is in fact a kind of world-centric immanence which is secular in nature precisely by virtue of its concern with worldly matters. Being concerned with the immanent world, and not requiring a transcendental anchor, Yoder’s reading of Jesus also offers a significant political resource for those interested in social justice, emancipation and liberation, and the pursuit of peace.7 For example, in his magnum opus The Politics of Jesus, Yoder draws from the Dutch theologian Hendrik Berkhof’s small book Christ and the Powers in order to develop a theory of Jesus’ opposition to the evil potential within human institutions and systemic social patterns. While Barber sees this as a kind of “dramatization,” it is important to note, from a theological perspective, that for Yoder there is no reductive or demystifying quality to calling Jesus’ life a kind of drama (113). While there is a detectable sense that Barber is distancing himself from the transcendental aspects of Yoder’s theology (faith in a personified God), he does appear to remain open to a non-reductive understanding of the narrative or drama of the theological tradition, especially given his concept of fabulation, outlined in the final chapter of Deleuze and the Naming of God.8 In sum, the anti-imperial

6. Of the many writings to appear in the past two years, I will point to one recent essay: Cramer et al.
7. Yoder’s pacifist and political reading of Jesus has its origin in the nonresistant love championed by the Mennonite theologian H.S. Bender, and the Schleitheim Confession of the Early Anabaptists. Where Yoder’s political reading of Jesus belongs to the lineage of the Anabaptists, Barber’s commitment to political emancipation seems to have its heritage in Marxism and critical theory.
8. For Barber, on the theopolitical potential of Yoder’s work, “Jesus’ particularity must not be subjected to already decided upon rules governing thought, it instead must force new manners of thinking” (Naming of God 111). These new ways of thinking from a position outside of the given coordinates are found in Yoder’s understanding of Jesus’ opposition to the ‘powers and principalities’ of the world (112). The “powers” that Berkhof and Yoder name “serve as the invisible weight-bearing substratum of the world, as the underpinnings of creation” while also being “the linkage between God’s love and visible human experience” (Berkhof 28-29). Examples of these powers include “the state, politics, class, social struggle, national interest, public opinion, accepted morality, the ideas of decency, humanity, and democracy” and they function, for Yoder’s theology, in an ambivalent way (Christ and the Powers 32). On the one hand the powers (as institutions) serve as a means of connecting the transcendent divinity to immanent humanity, and on the other hand they oppress and do violence to those under their horizon. In Deleuze and the Naming of God, Barber connects the way in which Yoder’s Jesus overcomes the powers, with Yoder’s argument for pacifism. In both instances the given coordinates of the scene are disrupted. Jesus’ opposition to the powers comes from outside of the conditions set by the powers. In the same vein, Jesus opposes violence in a way that avoids repeating violence in the effort to oppose or prevent violence. Barber
nature of Yoder’s Jesus, characterized by opposition to both empire and militarization, provides Barber with a strong resource for showing how immanence can mobilize its interior difference for the purposes of opposing systemic injustices and championing the cause of the oppressed.

**IV. Non-Identity, Metaphilosophy & Nonphilosophy**

Mention of immanence in the context of identity certainly calls for dialogue with the work of Theodor Adorno, and Barber’s fifth chapter delivers a thoughtful reading of Adorno’s concept of non-identity for the purpose of enriching immanence. In “Adorno: A Metaphilosophy of Immanence,” Barber links immanence and its commitment to difference and the unthought, to Adorno’s non-identity and its commitment to show that the other of identity is embedded within identity. If “Yoder and Deleuze are thinkers of the world” then Adorno is a thinker who metacognitively approaches questions of the immanent subjectivity and transcendent objectivity of the world (143). Outlining Adorno’s critique of Hegel, Barber summarizes Adorno’s concept of nonidentity in the following way: “[t]hat subject and object are nonidentical means, above all, that they cannot be identified, not even through mediation” (147). Adorno’s nonidentity assists the concept of immanence by showing how difference constitutes its inner movement and gives rise to an excess or a “more” of reality “that emerges in the mediation of subject and object” (150).

Beyond the concerns of subject and object, and nonidentity and the nonconceptual, Barber introduces his own distinct definitions of the terms “metaphilosophy” and “nonphilosophy,” each of which are necessary for his metadiscursive critique of philosophy and theology (155). Metaphilosophy refers to the way in which immanence “break[s] with the present mode of thought; it is a philosophical practice that attempts to understand philosophy’s present failure” (155). Admittedly differing from Laruelle’s nonphilosophy and the differing antiphilosophies of Alain Badiou and Boris Groys, Barber’s definition of nonphilosophy “refers to immanence’s experimentation with new modes of thought, modes not reducible to the present mode of thought known as philosophy” (156). Encouraging both metaphilosophical reflection upon the failure of philosophy, and nonphilosophical exceeding of the boundaries of philosophy, and developing a theory of their relation, Barber departs from

writes that “Yoder’s concept of non-resistance … affirms that the more can exceed the limit without having to react against it, and that the more only undermines itself when it tries to express itself within the logic of the limit” (*Naming of God* 121). In this particular way, Yoder’s concrete political oppositions to violence and the powers serve as examples of how the ontological question of immanence can give rise to political change.
Adorno into a creative and constructive proposal in the final quarter of the book.

V. Conclusions

The sixth chapter and conclusion offer the most creative exposition on the consequences of immanence arising from Deleuze and the Naming of God. In “Icons of Immanence: Believe the Now-Here, Fabulate the No-Where” Barber synthesizes his conclusions regarding Deleuze, Yoder, and Adorno, and offers constructive suggestions for the implementation of the perspective of immanence. The term “fabulation” serves to tie together the perspective and concept of immanence with a narrative strategy: “Fabulation names the capacity to tell a story that outstrips the criteria that would decide on its truth or falsity” (200). According to Barber, Deleuze encourages a practice of producing counternarratives which “refuse the truth-conditions provided by the present, and affirm the interstitial field of the no-where” (201). This affirmation of the no-where appears to locate the other-world within the world, and extends the Nietzschean “connection between imagination and the world” (212).

In the conclusion, “The Future of Immanence,” Barber clarifies that “immanence is not given” or separate from the locutions of perception and perspective (212). Beyond this clarification he offers three future trajectories for the future of immanence, upon which I have added my own critical evaluation of his project, in the spirit of appreciative review:

1. “Immanent Belief: Immanence must adopt a radically critical perspective on the secular.” While accepting that immanence holds real potential for engineering a rupture with the given parameters of the world as we apprehend it, I find it difficult to follow Barber’s evaluation of all transcendence as “bankrupt” (212). I appreciate the warning against equating immanence with the secular, but I fear that the distinction between transcendence itself and human knowledge of transcendence gets lost in the wholesale critique of transcendence. The critique of transcendence assumes that a transcendental referent necessarily causes human understanding to set restrictive boundaries, and does not seem to acknowledge the possibility that an affirmation of transcendence could occur without hegemonic confidence in human understanding of transcendence or language about transcendence. In this way the critique of the secular offered by Barber does not go far enough. While Barber critiques the ways in which transcendence has endorsed oppressive discourses within Christianity, the same critique could be mobilized against the transcendental status of reason in the discourse of secularism. Immanence surely breaks down the violent oppositions of transcendence, and offers a critique of the modern triumphalism of the secular, but it could potentially enact the sort of reductive operation upon the world that
transcendence has been known to do. The goal of immanent belief, however, remains deep and inspiring in its goal to “refuse the limits imposed onto the world while simultaneously entering into the world” (213).

2. “Metaphilosophy: Immanence must actively refuse every tendency that would reduce it to ‘affirmation’ or ‘positivity’.” Barber presents the metaphilosophical impulse as refusing reduction to either positivity or negativity. Against a perceived overcorrection towards positivity in Deleuze’s immanence, Barber encourages the practice of thinking both creation and destruction, and success and failure, as being within the domain of philosophy (214). In an effort to give full weight to both the depressing and positive aspects of the immanent present, as well as full weight to both philosophy’s success and failure at theorizing and understanding the present, Barber affirms an immanence that is both realistically grounded in phenomena while also enabling emancipatory change.

3. “Fabulation: Immanence cannot be conceived apart from its production of icons.” Finally, Barber suggests that immanence culminates in the creative production of icons through a narrative and symbolic process of fabulation (215). The icons of fabulation assert the “right to difference” through “the power to produce particular realities that differ from the ever-expanding continuity of the present” (216).

With these three theses in mind it is evident that the book is not reducible to its polemic against Christian theology. Being a critique which is appreciative of aspects of the Christian tradition, it could be edifying to the curious Christian theologian. In another vein, Deleuze scholars may appreciate this work because of the ways that it opens Deleuze’s work to new lines of flight, and new trajectories which do not accept the stale dualisms that transcendence forces upon contemporary discourses on philosophy and theology. On this note, Barber’s recent work on conversion promises to continue this interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary mode of scholarship of which Deleuze and the Naming of God is a prime example.
Works Cited


