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Review of: Noël Valis, *Sacred Realism: Religion and the Imagination in Modern Spanish Narrative*

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Noël Valis, *Sacred Realism: Religion and the Imagination in Modern Spanish Narrative*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. 356 pp.

What exactly did Max Weber mean when he identified modernity with disenchantment, the loss of magic, *die Entzauberung der Welt*? Did modernization—and its concomitant intellectualization and rationalization—inevitably herald a de-sacralization of Western culture? Or did modernity merely result in a series of *displacements* of the sacred?

Weber's pithy argument has long given us license for a set of intellectual shortcuts. It has allowed us to identify modernity with secularism, rationality, and progressive politics and, inversely, to associate religiosity with irrationalism, traditionalism, and reactionary political movements. In recent years a vocal chorus of radical atheists—including Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins—have attempted to cement this basic binary schema. And yet its accuracy and explanatory power is increasingly up for discussion. Partly in the face of the curious persistence of religiosity even in some of the most advanced industrial societies (not least the United States), and partly in recognition of the limitations and contradictions of secularism itself, a series of books from different disciplines have worked to destabilize the notion that modernity and religion are mutually incompatible. Thus, the Frisian-American philosopher Alvin Plantinga has recently argued in *Where the Conflict Really Lies* that not naturalism but religion—a fundamental belief in a creating God—is the only logical basis for scientific rationalism. The philosopher Simon Critchley, meanwhile, has postulated in *The Faith of the Faithless* that “[r]ather than seeing modernity in terms of a process of secularization, ... the history of political forms can best be viewed as a series of metamorphoses of sacralization” (25). The political theorist Roger Griffin, for his part, has focused on the genealogical link between modernist culture and reactionary politics, arguing that fascism “can be seen as a political variant of modernism” (6). Neither of these ideas are entirely new, of course: Griffin's argument was formulated, in a different way, by Max Aub in 1945; theorists have long pointed out that radically secular ideologies such as Anarchism and Communism are in fact organized around a sacralized core; and Benedict Anderson famously noted that modern nationalism has provided a new sense of the sacred, filling the void left by the withdrawal of religion.

Noël Valis's provocative new book joins in these debates by taking on the question of religiosity in the modern Spanish novel. She is interested in correcting

what she sees as a chronic blind spot among critics and historians of modern Spanish literature, who by and large have refused to acknowledge the central importance of broad religious concerns even in such apparent paragons of Spanish liberalism and progressive radicalism as Benito Pérez Galdós, Clarín (Leopoldo Alas), and Ramón J. Sender. The cause for this blind spot, Valis argues, is quite simply prejudice: a whole generation of critics has let their own secularism get the better of them. “[U]nder the somewhat belated and dismal impact of Michel Foucault,” she writes, “... critics have ignored ... the question of faith and belief, the relation between religion and identity, or between religion and community, and above all the influence of religion on structures of the imagination in narrative.” This is no surprise; as it turns out, “posthumanist and poststructuralist approaches like Foucauldianism do not appear well equipped to deal with issues like religion precisely because they see everything, including religion, as purely secular or secularized” (5).

How does Valis make her case? A long introduction—in which she covers everything from the nature of religious belief to the drawn-out conflict between the Catholic church and modernizing forces over the last three centuries of Spanish history—lays the groundwork for eight detailed, chronologically organized literary analyses covering three moments of religious crisis: from the 1770s to the 1840s; the Restoration period (1875-1902); and the years of the Second Republic and the Civil War (1931-1939). Chapter 1, “The Relics of Faith,” takes on Cadalso’s *Noches lúgubres*, Pablo de Olavide’s *El evangelio en triunfo*, and Luis Gutiérrez’s *Cornelia Bororquia o La víctima de la Inquisición*, showing how the narrative interest in the lower classes is driven by a religiously inspired philanthropic-humanitarian impulse. Chapter 2, “The Philanthropic Embrace,” revisits *Fortunata y Jacinta* alongside Wenceslao Ayguals de Izco’s *María, la hija de un jornalero* to argue that both texts, in different ways, represent worlds in which social relations are conceived in terms of communion. For Galdós, novel writing itself becomes a form of philanthropy. Chapter 3, “The Confessional Body,” deals with *La Regenta*, arguing that beyond Clarín’s critique of religious institutions, the novel is driven by a trope of confession. Chapter 4, finally, “The Politics of Martyrdom,” discusses José María Carretero’s *La revolución de los patibularios* and Sender’s *Réquiem por un campesino español*, which, from opposite political perspectives, narrate the Civil War in terms of martyrdom and resurrection.

In these analyses, Valis makes three related arguments about the important but largely overlooked connections between religious faith and modern realism. First, at the level of content and focus, she argues that the realist novel often organizes itself around Catholic tropes such as communion, confession,

martyrdom, resurrection, and redemption. Second, she contends that at the level of form, the belief that realist fiction invites the reader to adopt is not unlike the belief that is the basis of religious faith. And third, she maintains that the realist novel drew on Catholic tradition to shape an ethical, humanitarian view of modern society as a network of human relations: a *communitas* shaped by the vision of the other as neighbor, the “empowering moral sense of obligation of one person to another” (244). “[T]he novel,” she writes, “builds ... an alternative site of community that reattaches us to being in the world with others” (55). In a brief epilogue, Valis points to the distorting legacy of Francoism on Spanish literary history. Ironically, it was in part the regime’s imposition of religious orthodoxy that shaped our “ideologically blinkered” notion of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Spanish narrative as fundamentally devoid of faith-based concerns.

One of the great merits of this book is that it pulls Spain into a major debate—perhaps *the* major debate—in contemporary cultural history. This is important precisely to the extent that Spain is a *Sonderfall*, a case apart. The truth is that Valis, as self-appointed defender of the non-reactionary potential of religion in general and Catholicism in particular, has her work cut out for her. Spain, after all, presents some peculiar challenges when it comes to thinking about the relationship between religion and modernity. Not only because for most of modern history the English- and Dutch-speaking north associated its Catholicism with its purported backwardness or *lack* of modernity in intellectual, political and economic terms, but also because for most of that same history the Catholic Church actually functioned as part of a power block that aimed to hold modernity at bay, if not to violently suppress it. If Spain’s modernizing liberal elites identified the Church as one of their most powerful adversaries, they were largely correct. And as we know, the role of religion in Spanish public life and culture continues to be a major political bone of contention.

Given the nature of her subject matter and the fact that she enters the debate taking a clear position, Valis sets herself up for an intellectual fight or two. This is to be lauded; polemics often serve to advance our thinking much more than dispassionate or overly polite analyses would. In that spirit, I will venture to draw some tentative question marks in the margins of Valis’s thought-provoking text.

I have two overarching, interrelated objections to her case. The first concerns the chain of equivalence that she establishes between the Catholic church, religion, the sacred, and the ethical (or what she alternatively describes as a “religiously infused, humanitarian sensibility,” “the sacred ground upon which the social bond rests,” or “a sacred ground of sociability and the possibility of

individual redemption” [6, 9]). “[A] sense of the sacred persists in ... apparently godless novels,” she writes, for instance, in the first couple of pages, quoting Pericles Lewis; later she similarly states: “Novels are secular projects insofar as they are in the world and of the world. But they are also ethically bound up in that world and to that extent beholden to things that are invisible, including the spirit” (235). I would argue that this persistent slippage in Valis’s argumentation between the religious, the spiritual, the sacred and the ethical is debatable in itself. More importantly, it allows Valis, as an advocate of the case for religion, to *appropriate* the ethical for her cause. Conversely, she can bracket the collusion between the Church and politically conservative sectors—most clearly embodied in the Franco regime—by arguing that the regime itself, by “effectively politicizing religion” and mobilizing faith for worldly power “ultimately secularized the religious sphere” (8, 241).

But this argument—and this is my second objection—is precisely the kind of rhetorical and philosophical move that drives critics like Hitchens up the wall, and rightly so. By equating the ethical with the religious and the political with the secular, Valis ultimately, and circularly, endorses the notion that, in the end, only religion can provide moral content to our lives, that all morality owes a debt to religion, and that a social world without faith is condemned to the bleakest of self-centered nihilisms. But isn’t this precisely the notion that secular liberalism and other progressive movements seek to challenge? If Sender turns Paco el del Molino into a worldly Christ, and Mosén Millán into a Judas, isn’t he precisely detaching—that is, liberating—the ethical potential of the New Testament from its clerical and biblical monopoly? It is true, as Valis writes, that “Sender’s faith ... is ultimately humanistic, even humanitarian” (235). But doesn’t that precisely make him a non-religious writer?

Valis’s densely argued and intellectually stimulating book usefully and convincingly points to the legacies, traces, and transformations of Catholic tropes and concerns in modern Spanish narrative, even in authors we tend to consider—and who thought of themselves as—liberal or anti-clerical. Whether those traces should be viewed in terms of continuity and debt, as Valis does, or rather in terms of break and emancipation, is a question that is still up for debate.

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