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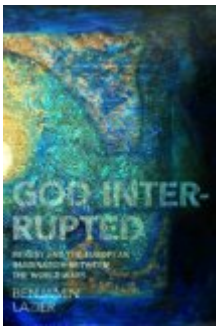


**Benjamin Lazier.** *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination between the World Wars.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. xiv + 254 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-13670-7.

**Reviewed by** Anna Yeatman

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**Commissioned by** Magdalena Zolkos (Centre for Citizenship and Public Policy, University of Western Sydney)

Modernity signals a tear in the fabric of mythology and theology where what is normative is understood as given to humankind and where human action is authorized if it follows or at least is contained within a mythical or divine template. Once a freedom for human artifice is authorized, it is impossible to restore this kind of wholeness, and the problem of a nihilistic self-authorization for the human subject is unleashed. Thomas Hobbes understood the legitimation problem of human artifice well. He subscribed to a Christian theology, but he insisted that the revealed word of God could not supply the basis of political authority for necessarily it was available only via human interpretation (artifice), and it was inevitable that human interpreters of God's word made it serve their own ends. To this degree, on the terms of this book, Hobbes committed the heresy of Gnosticism--a conception of God in a relationship of abandonment or dereliction to the world, a God that is absent from his creation. Yet Hobbes did not take this road, for he opened up a worldly alternative to heresy--one where human beings have to understand and follow the inherent logic of a world shaped by their own artifice. If it is their own imagination (artifice) that leads them into all kinds of paranoiac elaboration of the ordinary difficulties in reconciling their willed action with that of others--difficulties that follow the necessity of coexistence--then they can use their imagination and their reason to work out how to develop terms of coexistence that provide security for their existence as distinct subjects of artifice. Hobbes thereby suggested how the institutional artefact of a civil authority is able to work with the nature of human artifice. He did not do away with the divine so much as indicate that it is an order of being parallel to that of human artifice. Ian Hunter and others call this way of approaching the political "civil philosophy." It is not dissimilar to Hannah Arendt's insistence on the heteronomy of philosophy and the political--they address different orders of being, philosophy that is apprehended as truth by the individual knower, and

the political that is disclosed as a world shared with others in how the subject responds to the possibility of such a world in action.

In this wonderful, erudite, and beautifully written book, Benjamin Lazier suggests that the legitimation problem of human artifice assumed a particular urgency and topography in the period between the world wars. His focus is especially on how three Jewish thinkers--Hans Jonas, Leo Strauss, and Gershom Scholem--responded to what their contemporary Arendt recognized as the context for Walter Benjamin's work, the irreparable loss of authority for tradition, in his case the tradition of Judaism and a non-assimilated Jewish way of being. None of these thinkers wanted to reinstate orthodox Judaism; they could not avoid the modern freedom for human artifice, but they rejected a nihilist-existentialist celebration of the will--in the absence of God, the human subject is free to will its own being. They rejected this conclusion because it affirms an utter contingency or arbitrariness. Such freedom is without any normative orientation or restraint. It is as though the human subject arrogates to itself a divine creative power without the infinity or universality that is the divine.

In his own way, each of these thinkers insisted that it is vital that the human freedom for artifice not be mistaken as a freedom for self-creation. To make this insistence, each had to engage and learn from the two heresies of Gnosticism and pantheism that attend the development of the idea of a freedom for human artifice. These heresies are not new, but in the modern context they acquire the force of being the only possible intellectually cogent narratives of the divine. In Gnosticism, as already indicated, the divine is invoked in its absence from the world that humans have made, a world of destruction and sin. In pantheism, the divine is invoked as it inheres within worldly being. The problem with both heresies is that they are antagonistic to the world--Gnosticism by indicating the world as derelict in relation to the divine, and pantheism by conflating the divine with the world, thus robbing the world of its own distinctive being. Jonas offered a philosophical biology, a neo-Aristotelian account of the world as a living organism, as purposive nature. In so doing, he deliberately presented an alternative to the will to power, a normative reference point in ecology. Strauss offered a different conception of nature as a normative reference point for human artifice--this is a neo-Platonic conception of natural right, a conception of justice that precedes human artifice. Of the three, Scholem was most attracted to a nihilist celebration of a Jewish Zarathustra, a worldly messianism that, like pantheism, conflates human and divine creation. However, he argued that "Nietzsche's famous cry 'God is dead,' should have gone up first in a Kabbalistic text warning against the making of a Golem and linking the death of God to the realization of the idea of the Golem" (p. 194). The myth of the Golem, of course, is a story of the human arrogation of the divine power to create turning into a force for destruction of human beings and their world. Scholem recognized in Zionist messianism a contemporary Golem, and he argued against it, the tragedy as is now so clear of modern Israel. He argued that a freedom of artifice that appropriated to itself the omnipotence of the divine, figured as belonging to a specific (Jewish) tradition of the divine, should heed and come to know that tradition. As Lazier puts it "For Scholem--a dialectical animal through and through--to contest tradition meant implicitly to uphold it. Not ambivalence or sublimation or even studied violation, but only indifference to Jewish tradition did he condemn as 'educational murder'" (p. 199).

Lazier does not seek to rescue us from our modern predicament--to know or to refuse to know something of the chasm between that which has been invoked as the whole, as primordial chaos, as the eternal, and the specific contingencies of human artifice. He asks us to learn of this predicament from these thinkers and others who have sought to know something about it. He asks

us to recognize in them a struggle to come to terms with not just two terms but three: "Our most basic options are not two, but three: there is God and man, but there is also nature, earth, or world. There is political theology and political philosophy, but there is also, for lack of a better word, political ecology too. More important still, their example suggest it may be a misnomer to call them separate options at all. They demonstrate how easy it is for one to become another, how talk of God gets displaced into talk about ourselves and our world, and the inverse of that relation too. They suggest we are destined to live with all there, all at once, all the time" (p. 203). For Lazier, God cannot disappear, for the modern sensibility continues to dwell with and in God, albeit heretically.