

MONTAIGNE AND CHRISTIAN SECULARITY: An Alternative to Radical Orthodoxy

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE CONTESTED MEANINGS OF SECULARITY

Contemporary theological debates concerning the meaning and character of secularity are invariably structured by conflicting historical and methodological commitments. These differing approaches can be broadly divided under minimalist and comprehensive rubrics. On the minimalist front, political liberals and their theological sympathisers tend to define 'secularity' primarily in terms of the formation of a *neutral space*, where diverse communities and individuals can pursue their religious beliefs without interference from other individuals, communities or the state. As the philosopher Robert Audi summarises this principle:

[The] state should neither favour nor disfavour religion (nor the religious) *as such*, that is, give positive or negative preferences to institutions or persons simply because they are religious. As the reference to both positive and negative preference indicates, this principle requires neutrality, not

only among religions, but also between the religious and non-religious.¹

Yet, the peculiar paradox of secularism is that its commitment to neutrality depends upon a distinctive set of moral judgements concerning the treatment of individuals by groups and state-agencies. Secularism assumes for instance the normative worth of individual judgement as well as the significance of beliefs which are reached free from coercion. This is grounded in what Audi sees as the two central functions of the liberal state—namely the maintenance of individual liberty and the person’s equal treatment before the law.² Yet, since the function of these values is to guarantee the free expression of other values and practices, the goals of liberal secularity in this mould are ‘minimalist’ because such a settlement does not presuppose an all-inclusive view of politics or ethics.³ This being the case, secularity functions less as a strict doctrine and more like a pragmatic strategy. In this vein John Rawls suggests that:

Political liberalism does not question that many political and moral judgements of certain specified kinds are correct and it views many of them as reasonable. Nor does it question the possible truth of affirmations of faith. Above all it does not argue that we should be hesitant and uncertain, much less sceptical, about our own beliefs. Rather, we are to recognise the practical impossibility of reaching reasonable and workable agreement in judgement on the truth of comprehensive doctrines, especially an agreement that might serve the political purpose, say of achieving peace and concord in a society which is characterised by religious and philosophical differences.⁴

¹ Robert Audi, *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 33.

² Audi, *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason*, 38.

³ Steven Seidman, *Liberalism and the Origins of European Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 39.

⁴ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism: Extended Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993: 2005), 64.

From such a vantage point secularity does not promote a particular notion of the 'good' to be aimed at nor a single ideal to be actualised. From Rawls' standpoint, secularity is no more than a construction for avoiding the destructive effects of differences of practice and opinion between individuals and communities. Reflecting upon the epistemological implications of Rawls thesis, the Neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty suggests that a secular-liberal society is necessarily one in which 'the only test of a political proposal is its ability to gain assent from people who retrain radically diverse ideas about the point and meaning of human life, about the path to private perfection'⁵. In an effort to engage theologically with this reading of the secular, Christopher J. Insole has sought to draw attention to forms of Christian politics which value the neutral space which the likes of Rawls and Rorty seek to uphold. Stressing the constructive nature of the doctrine of sin, Insole argues that the recognition of human fallenness encourages 'caution about oneself, compassion for others and a sense of frailty and limitation of human agency'.⁶ Linking such a realization with the notion of a limited-state, Insole argues that a truly sin-sensitive politics should refuse the temptation to 'to save human souls by the use of public power'⁷—whether by coercion and privilege. Providing theological validation for a recognisably Rawlsian compromise Insole declares:

The state must be silent about religious truth, not because there is none, but because it is hard to discern and the attempt to impose upon others leads to conflict and oppression. So we have the characteristic liberal call to religious tolerance, but then justified in terms of the Christian virtue of charity.⁸

⁵ Richard Rorty, 'Religion as Conversation-stopper', in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin: 1999), 173.

⁶ Christopher J. Insole, *The Politics of Human Frailty: A Theological Defence of Political Liberalism*, (London: SCM Press, 2004), 36.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

In contrast to this positive reception of secularity, many anti-liberals (in particular within Radical Orthodoxy) suggest that far from being an expression of impartiality, liberal notions of the secular are part of a cultural smokescreen to obscure the ideological nature of the secularist. Re-framing neutrality as a form of negation, Radical Orthodoxy sees secularity as the multiple withdrawal of Christological, ecclesial and teleological realities from Western culture and their confinement to the private sphere. In the wake of such retreat, both John Milbank and Graham Ward see the rise of public culture populated by citizens who replicate reflexive individualisms, rooted in patterns of private gratification, interiority and self-creation. Under secularity, human life is no longer located within a doxological context (that of a 'given' world praising its Creator) but rather as something *artificial*. As Milbank reflects, at the core of secularity is the realm of *factum* (the made) so that the 'conception of society as a human product and therefore 'historical' remains one of the basic assumptions of secular social science'⁹. Interlocked with such a critique, Radical Orthodoxy also seeks to expose the pervasive colonies of moral relativism and anomie within the secular. Finding in its social artificiality the ontological emptiness of nihilism, Milbank mourns the modern dissolution of the human self as an agent of spiritual and moral truth and the reduction of the human being to an expression of instrumental computation or a naturalistic will to survival. One of the most significant casualties of this secular anthropology for Radical Orthodoxy is the human body itself. Under the liturgical patterns of Christendom, argues Ward, the human body was a symbolically charged site of divine imitation whereby each person 'stands analogically to Christ, fashioning icons of the primordial Word'.¹⁰

⁹ John Milbank, 'Political theology and the new science of politics', in *The Radical Orthodox Reader*, ed. John Milbank & Simon Oliver (London: Routledge, 2009), 180.

¹⁰ Graham Ward, 'The Beauty of God', in *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 42.

Under this Christological scheme, our actions are portals to living and reproducing the presence of God's incarnation, while our bodies are centres of an unfolding mystery of divine creativity. Yet according to the Ward's reading, a secular body has no sacramental significance. It is 'mechanical'¹¹ and physiological, understood as 'mere flesh'¹² without any metaphysical dimension. As Ward notes, '[T]here is no longer a controlling sacramental world order analogically related to a transcendental principle. We are now the makers of our world and of any meaning, moral or otherwise that we might find in it'.¹³ Accordingly, secularity represents not merely the retreat of religion into a clandestine world, but the withdrawal of transcendental meaning from experience, even down to our physicality. In its appeal to privacy, secularity in actual fact initiates a deprivation of our essential nature. For Augustine the private was intimately related to sin (which he understood as *privatio boni*).¹⁴ Taking up this theme Ward sees in the secular postulation of neutral space an institutionalised denial of our need for community. Severed from 'a theological account of grace-bound nature', the secular individual sees sociality as a personal option, something that 'humans make themselves'.¹⁵ Thus, unlike the minimalistic and ultimately pragmatic creed offered by its liberal advocates, secularity is seen to actively promote a form of life which excludes appeals to the transcendental and the sacramental.

What should we make of this contest between minimalist and comprehensive interpretations? So at variance are these two readings of secularity that it is difficult to see how one would begin either to choose between them, or begin

¹¹ Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Post-material Citizens* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 229.

¹² *Ibid.*, 222.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 229.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 230.

any form of meaningful dialogue. Ultimately, the Radical Orthodox objection to secularity is rooted in the sphere of motive. While secularists declare their politics to be minimalist, Radical Orthodoxy claims to 'know' the real convictions of secularists—perhaps better than secularists do themselves. Rejecting both the thesis of secular minimalism and the Milbankian 'hermeneutic of suspicion', this article sets out a new point of departure, one which consciously avoids the stifling polarities of crusading secularity and embattled Christianity. While taking seriously the Radical Orthodox claim that secularity is a comprehensive and not minimalist phenomenon, I reject the suggestion that such comprehensiveness is necessarily inimical to Christian community or revelation. Through a close reading of the French essayist and nobleman Michel de Montaigne [1533-1592] I point to the existence of a neglected form of Christian secularity, which destabilises dualistic readings of religion and modernity and thus provides space for an alternative. In the first part of this article I consider two contrasting portraits of Montaigne current among academic commentators. The first is Montaigne the secularist. Drawing on contemporary literary and historical analysis, I suggest that many of Montaigne's key philosophical commitments can be understood as conforming to the negative characterisations of secularity as provided by Radical Orthodoxy. Seemingly animated by a self-directing individualism, Montaigne emerges in this discourse as a deeply private self, fundamentally detached from the world around him. Compounded by his cultural relativism and anthropological inquisitiveness, Montaigne appears an unlikely figure from which to draw a positive theological reading of secularity. In a bid to challenge this impression, I examine a second, somewhat neglected portrait; that of Montaigne the Catholic intellectual. Drawing links between the religiosity of the *Essays* compared to the Augustinian tradition, I attempt to recast Montaigne as a sophisticated theological voice, actively engaged in contemporary debates around grace, knowledge and divine intervention.

Central to this account is Montaigne's creative synthesis of Ancient Scepticism and the Augustinian tradition. Examining the impact of this fusion on Montaigne's attitudes towards the church and the state, I illustrate the way in which Montaigne develops innovative model of Christian reflection rooted in a radical vision of grace. Extending this latter account, the second part of this article attempts to knit together these secular and religious aspects to Montaigne's character. Reinterpreting his apparent secularity as an extension of his Sceptically-inclined Catholicism, I suggest that what Radical Orthodoxy perceives as a negation of sacred is for Montaigne an opportunity for a revitalised Christian discipleship. Examining Montaigne's response to social difference, personal privacy and relativism, I position Montaigne as an advocate of a deeply Christian form of secularity which has the potential to provide as an effective counter-argument Radical Orthodox readings and providing new points of encounter between Christians and secularists.

2. MONTAIGNE AS SECULARIST

The image of Montaigne as a proto-secularist in the minimalist mould possesses an enduring appeal within the academy. Such a fact can be explained as much by his biography as a result of the intellectual richness of his *Essays*. Born to a Catholic father and a Jewish Christian mother, Montaigne seems to have developed penetrating insights into the defining religious polarities of his age. In reflecting on the bloody sectarian strife which defined 16th century Europe, Montaigne shows a degree of critical independence from faction. While as a Catholic observer, Montaigne is understandably horrified by the violence unleashed by Protestantism, he nevertheless attempted to understand the central disputes of the Reformation, familiarising himself with the doctrinal disputes of the Calvinists, Lutherans and many other shades of Protestant opinion. Montaigne's intellectual engagement with these arcane quarrels reveals a deep

appreciation of religious differences. Montaigne's inquisitiveness is in stark contrast to the polarising religious politics of mutual suspicion which characterised the period. In his recognition of 'heretics' as constituting distinct and theologically rich communities, he portrays himself as an anthropological observer rather than zealot. Like the minimalist secularist, Montaigne appears to recognise the fact of 'diversity' and possesses little desire to suppress it. Such generosity has been read by a number of commentators to indicate shades of secularity. The British economist Deepak Lal has favourably compared Montaigne's attitudes to the policies of Henry IV of France who attempted to establish 'a religiously tolerant secular state',¹⁶ while political scholar April Carter has suggested that 'Montaigne anticipated the Enlightenment sense of a common humanity transcending diversity of religion and custom, and the Enlightenment reaction to unnecessary cruelties'.¹⁷ In both cases, Montaigne emerges as a significant secular voice because of his tolerance towards religious difference.

Yet alongside these rather Rawlsian snapshots of Montaigne, there exists a more substantial interpretation of his secularity recognisable to Radical Orthodox critics. This is vividly illustrated when we examine Montaigne's recourse to a radical philosophy of privacy. In his work unearthing the roots of the modern world, Charles Taylor includes Montaigne within rich canon of thinkers who express a fundamental rupture with a pre-modern world. Pointing to the existence of a buffeted self (which formulates an 'an inner realm of thought and feeling to be explored'¹⁸) Taylor defines the secular as the intensification of an inwardness and self-focus, which leads to a deepening

¹⁶ Deepak Lal, *Reviving The Invisible Hand: The Case For Classical Liberalism In The Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Princeton University, 2006), 228.

¹⁷ April Carter, *Political Theory of Global Citizenship* (London: Routledge, 2001), 22.

¹⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2007), 539.

retreat of value and 'enchantment' into the self.¹⁹ This is expressed throughout Montaigne's *Essays*, but seen most vividly in *On Solitude* where Montaigne advises his reader to 'Retire into yourself, but first prepare to receive yourself there'.²⁰ Combining a highly Stoic contempt of the crowd with an ease with his own company, Montaigne renounces the imposition of public service in favour of an expansive life of self-reflection. In the seclusion of his library, Montaigne writes free-flowing explorations of his experience, expressing conflicting motives, and contradictory positions. He does not strive towards unified 'truths' about himself, rather he simply wishes to present things as they are at the moment of composition. Montaigne notes in his essay *Of Repentance*:

I do not portray being; I portray passing. Not the passings from one age to another or, as the people say, from seven years to seven years, but from day to day, from minute to minute. My history needs to be adapted to the moment. I may presently change, not only by chance, but also by intention.²¹

Such fluidity of self have led scholars like Patrick Riley to conclude that while Montaigne's introspection superficially resembles Augustinian confessional practice by asking many of the same questions,²² Montaigne's aim is ultimately secular because his project is insufficiently grounded in a narrative of sin and redemption. While Augustine is only interested in those aspects of life which relate to salvation,²³ Riley suggests that Montaigne sees 'the self' as 'strictly indivisible, that its entire history, its every component forms part of an irreducible totality'.²⁴ In contrast to *Confessions*, the *Essays* are 'an attempt to give

¹⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2007), 540.

²⁰ Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, trans. by Donald M. Frame (London: Everyman's Library, 1943), 221.

²¹ Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, 40.

²² Patrick Riley, *The Character and Conversion: Augustine, Montaigne, Descartes, Rousseau and Sartre* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 61.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

a voice to that totality, to represent the fullness and indivisibility of the self.²⁵ Drawing out the significance of these differences, Riley points to the seeming gulf between Augustine and Montaigne at level of meaning. While Riley characterises Augustinian confessional rhetoric as locating ‘the self’s essence *beyond* the self’²⁶ in Montaigne ‘the soul has no destiny towards which it gravitates’.²⁷ Riley views Montaigne as rejoicing in ‘the soul’s ‘constant becoming’.²⁸ Illustrating this visible gulf on the telos of the self, Montaigne reflects: ‘I live from day to day, and, without wish to be disrespectful, I live only for myself; my purposes go no further’.²⁹ Such sentiments leave the contemporary reader with the impression that the self and its subjectivities is at the hub of Montaigne’s interest and writing.

The conclusions which Montaigne draws from this fluid conception of self are hardly reassuring from the perspective of Radical Orthodoxy. While Ward has called for the return to a pre-modern vision of sacramentality, Montaigne’s private self actually strips the world of such meaning. In the face of the European discovery of the American continent, Montaigne was particularly sensitive to the various ways in which human beings differed from one another at the level of custom. Questioning scholastic formulations of a universal moral law, Montaigne instead envisions human beings as forming their moral judgements in the context of various geographies and biases, which in turn cause the emergence of diverse ethical codes. This causes Montaigne to conclude in his *Apology to Raymond Sebond* that ‘the murder of infants, the murder of fathers, sharing of wives, traffic in robberies, licence for all sorts of sensual pleasures, nothing in short is extreme

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 65.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, 763.

that it is not accepted by the huge number of some nation'.³⁰ The reason for such differences between human beings is for Montaigne a function of perspective whereby '[one] nation looks at one side of a thing and stops there; another at another'.³¹ Here Montaigne can be seen to radicalise one of the central philosophical problems generated by the Reformation; the foundation of claims to religious and moral authority. Catholic disdain for Protestant innovation was rooted in the view that the followers of Luther had no basis for their religious conclusions other than the subjective impressions of conscience.³² Montaigne significantly extends this anxiety by implicitly suggesting that this not just a problem faced by Protestants, but something faced by every human being.

Where does this pessimistic epistemology come from? For Montaigne it stems from a close reading of the Pyrrhonian Sceptics. Central to the Ancient Sceptical tradition was the claim that social relationships and customs are a more reliable guide to living than either the senses or the intellect. In this vein, society is structured, not according to rules of philosophical verification, but sentiments and reflexes hallowed by use and time. As Montaigne writes: 'the laws of conscience, which we say are born of nature, are born of custom. Each man holding inward veneration the opinions and behaviour approved and accepted around him cannot break loose from them without remorse, or to apply himself to them without self-satisfaction.' Thus our judgements on important matters are irredeemably prejudiced so that 'what is off the hinges of custom, people believe to be off the hinges of reason'.³³ In acknowledging the insubstantial and variable nature of human mores, we are inclined to view Montaigne's secularity through Radical Orthodox lens; constructionist, self-focused and relativistic. These

³⁰ Ibid., 532.

³¹ Ibid., 532.

³² Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Erasmus to Spinoza* (London: University of California, 1979), 8.

³³ Ibid., 100.

features have led a number of scholars to question the nature of Montaigne's professed Catholicism. The liberal-secularist Judith Shklar argues that the innovative content of Montaigne's *Essays* reveal a loss of faith in Christianity, 'though perhaps not God'³⁴ while the philosophical historian Richard H. Popkin is inclined to the view that 'Montaigne was probably mildly religious, although not much more'.³⁵ What shall we make of such assessments? While acknowledging Montaigne's role in shaping modern secularity, I suggest that many contemporary portraits of Montaigne underestimate the degree to which theological reflection underlies his secular postures. Far from merely resembling an Augustinian model of confession as Riley claims, I suggest that Montaigne's models of selfhood, ethics and anthropological detachment shows him to be a theologically creative interpreter of Augustine's theology. At the centre of this process is Montaigne's commitment to ancient Scepticism, which offers Montaigne a rich landscape in which to develop his Christian faith. To begin this argument, I seek to establish Montaigne as a contentious reader of Augustine's theology. Examining both the source material of the *Essays* and their historical context, I locate strong theological currents of illuminationism, grace and faith, which defy lukewarm depictions of Montaigne's Christianity.

3. MONTAIGNE AS INTERPRETER OF AUGUSTINE

In the seminal philosophical and theological struggles of the sixteenth century, Augustine's theological legacy played a decisive role. It was after all Augustine who served as the frame in which both Luther and Erasmus disputed the

³⁴ Judith N. Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1984), 10.

³⁵ Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Erasmus to Spinoza* (London: University of California, 1979), 55.

freedom of the will,³⁶ while Augustinian models of salvation and grace animated the work of John Calvin³⁷ as much as the Counter-Reformers at the Council of Trent.³⁸ Whether one was engaged in the restoration of the True Church (as with Luther and Calvin), or saw the reform and protection of Christendom as paramount (as with Erasmus) Augustine was a central authoritative voice. Given this fact, it is no exaggeration to say that being a public theologian in this period meant being a conscientious reader of Augustine—or at the very least a conscientious reader of Augustine's interpreters. On this qualification, many commentators have attempted to disqualify Montaigne as a serious theological voice. Hugo Friedrich in his survey of Montaigne's Christian sources argues that Montaigne reads 'the Bible with the eyes of an intellect fond of hellenistic wisdom'³⁹ and suggests that Montaigne's use of Augustine is entirely instrumental, lacking an appreciation of Augustine's apologetic objectives.⁴⁰ Going further, other readers, most notably the novelist Andre Gide,⁴¹ have suggested that a scarcity of explicit Christian doctrine in Montaigne a covert atheism. While it is true that Montaigne's religiosity was of a highly individual kind, I do not think this disqualifies him from being a significant theological voice. Indeed, despite his Classicism and seeming lightness of doctrine, Montaigne could be seen as actually adopting highly orthodox postures which have their origin in his negotiation with Augustine and his tradition.

³⁶ Greta Grace Kroeker, *Erasmus in the Footsteps of Paul* (London: University Press, 2011), 138.

³⁷ Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin, Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 16.

³⁸ Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 23.

³⁹ Hugo Friedrich, *Montaigne*, trans. Dawn Eng (Oxford: University California Press, 1991), 81.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴¹ See Wendell John Coats, *Montaigne's Essais*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004), 95.

Montaigne's debt to Augustine appears in both direct and indirect forms. While Montaigne seems not to have read Augustine's *Confessions*,⁴² *City of God* stretches right across Montaigne's *Essays* with citations of Augustine used in such seminal topics as the relation between body and soul,⁴³ knowledge of God,⁴⁴ the freedom of the will,⁴⁵ as well as miracles.⁴⁶ More significant than these direct uses is Montaigne's vivid adoption of an Augustinian framework to investigate his own identity. While Montaigne's *Essays* are theoretically playful, combining personal anecdote with the various insights of both Classical and Christian authors, his theological trajectories are unmistakably derived from Augustine. Adopting a firm ontological distinction between Creator and created, Montaigne views human existence in profoundly Augustinian terms, stressing the primacy of God's grace in giving human life both its meaning and agency. In his *Apology*, Montaigne reflects:

Now our human reason and arguments are as it were the heavy and barren matter; the grace of God is their form; it is that which gives them shape and value. Just as the virtuous actions of Socrates and Cato remain vain and useless because they did not direct them towards the end of loving and obeying the true creator of all things, and because they did not know God so it is with our ideas and reasonings; they have a certain body, but it is a shapeless mass, without form or light, if faith or divine grace is not added to it.⁴⁷

Montaigne's connection between the activity of divine grace and human knowledge leads us to consider another key aspect of the Augustinianism present in his work (whether explicitly or not); his frequent appeal to an illuminationist epistemology. One of Augustine's most distinctive intellectual

⁴² Riley, *The Character and Conversion*, 61.

⁴³ Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, 1043.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 481.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 396.

contributions to the formation of medieval philosophy was his doctrine of divine illumination, which attempted to offer a theological alternative to the Platonic theory of knowledge as the recollection of a pre-existing soul. In its place, Augustine postulated an epistemologically activist view of God which views the Creator continually intervening in the formation of our mental ideas in order to correct and fortify them against errors.⁴⁸ Assenting to this Augustinian doctrine, Montaigne dramatises it by looking back to the philosophers of the classical past. Making sympathetic use of the figure of Socrates, Montaigne finds a convincing model of a life given over to divine dependence. Finding inspiration in Socrates' practice of contentious doubt, 'never concluding, never satisfying',⁴⁹ Montaigne places in himself in a Socratic position, recognising the insufficiency of his reason to discern the truth. It is by this philosophical road that Montaigne discovers his need for the Augustinian doctrine of divine illumination. In the Socratic world of uncertainty, it cannot be reason that delivers us into knowledge, but only God's gracious action. As Montaigne notes at the beginning of his *Apology* on the matter of Christian doctrine:

I think thus, that a thing so divine and so lofty and so far surpassing human intelligence as is this truth with which it has pleased the goodness of God to enlighten us, it is very necessary that he still us his help, by extraordinary and privileged favour, so that we may conceive it and lodge it in us. And I do not think that purely human means are at all capable of this; if they were, so many rare and excellent souls so abundantly furnished with natural powers, in

⁴⁸ Augustine uses a combination of didactic and luminescent imagery derived from Platonic sources. With this, he perceives Christ as the Truth and our inward Teacher, who reveals to us the real nature of objects or ideas. These, if left without divine encounter, would remain dim to our understanding. The Fourth Gospel's claim, that all are enlightened by the Word [John 1.9] becomes for Augustine an affirmation of epistemic security. In his useful study of Augustine's epistemology, Ronald H. Nash identifies three core elements of the illumination theory: '(1) God is light and illuminates all men to different degrees, (2) There are intelligible truths, the *rationes aeternae*, which God illuminates, and (3) The mind of man can know the divine truths only as God illuminates him'—see Ronald H. Nash, *The Light of the Mind: St Augustine's Theory of Knowledge* (Lima: Academic Renewal Press, 2003), 92.

⁴⁹ Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, 458.

ancient times, would not have failed to arrive at this knowledge through their reason.⁵⁰

As if to underline this illuminationist point, Montaigne goes on to place reason's powers firmly at the discretion of God. Couching this theological claim in the myth of Athena's birth, Montaigne notes: 'For true and essential reason, whose name we steal on false pretences, dwells in the bosom of God; there is her lair and her retreat, it is from there that she issues when God is pleased to let us see some ray of her, as Pallas sailed from the head of her father to communicate herself to the world'.⁵¹ Here Montaigne's allegorical fusion of human reason with the 'ray' of Athena is significant since it reveals a much overlooked Christological dimension to Montaigne's thought. Like the author of the Fourth Gospel, Montaigne wishes to show us that human knowledge cannot be discovered without the encounter between God's Word and the human mind. Following this theological trajectory, Montaigne affirms that while reason 'exists in the soul',⁵² it gains its ultimate potency from ideas it gains from God so that 'there cannot be first principles for men unless the Divinity has revealed them'.⁵³ Without God's intervention, says Montaigne, 'we are nothing'.⁵⁴

Given this radical dependence upon God for knowledge, how does Montaigne think one should live? Here we come to the third element of Augustine's influence upon Montaigne; his conception of Christian life as one of faith. In understanding Montaigne's *Essays*, contemporary scholars tend to emphasise Pyrrhonian Scepticism at the expense of Augustine, when seeking out formative philosophical influences. According to this interpretation, Montaigne's posture of radical doubt needs to be understood, primarily in terms of a loss of

⁵⁰ Ibid., 389.

⁵¹ Ibid., 492.

⁵² Ibid., 492.

⁵³ Ibid., 491.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 447.

confidence in religious dogma, a process that Richard Popkin has called this Montaigne's *crise pyrrhoniennne*.⁵⁵ On the back of such a claim, scholars including Christian Thorne have argued that Montaigne had no interest in 'revitalising Catholic dogma' but preferred to remain aloof from theological disputes and the wider Counter-Reformation.⁵⁶ Yet, I suggest that by choosing Scepticism over Augustine when analysing Montaigne, one introduces a false distinction between theological conviction and philosophical reflection. Yet, Montaigne's use of radical doubt leads him, not to the renunciation of formal religious identification (like Spinoza a century after him)⁵⁷ but instead to a return to dogmatic faith with a renewed fervency. Indeed, Montaigne condemns Catholics for wavering under Protestant opposition:

It seems to them (Catholics) that they are being very moderate and understanding when they yield to their opponents some of the articles in dispute. But besides the fact that they do not see what an advantage it is to the man charging you for you for you to give ground and withdraw, and how much that encourages him to pursue his point, those articles which they select as the most trivial are sometimes very important. We must either submit completely to our ecclesial government, or do without it completely. It is not for us to decide what portion of obedience we owe to it.⁵⁸

What explains this apparent contradiction of sceptical allegiance? This incongruity can partly be explained by Montaigne's creative engagement with Scripture. In the midst of the doubt stimulated by the Sceptics, Montaigne's first recourse was to examine Scripture for moral solace. Like Pascal after him, Montaigne found particular spiritual nourishment in *Ecclesiastes*, which taught

⁵⁵ Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Erasmus to Spinoza* (London: University of California Press, 1979), 43.

⁵⁶ Christian Thorne, *The Dialectic of Counter-Enlightenment* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2009), 102.

⁵⁷ Popkin, *The History of Scepticism*, 241.

⁵⁸ Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, 163.

that doubt could serve as a preparation for service to God. The progression of the Preacher from his claim that ‘all is vanity’ [Eccles 1.2.] to his eventual praise of God, must have offered succour for a young man who according to Popkin, saw ‘his entire intellectual world dissolve into complete doubt’⁵⁹ because of reading of Sceptics. So impressed was Montaigne by *Ecclesiastes* that the walls of his library at Bordeaux are inscribed with direct and conjectural epigrams from the text.⁶⁰ The *Essays* are equally littered with direct quotations as well as multiple allusions to the book, examining many of its core themes including vanity,⁶¹ the common destiny of humans and animals,⁶² as well as the necessity to fulfil one’s vows to God ‘and keep his commandments’ [Eccles 12:13] in contrast to the futility of obtaining knowledge.⁶³ One of the titles of his essays, *All things have their season* is a direct quotation from *Ecclesiastes* [3.1].⁶⁴ Alongside *Ecclesiastes*, Montaigne also finds a receptive theological companion in St Paul. Emphasising both the anti-philosophical and Apophatic turns within the Pauline corpus,⁶⁵ Montaigne is drawn towards Paul’s images of Christian wisdom:

The weakness of our judgement helps us more than its strength and our blindness more than our clear-sightedness. It is by the mediation of that divine learning. It is no wonder if our natural and earthly powers cannot conceive that the supernatural and heavenly knowledge; For as it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? Where the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? Hath God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after

⁵⁹ Popkin, 43.

⁶⁰ T.A. Perry, ‘Montaigne’s Essay on Vanity and Kohelet’ in *From Iberia to Diaspora: Studies in Sephardic History and Culture*, ed. Yeddia K. Stillman & Norman A. Stillman (Lieden: Brill, 1997), 115.

⁶¹ Montaigne, 273.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 401; see *Eccles* 9:3.

⁶³ Montaigne, 444, 447.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 644.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 468.

that the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" [1 Corinthians 1:25].⁶⁶

Interpreting this motif through Sceptical lenses, Montaigne discovers theological warrant for the Pyrrhonian rejection of discursive argument. His doubt is thus transformed from an obstacle into a tool of faith. Yet, is such a conclusion sufficient to sustain one's religious convictions? Montaigne finds a positive answer to this question by theologically codifying his scriptural reading by adopting a roundly Augustinian understanding of faith. Summarising Augustine's definition, Philip Cary writes, 'Augustine defines faith, not as belief in Christ but as belief in the mind's need for purification and healing in order to see God—a belief that makes it willing to following 'doctor's orders', that is, to obey the divine commands that make for virtuous living'.⁶⁷ In this way, Augustine has faith precede both doctrinal statement and theological proposition, since without faith, one would neither be willing nor able to hear, much less heed, the call of divine revelation [Isa 7:9]. The function of the Church according to this formulation is not to furnish our minds with logical expositions of the workings of God, the natures of Christ or the dynamics of the Trinity, but rather to train us precisely in Pauline 'foolishness'; to accept what we do not fully understand and to believe what reason initially denies. In this mould God is not an object ready for our study, rather God is a horizon, the end of which we cannot grasp, yet we are nonetheless propelled onwards towards our goal. In short, Augustine's conception is primarily mystical and not axiomatic. Faith is not a solver of problems; rather it is an initiator of an ongoing relationship with the majesty of God. Montaigne continually appeals to this model of fidelity throughout the *Essays*, offering it as an antidote to the religious confusion of his

⁶⁶ Ibid., 449.

⁶⁷ Phillip Cary, *Inner Grace: Augustine in the Traditions of Plato and Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12.

age. For this purpose he adopts a series of recognisably Augustinian stances which emphasise the primacy of faith in answering religious questions. One of the most visible instances of this approach is found in Montaigne's attitude towards miracles. The most lucid exposition of the Augustinian position on the subject can be found in Chapter 21 in *City of God*; where Augustine mounts a defence of the Christian belief in miracles on the basis of the limitations of human reason:

[T]he unbelievers demand a rational proof from us when we proclaim the miracles of God in the past and his miraculous and his marvellous works which are still to come which we cannot present to the experience of the unbelievers. And since we cannot supply this rational proof of those matters (for they are beyond the powers of the human mind the unbelievers assume our statements are false whereas they themselves ought to supply a rational explanation of all those amazing phenomena which we observe or at any rate, are able to observe. And if they see that this is beyond man's capacity they should admit the fact that a rational explanation cannot be given for something does not mean that it could not have happened in the past, or that it could not happen in the future, seeing that there are these things in the present which are equally inscrutable to rational explanation.⁶⁸

Reviving Augustine's limited-reason defence of miracles, Montaigne condemns various shades of refutation. Of particular annoyance to Montaigne are those who insist either upon an inflexible understanding of nature, or else, attempt to define God's abilities. The worst offenders for Montaigne are those Scholastics, who, with their enthusiasm for logical definition, would bind God to the laws of nature or the diktat of Aristotelian syllogisms.⁶⁹ Montaigne complains in the *Apology*: '[I]t has always seemed to me that for a Christian this kind of talk is full of indiscretion and irrelevance: "God cannot die, God cannot go back on his word, God cannot do this or that." I do not think it is good to confine the

⁶⁸ Augustine, *City of God*, 971.

⁶⁹ Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, 475.

divine power thus under laws of our speech.⁷⁰ In contrast to such idle speculation, Montaigne prefers an intellectually bounded religion; one which holds as central the ineffability of God and the weakness of human inquiry to fathom Him. While Scholastic thinkers attempted to describe the operation of the divine law through appeal to their reason, Montaigne hazards that we live under a 'municipal law'⁷¹ having no grasp of the universal law which is at God's discretion. In place of a prideful overreach Montaigne suggests (quoting Augustine) that 'God is better known by not knowing'.⁷² The true Christian, thinks Montaigne, lives in the midst of this paradox of seeking the unknown, unlike the presumptuous who seek a counterfeit deity after their own fashion.⁷³ Rejecting the multiple idolatries of philosophers and religious experts of all kinds, Montaigne settles on the 'hidden and unknown Deity' honoured by St Paul in visit to Athens [Acts 17:23], a deity who sustains and orders the world in a way beyond our comprehension.⁷⁴ Alongside these general remarks on the mystery of divine power, Montaigne's philosophical Scepticism inclines him to lend support to particular instances of miracles on the basis that it unwise to 'disdain what we do not comprehend' when faced with the 'infinite power of nature'.⁷⁵ In place of contempt, says Montaigne, we should take seriously the manifold accounts of those who have been party to the miraculous. This does not mean that we should believe in every miracle we hear, but we should certainly not doubt them all either:

When we read in Bouchet about the miracles done by the relics of St Hillary, let it go; his credit is not great enough to take away our right to contradict him. But to condemn

⁷⁰ Ibid., 476.

⁷¹ Ibid., 473.

⁷² Ibid., 448, quoting Augustine, *On Order* [2.16.42].

⁷³ Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, 480.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 462.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 163.

wholesale all similar stories seems to me a singular imprudence. The great Saint Augustine testifies that he saw a blind child recover his sight upon the relics of St Gervase and St Protasius at Milan; a woman at Carthage cured of a cancer by the sign cross made over her; Hesperius, a close friend of his, cast out the spirits that infested his house from a little earth from the sepulchre of Our Lord and a paralytic promptly cured by this earth later, when it had been carried to church; a woman in a possession having touched St Stephen's shrine with a bouquet and rubbed her eyes with this bouquet recover her long-lost sight; and he reports many other miracles at which he himself was present. Of what shall we accuse both him and two holy bishops, Aurelius and Maximinus, whom he calls on as his witnesses? Shall it be of ignorance, simplicity, credulity, or of knavery and imposture? Is there any man in our time so imprudent that he thinks himself comparable, either in virtue and piety, or in learning, judgement and ability?⁷⁶

On preliminary inspection this passage seems strange. How could a professed follower of the Sceptics construct an argument in favour of miracles? Such a defence would only be incredible if Montaigne was a pure Sceptic. In antiquity the Ancient Sceptics treated religion as a wholly ritualistic practice, suspending any judgement on the validity or otherwise of religious claims. This was far from Montaigne's view. For him Scepticism was not in opposition to the affirmation of religious truth. In fact, the Sceptical dissolution of certainty invites the mind to renounce its closed assumptions and revel in the ambiguous, the strange and the unbelievable. In such a shadowy world, unhampered by narrow certainties, the miraculous, the fusion of nature and grace is possible. According to the philosopher Ann Hartle:

Montaigne blurs the distinction between nature and grace not because he denies the presence of the sacred in human life, but because he sees the presence of grace everywhere. Or to put the matter in skeptical terms, human reason cannot make the distinction between nature and grace. In this sense,

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Montaigne's skepticism is his faith; faith cannot assume to know and does not need to know whether the cause of any given action is nature or grace.⁷⁷

While theological critics of Montaigne tend to condemn him for his drastic diminution of reason and his reliance on faith (fideism) Hartle points us towards the profound strain of orthodoxy which underpins many of Montaigne's seemingly heterodox positions. For all its unsettling power his Scepticism is both open and moderate, bound to a Christian tradition which it both defends and nurtures. In an age which saw Europeans Christians die for abstract doctrinal disputes, Montaigne attempts to use doubt to bring people back to an earlier Augustinian conception of Christendom, one in which doubt serves to impart a greater sense of dependence upon God, in place of intellectual prowess. The Augustine who rallied against the conceit of the ancient philosophers finds new intellect energy in Montaigne, who rejects the stale logic of Scholasticism in favour of a God of mystery. The universe is not an elegant system of propositions to be argued about but a fully providential creation underpinned by the unknown and unquantifiable. Such a trajectory not merely expresses a reverence for the miraculous, but a desire to see the end of a poisonous sectarianism between Protestants and Catholics.

In his appreciation for theological incompleteness he eschews the fixed positions which were driving Christian Europe apart. Such innovative responses tell us something significant about his character. Montaigne was a man of considerable intellectual gravitas. His *Essays* offer more than a personal exploration of himself, but contain a kind of experiential theology which attempts to understand fully and seriously the logical and personal consequences of the doctrine of grace by testing it in various fields. Far from being a merely casual reader of Augustine, Montaigne is a fully engaged interpreter, possessing a

⁷⁷ Ann Hartle, *Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6.

theological sophistication which is little appreciated by his secular admirers. Keeping this Augustinian portrait firmly in view, I proceed to examine its implications for the secular readings of Montaigne we encountered earlier. Rejecting any disjunction between his secularity and religiosity, I posit that Montaigne's approaches to social difference, selfhood and anthropological reflection are in fact innovative re-workings of Augustinian legacies. Montaigne's *Essays* do not marginalise Christian faith and practice; rather they are an attempt at finding new models of faithfulness in the midst of the institutional disintegration of Christendom. Emphasising in particular the didactic function of his secular turns in relation to relativism, selfhood and anthropological distance, I claim that Montaigne offers a distinctive mode of discipleship which provides an alternative reading of the secular.

4. MONTAIGNE: RELATIVISM AND GRACE

At the heart of Montaigne's theology is the notion of obedience. For Montaigne, God possesses manifold opportunities to reveal his nature to human beings through physical signs; in miracles and in the sacraments and ceremonies of the Apostolic Church. By what Montaigne regards as 'a common supernatural inspiration' shadows of the true faith are also communicated to those who have not even heard of the Church of Christ.⁷⁸ In these diverse communications God seeks to instruct us in making known our arrogance, tempering our hubris and chastising our vanity.⁷⁹ Yet, in a world of competing sects and doctrines, how might we best follow the call of God? At first glance Montaigne's solution to this problem is deceptively simple: we must learn to rekindle our capacity for faithfulness. Yet what does such a rekindling involve?

⁷⁸ Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, 526.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 504.

As a Catholic Montaigne turns firstly to Scripture and tradition in order to sketch the direction of his thought. Following Augustine's account of the fall in *City of God*, Montaigne takes us back to the distant past in which human beings were governed solely by 'a law of pure obedience,'⁸⁰ that is to say, their reason in subjection to divine authority.⁸¹ In this original state of virtue there is no need for philosophers, schools or disputation. Under the equanimity of heavenly order, every human being lives as a Sceptic, their souls undisturbed by the intellectual anxieties of questioning and doubt. Thus in Montaigne's rendering of Paradise, God's grace allows each of us to experience Pyrrho's ideal of ἀταραξία without effort. This is only a slight modification of the original Augustinian material on Montaigne's part. When describing the original serenity experienced by Adam and Eve, Augustine probably had the equivalent Stoic notion of ἀταραξία in his mind.⁸² Montaigne's substitution of Stoicism for Scepticism in no way compromises the integrity of the original Augustinian reading. It constitutes a respectful gloss rather than a contortion. Rather than conceiving of Scepticism as an alien presence in an otherwise orthodox account; it is a fruitful tool which allows Montaigne to depict and ideals of Christian discipleship more faithfully.

If there is a paradise in Montaigne's Christian faith, there is also a fall. Drawing directly upon scripture, Montaigne argues that sin entered the world through an arrogant desire for knowledge. Lives which once conformed to a godly pattern of simplicity and peace are now disfigured by irreligion, violence and self-hatred, all because of an overreaching desire for knowledge. Not content with the natural bounds that God has provided it, the speculative mind 'does nothing but ferret and quest, and it keeps incessantly whirling around, building up and becoming entangled in its own work, like our silkworms, and is

⁸⁰ Ibid., 437.

⁸¹ Ibid., 436.

⁸² Christopher Brooke, *Philosophic Pride: Stoicism and Political Thought from Lipsius to Rousseau* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 9.

suffocated in it'.⁸³ Yet there is something of the humanist in Montaigne which refuses to believe that this original grace is entirely lost to us. He imagined its continuance among far away peoples like the Brazilians or else in the lives of non-human animals, those with the benefit of not being corrupted by intellectual calculation.⁸⁴ As we shall see, these musings are mainly rhetorical devices with the purpose of recommending the cause of his favoured philosophical school, the Ancient Sceptics. As a Catholic Montaigne did not believe that the Sceptics had in themselves any special revelation which the Scriptures did not also possess, yet he did believe that Sceptics provided excellent preparation for the Christian. By emptying the mind of all its cherished beliefs and certainties the Sceptical method cleared the way for reliance upon God alone. In this act of Pyrrhonian *knosis* the human being becomes a 'blank tablet prepared to take from the finger of God such forms as he will be pleased to engrave upon it'.⁸⁵ In the discussion which follows, I suggest that Montaigne's secularity is in actual fact elements of this self-emptying strategy. From this perspective, I suggest that Montaigne shows us a way in which secularity has the capacity to be harassed to the service of Christian faith and practice. What might be seen as secularism's most disconcerting face for Radical Orthodoxy becomes for Montaigne an opportunity to live according to faith. Let us first consider the most controversial aspect of Montaigne's secularity: his commitment to cultural relativism.

As we saw earlier, Radical Orthodox critics see the normative acceptance of cultural relativism as part of the general pattern of the secular, namely that of value-negation. Relativism marginalises precisely what Radical Orthodoxy seeks to sustain; the retrieval of multiple ecclesial, theological and ethical universals from an increasingly fragmented and anomic modernity. Yet, if cultural

⁸³ Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, 995.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 440.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 455.

relativism represents the suppression of universal meaning for Radical Orthodoxy, cultural relativism is for Montaigne merely a fact of life. The discovery of the New World taught him the utter fallacy of the Scholastic notion that the human family was able to live according to a single moral standard deducible by reason. If there was rationality at play in the diversity of customs among the world's peoples, Montaigne sensed that such rationality was not reciprocally intelligible. '[A] man calls barbarous whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the customs and opinions of the country we live in' (*Of Cannibals*).⁸⁶ Such modernist-sounding remarks have led some readers to discern in Montaigne a clear anticipation of Nietzsche's model of cultural relativism.⁸⁷ Yet, unlike the atheistic Nietzsche⁸⁸ Montaigne's relativism is theologically and not nihilistically motivated. While Nietzschean relativity presupposes a universe without transcendent meaning, Montaigne's version attempts to show us how far we have fallen in the sight of God. While in the beginning there was a single moral law, sin has caused deviation and dilution. Such an immorality which reaches the grossest degree; that of a Christendom which simultaneously proclaims the truth of God and finds itself more brutal than those 'savages' who have not heard of Christ. Noting of the brutality of the wars of religion in his native France, Montaigne remarks: 'I am not sorry that we notice the barbarous horror of such acts (those of cannibals) but I am heartily sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own'.⁸⁹ If relativism shows us how disordered our world has become, Montaigne also has a didactic function in mind. If we are confronted with contradictory models of morality and custom,

⁸⁶ Ibid., 185.

⁸⁷ Philip Hodgkiss, *Making of the Modern Mind: The Surfacing of Consciousness in Social Thought* (London: Athlone Press, 2001), 73.

⁸⁸ Nietzsche was himself a reader of Montaigne; see Jessica Berry, *Nietzsche and the Ancient Skeptical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 80-81.

⁸⁹ Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, 189.

how shall we choose between them? Not by reason, says Montaigne, since with reason we will simply see our cultural prejudices reflected back to us. The resolution to relativism can only be achieved by turning away from our own facilities and towards Divine Revelation, which transcends both rationality and culture. So while the ‘world is nothing but variety and dissimilarity’⁹⁰ Montaigne’s illuminationism prevents him from sinking into nihilism. Indeed his commitment to relativism is not a permanent position, but rather a stepping stone to faith. By carefully studying the diversity of sects, schools and tribes of humans, Montaigne is convinced that our faith in God’s grace will increase, as we realise that our own intellectual powers are insufficient in achieving a measure of certainty. Rather than comparing Montaigne to Nietzsche, it would be wiser to compare him to Karl Barth. With his stress on the primacy of God’s revelation and distrust of rationalist theology, Montaigne anticipates Barth’s contention that one cannot ‘logically’ read God’s intentions from the world around us; rather God must actively reveal Himself to us through Scripture and the Church. In a deeply Montaignian passage in *Church Dogmatics* Barth reflects:

[The] knowledge of God certainly doesn’t come without our work; it also does not come through our work, or as the fruit of our work. At this very point the truth breaks impetuously and decisively before us; God is known only to God; God can be known only to God. At this very point, in faith itself, we know in utter dependence, in pure discipleship and gratitude. At this very point we are finally dissuaded from trusting and confiding in our own capacity and strength. At this very point we can see that our attempt to answer God’s revelation with our views and concepts is an attempt undertaken with insufficient means, the work of unprofitable servants, so that we cannot possibly ascribe the success of the attempt, and therefore the truth of our knowledge of God to ourselves, i.e. to the capacity of our views and concepts. In faith itself we are forced to say that

⁹⁰ Ibid., 296.

our knowledge of God begins in all seriousness with the knowledge of the hiddenness of God.⁹¹

It is this vision of a mysterious God which lies at the heart of Montaigne's relativism. In a world where revelation is the only channel of contact between creature and Creator, there is no automatic natural, ontological or theological order which can be read and understood by the powers of human reason alone. Far from arguing for relativism out of a desire to negate values (as Milbank and Ward fear) Montaigne's apparent secularity emerges out of a desire to uphold the mystery of God. Realising the failure of all human beings to adequately comprehend the divine law, Montaigne uses the bewildering array of customs in order to illustrate our need of radical dependence upon God through his Church and Sacraments.⁹²

5. MONTAIGNE AND THE AUGUSTINIAN SELF

What does such an attitude of dependence mean for Montaigne's understanding of the self and how might it be considered secular? If we are to believe Riley's reading of the self in the *Essays* Montaigne's view of human identity is diametrically opposed to the theological personhood of Augustine. While Augustine places his true individuality in relation to God, Montaigne is seen to

⁹¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics The Doctrine of God, Volume 2*, ed. by G.W. Bromiley, T.F. Torrance (London: T&T Clark, 1957: 2004), 183.

⁹² As to why the Church should be exempt from such radical doubt, Montaigne gives little in the way of a direct answer. However, one can offer formulate a viable theory by considering the sources which influenced his Scepticism. Like Augustine before him, Montaigne is a contentious reader of Cicero's philosophy (see Friedrich, *Montaigne*, 80). Reacting against dogmatism and systematisation in typically Ciceronian ways, Montaigne rejects the necessity to be consistent—applying (like Cicero) Sceptical tools to his own doubt (Friedrich, *Montaigne*, *Ibid.*) An insistence on blanket rejection of belief would sit just as uneasily with the Sceptical attitude as blind allegiance. To insist that the church must be doubted would transform Scepticism into another dogmatic rule among many. Thus, Christianity is preserved from the philosopher's scrutiny for Montaigne on the paradoxical basis that to abandon his faith would be to negate the open-minded pragmatism worthy of a Sceptic.

turn inward, mining the content of his subjectivity for new meaning. In short, Augustine represents the relational identity of an older Christendom and Montaigne represents something new and ultimately disruptive; a culture of literary narcissism which presumes, to quote Ward, the 'the citizen as consumer who now designs his or her own lifestyle, manners and morals'.⁹³ Such an analysis of Montaigne evokes not merely the dissolution of religious identity as a central driving force of action, but also suggests the kind of self-absorbed identity which cares little for the lives of others. Yet such an interpretation deprives Montaigne of his religious substance, ignoring the theological motives which underlie his act of personal disclosure. Confirmation of this claim can be found when we examine both Montaigne's motives for writing alongside his commitments to the privacy and mystery of personal identity. All three elements reveal a deeply Augustinian understanding of self and world which confounds the expectations of theological critics of secularity.

In declaring his motives for writing the *Essays*, Montaigne assures us of two things. Firstly, he makes clear that his private compositions are not intended to replace his identity as a professing Catholic. As Malcolm Smith has suggested, the *Essays* allude to Montaigne's practice of one of the most significant practices of Catholic self-disclosure; the sacrament of penance. A particularly vivid hint of Montaigne's religious practice in this regard is found in his essay *Of Vanity* where he tells us that during periods of severe illness 'I reconcile myself with God by the last Christian offices and thereby find myself more free, and unburdened, feeling all the more triumphant over the sickness'.⁹⁴ As Smith observes the use of the phrase 'Christian offices' suggests 'the practice of the penitential sacrament'.⁹⁵ Regardless of the precise rite being described here, Montaigne at moments of

⁹³ Graham Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 125.

⁹⁴ Montaigne, 913.

⁹⁵ Malcolm Smith, *Montaigne and the Roman Censors* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1981), 72.

peril finds completion in the lap of the Church and its sacraments. His *Essays* record his life (and attempt to give it context) but they do not replace the Church. Whatever benefit the *Essays* perform for Montaigne, they do not have the reconciling power of the Christian faith. Such a conclusion is further bolstered by Montaigne's second reassurance, that his *Essays* (and the person represented in them) do not signify a rival locus of theological, moral or philosophical authority to that of the Church. While it is true that Montaigne experiments with many narratives other than Christianity; playing with Stoic, Platonic, Humanist and Epicurean masks, they remain just that, masks. He never adopts these postures as comprehensive doctrines of life. Indeed, his Scepticism inclines him to reject such systems precisely because they profess a certain comprehensiveness of form. In this vein, the ancient philosophers are points of clarification for Montaigne, but they never drag him towards any exclusive or dogmatic position other than to reinforce his Sceptical Catholicism. Scholars like Judith Shklar misunderstand the nature of Montaigne's attachment, despite being sensitive to Montaigne's devotion and evident delight in the ancient philosophers. The French writer's ongoing dialogue with Hellenism is not, as Shklar calls it, 'a return to the philosophers of antiquity' to the exclusion of Christianity, rather it is part of Montaigne's eclectic but Christian method of seeking continual points of interrogation of his beliefs and prejudices.⁹⁶ Antiquity is a potent for space for Montaigne's education in this respect but not an alternative way of life.

Alongside these motives, Montaigne's account of privacy offers further validation of the profoundly Christian convictions which underlie his understanding of the self. As we saw earlier, Ward defines the liberal-secular recourse to privacy as positing a sphere of lack and separateness which is divorced from the public demands of the Christian Gospel. Implied in such a

⁹⁶ Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1984), 10.

model is the suggestion that privacy is deeply anti-Christian practice, seeking as it does a 'room of one's own', rather than a space of mutual fellowship proclaimed by the Church. Superficially, Ward's negative interpretation of privacy maps comfortably onto Montaigne. In the seclusion of his library Montaigne claims an identity outside institutions, whether that is the church or the state. In an era when both monarchies and ecclesial authorities were tightening their grips all over Europe, Montaigne made individuality and idiosyncrasy the subject of his work.

To talk of 'I' in a century of an increasingly religious 'we', Montaigne appeals to the neutrality of his own self as a place of freedom and retreat. In this internal terrain, he was not of any party, except perhaps that of the human race. Montaigne is free to invent, experiment and innovate, while the world around him is stifled by authority. In making himself a text to be read, Montaigne develops a radical identity which never fully obeys the rules of 'the world'. Montaigne as a textual construct is always open to multiple interpretations which are private and personal. This being true, it is easy to assume rather lazily that Montaigne's secular space is divested of ecclesial or theological authority. This is where the Radical Orthodox understanding of secular privacy breaks down. Montaigne indeed claims himself as a proper subject of examination, yet he refuses to disinvest the self of either its communal or theological significance. While he claims the space of his library as his 'own', his *Essays* are written not for himself; rather they are public works with the intention of being read by others. In writing of himself, Montaigne considers that he is undertaking a supplementary form of religious confession which is more lucid than his private inarticulate confessions.⁹⁷ By making public his cherished privacy, Montaigne hopes that Christian readers might glean a degree of moral education in regard to the proper conduct of their bodies and souls. In his essay *On Some Verses of*

⁹⁷ Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, 780.

Virgil, he prays: 'God grant that this excessive licence of mine might encourage our men to obtain freedom, rising above these cowardly and hypocritical virtues born of our imperfections; that at the expense of my immoderation I may draw them on to the point of reason'.⁹⁸ So while Montaigne might be secluded his thoughts are harnessed towards communal ends; an object not foreign to Christian confessional practice where exploring private sins serve as a means of educating and improving the reader. Yet along with this moral function, Montaigne perceived introspection as a means of strengthening his model of Christian dependence by emphasising the mystery of the self.

As Montaigne goes deeper into the contents of his mind he discovers a startling truth. Instead of finding a fixed identity complete with personality traits, Montaigne discovers only a state of radical contingency. The collection of impressions and memories under which we understand as 'Michel de Montaigne' is an entity that is forever shifting, and consequently is analytically inexhaustible. Inward observation, he discerns, does nothing to abate the deep mystery of the self. 'I have seen no more evident monstrosity and miracle in the world than myself. We have become habituated to anything strange by use and time; but the more I frequent myself and know myself the more my deformity astonishes me, and the less I understand myself (*Of Cripples*).'⁹⁹ While Riley places such remarks in the context of a mind which revels in its 'becoming', the words 'monstrous' and 'deformity' seem odd in the context of a positive affirmation of ontological instability. Does Montaigne give us a clue to the significance of his choice of words? A clue is provided in the form of a short essay *Of a Monstrous Child* in which Montaigne discusses various strange examples of physical deformity. Eventually leaving the cause of such outward peculiarity to God Montaigne closely echoes the language he uses to describe his inner-self.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 778.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 958.

What we call monsters are not so to God, who sees in the intensity of his work the infinity of forms he comprises in it; and it is for us to believe that this figure that astonishes us is related and linked to some other figure of the same kind unknown to man. From his infinite wisdom there proceeds nothing but that is good and ordinary and regular, but we do not see its arrangement and relationship.¹⁰⁰

Such remarks are almost certainly a conscious imitation of Augustine's own discussion of 'monsters which are bound to be born among us to human parents' in *City of God* (16.8).¹⁰¹ Yet when we read *Of Cripples* beside this second essay it is possible to uncover an intriguing theological trail which further confirms the depth of Montaigne's Augustinianism. If our inner-world is monstrous and astonishing, and completely understood by God, it is difficult to escape the following; that while the self is a mystery to us, the strangeness of our personality finds its true meaning in God. Far from Riley's notion of a Montaignian self utterly devoid of transcendence, the subjectivity of the *Essays* is constantly looking outwards. Another being needs to fathom it in order that it makes sense of its own mystery. Fusing this needful self with the earlier account of privacy, we can see that if Montaigne's identity is a secular one, then the privacy he enjoys is certainly not indolent. Rather, it is directed towards God, who is at the root of self-understanding.

Now Montaigne's interpretation of personal identity takes on a distinctly Augustinian tinge, since Augustine agrees with Montaigne that we are a mystery to ourselves without God. While it is difficult to account for this Augustinian tenet by using obvious sources like *Confessions*¹⁰² the same theological conclusion can be inferred from the theory of Augustinian illuminationism, which Montaigne was certainly familiar with. Such a conclusion is also

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 654.

¹⁰¹ Augustine, *City of God*, 663.

¹⁰² Montaigne probably never read Augustine's declarations concerning of the mystery of the selfhood in *Confessions*, 10.8.15 and 10.17.26.

consistent with his strong model of epistemological grace. Such a framework sees the flowering of human action and intellect as directly related to the dispensation of God's wisdom on uncertain souls. In this context the self's radical instability becomes a further tool of discipleship. If we are a mystery to ourselves, we must seek our Creator—the one to whom nothing in creation is a mystery. In this 'theological turn', our self-sufficiency is dissolved as our radical reliance is understood. What then is the ultimate goal of these postures? In the final part of this chapter I consider this question through a close study of Montaigne's use of anthropological distance. By imaginatively representing the lives and customs of other cultures, I pinpoint a significant vehicle through which Montaigne articulates the final destination of his Christian-Sceptical project. Idealising the world of American natives as a return to Eden, Montaigne dramatises the philosophical life of tranquillity towards which he aspires.

6. ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE RETRIEVAL OF EDEN

In the opening discussion of this article, I suggested that Montaigne's apparent aloofness from the social world encourages view of the Renaissance essayist as a proto-secularist of a very particular kind. By standing outside other communities and 'looking in' Montaigne not only validates difference, but acknowledges distinct communities. The 'other' is no-longer merely a 'heretical' aberration but rather something to be considered and studied in its own right. As I suggested, this anticipates in key respects the values of the modern-secular state, in particular the social toleration of difference. Yet, this is not the whole of Montaigne's 'modernist' reputation in this area. With his active process of seeking respectful interchange with *the other*, Montaigne has also been connected to the rise and practice of anthropological analysis. Placing Montaigne on the cusp of modernity, commentators frequently cite Montaigne's essay *Of Cannibals* as representing an anthropological '*locus classicus*' on the representation of

‘otherness’¹⁰³ while others commended his cultural relativism.¹⁰⁴ In this vein, Ben-Ami Scharfstein finds in Montaigne’s *Essays* echoes of the cultural anthropologist ‘who comes to recognise the equal validity of all customs which are not inherently cruel or do not offend the simple truth’.¹⁰⁵ Some commentators have gone even further, suggesting that Montaigne is ‘the father of anthropology’.¹⁰⁶ Such a depiction is at first glance persuasive, since it acknowledges Montaigne’s acceptance of cultural diversity, but also the contextual nature of human judgement—an insight which has become increasingly central to contemporary debates within cultural anthropology. As Ida Magli remarks:

The absolutely pragmatic nature of cultural anthropology—the trait most strongly striking anyone who approaches it—arises from its clinging to concrete behaviour, to the daily experience of a given human group, circumscribed in time and space, without drawing general conclusions, unless comparing this behaviour and this experience with those of groups, circumscribed in time and space as well. Comparatism became a scientific doctrine in which, nevertheless, no anthropologist forgot, even for a moment that what the scholar deduces always remains a mere growth of his capacity for understanding. It does not exist in reality; does not correspond to any one group observed as an object of inquiry.¹⁰⁷

Extending Magli’s constructivist analysis further, Ioan M. Lewis argues for the merits of ‘experimental ethnography’ which considers how cultural

¹⁰³ Laurence R. Goldman, ‘From Pot to Polemic: Uses and Abuses of Cannibalism’, in *The Anthropology of Cannibalism* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 1999), 1.

¹⁰⁴ For an anthropological appraisal of Montaigne’s relativism, see Clifford Geertz, ‘Anti Anti-Relativism’, *American Anthropologist* 86, No. 2 (1984): 262-278.

¹⁰⁵ Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *The Philosophers: Their Lives and the Nature of their Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 163.

¹⁰⁶ Pat Duffy Hutcheon, *Leaving the Cave: Evolutionary Naturalism in Social-Scientific Thought* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1996), 34.

¹⁰⁷ Ida Magli, *Cultural Anthropology: An Introduction* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 1980: 2001), 3.

anthropological accounts of individuals and communities are produced by the concerns and preferences of the researcher¹⁰⁸. In both cases, the study of *the other* necessitates an awareness of the partiality of the observer. Anticipating this contemporary development, Montaigne embraces a radical mode of subjectivity in his engagement with *otherness*. While Montaigne the essayist and social critic frequently looks beyond the insularity of his library, he is constantly reminded that his conclusions cannot be divorced from his own sense of embodiment. Unlike earlier philosophers who attempted to abstract their sensual wants and desires from the performance of thinking, Montaigne realises that our evaluations are not independent from our physical conditions. Illuminating this point in his essay *Of Repentance*, Montaigne notes: 'Others form man; I tell of him and portray a particular one, very ill-formed whom I should make very different from what he is if I had to fashion him over again. But now it is done'.¹⁰⁹ Thus, even when Montaigne talks about 'others' in traditional anthropological terms (i.e. as subjects to be studied) these explorations are part of his underlying phenomenological aim of describing himself.

If Montaigne is a proto-anthropologist as some interpreters imply, this is yet another reason for him to be rejected by Radical Orthodoxy. As we observed earlier, Milbank views the Social Sciences through the lens of a nihilistic secularity in which all social relations are transformed into artificial creations.¹¹⁰ While pre-modern Christendom conceived of the social world as a shared gift of God, Milbank contends that social scientists (the anthropologists included) commit a serious heresy by treating the realm of culture as *homo faber*, the human making of human institutions'.¹¹¹ Such a world not merely confines

¹⁰⁸ I. M. Lewis, *Social & Cultural Anthropology in Perspective*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1985: 2003), 368.

¹⁰⁹ Montaigne, *The Collected Works*, 740.

¹¹⁰ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 26.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

theology to the margin of knowledge, but also promotes a covert politics of liberalism which presumes ‘only the isolated, self-conserving individual’.¹¹² Yet does Montaigne really fall into the scope of Milbank’s critique of the secular? While a connection between Montaigne and anthropology is common there are two significant anomalies which incline us to question its validity of this association.

Firstly, such an understanding fails to account for the distinctive Sceptical epistemology, which underlies the *Essays*. While secular Anthropologists attempt to construct convincing accounts of *the other*, Montaigne has no such ambition. Renouncing any attempt at ‘regimenting, arranging and fixing truth’ Montaigne instead prefers free-flow of his own imagination as shaped through books and his own daily experiences.¹¹³ This approach well suited him since he had little faith in his ability to recall facts correctly¹¹⁴ and was even less certain that the object of his attention would remain fixed long enough for him to analyse it.¹¹⁵ In accord with these distinctive starting premises, Montaigne’s method of inquiry possesses an aesthetic rather than an analytic quality. Instead of immersing himself in another community, all Montaigne offers his reader are a series of images which are continually constructed, tested and overtaken by newer, and more beguiling impressions. Montaigne in good Pyrrhonian fashion does specify a systematic end-point to this conveyer belt of images; his aims consist in a form of pragmatic self-criticism, summed up by the arch-Montaignian question, ‘Que sais-je?’ (‘What do I know?’). While such fluidity possesses a passing resemblance in experimental ethnography mentioned above it ignores a crucial warning given by Lewis—‘There is a danger that the writer of the ethnographic text may

¹¹² Ibid., 51.

¹¹³ Montaigne, *The Collected Works*, 454.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 740.

become so self-indulgently intrusive that the culture he seeks to depict in all its rich authenticity recedes into the background and becomes merely a pale outline or setting for the anthropologist's exercise in introspection. Ethnography then becomes anthropological travellers' tales'.¹¹⁶ Yet, while Lewis finds such introspection problematic, for Montaigne such an exercise is of central philosophical importance.

Secondly, Montaigne's engagement with other cultures is peculiarly uninterested in social facts. While the anthropologist attempts to document the customs, institutions and practices of cultural *others*, in his *Essays*, Montaigne prefers to use foreign landscapes as canvases for his own personal musings. This approach is epitomised by Montaigne's familiarity (or lack thereof) with the ingenious American cultures he purports to depict in *Of Cannibals*. While this text possesses all the prerequisite generosity towards difference characteristic of a Rawlsian secularist, Montaigne's comprehension of otherness is rather limited. Dependent upon the reports of others and a cursory encounter with an American native, Montaigne lacks the experience to effectively judge their lives and communities with much validity.¹¹⁷ In the space left by such an absence of facts, Montaigne uses Classical authors to construct an Arcadian setting where its inhabitants are possessed of a nobility Montaigne finds lacking in his native France. He interpolates his discussion with quotes from the Latin poets Sextus Propertius and Virgil, and in this way he argues that in the Americas we find a simpler world, filled with the kind of natural harmony which obsessed the artists and poets of the Renaissance. Far from the corrupted and degenerate men and women of latter-day Christendom, this new terrain preserves specimens of *homo natura*—beings, lacking all guile and artificiality:

¹¹⁶ Lewis, *Social & Cultural Anthropology in Perspective*, 268.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 185.

I am sorry that Lycurgus and Plato did not know of them [these indigenous people]; for it seems to me that what we actually see in these nations surpasses not only all the pictures in which poets have idealised the golden age and all their inventions in imagining a happy state of man, but also the conceptions and the very desire of philosophy. They could not imagine a naturalness so pure and simple as we see by experience; nor could they believe that our society could be maintained with so little artifice and human sorder. This is a nation I should say to Plato, in which there is no sort of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no science of numbers, no name for a magistrate or for political superiority, no custom of servitude, no riches or poverty, no contracts, no successions, no partitions, no occupations, but leisure ones, no care for any but common kinship, no clothes, no agriculture, no metal, no use of wine or wheat.¹¹⁸

Taken too literally one is inclined to view such passages either as self-indulgent fabrications or as heretical sentiment. Fabrication, because Montaigne could not have known the truth of what he claimed; heretical because his ideal natives suggested (in contrast to Augustine) that the fall is either reversible or not total. Does it follow that Montaigne finally parts company with Augustine? Such conclusions are only tenable however if one assumes that Montaigne's aim is to persuade his reader that he is concerned with an authentic account of these foreign lives—yet as we have seen, this is not Montaigne's concern. Framed as they are by Western allusion, these depictions are not the product of a writer attempting to understand a people from the inside, but rather the work of an idealist, seeking some semblance of his model of perfection in a contemporary setting. Thus as Tsvetan Todorov has rightly argued, in representing cultural difference, Montaigne actually attempts to draw radical otherness into Occidental categories by appealing to the Greek and Roman past, thereby making this far off land and its peoples merely an extension of European cultural identity. As Todorov notes:

¹¹⁸ Montaigne, *The Collected Works*, 186.

The knowledge of societies that can be found in [Montaigne] remains piecemeal and in fact is entirely subordinate to his didactic project, the criticism of our society. The identity of the other is never acknowledged even if it is idealised for the needs of the cause.¹¹⁹

In imagining something beautiful and unspoilt across the ocean, Montaigne discerns a position from which to condemn his own society, finding in New World natives the idyllic life he felt best reflected what he believed human nature really 'meant to be'. In this way Montaigne's act of examining other cultures at a distance is not even partly Rawlsian. Far from refusing to judge other societies and ways of life, Montaigne spends much of his *Essays* doing just that. The essay *Of Cannibals* sees Montaigne merely reversing the usual burden of judgement among his Christian contemporaries. He shifts his allegiance from European Humanism to a paradisiacal landscape which reveals to us what we have lost. What does Montaigne believe such an imaginative project can achieve?

If we read the idealisation of the American natives through his general commitment to the exploration of his own subjectivity, we begin to see the strategic function of such descriptions. By contemplating the New World inhabitants Montaigne constructs a narrative in favour of his own philosophical posture; that of Pyrrhonian Christianity. According to this reading, the otherness represented in the *Essays* is not an attempt to depict something external to the reader but rather to represent artistically and theologically Montaigne's own longings and aspirations. Key to making the connection is the theme of 'nakedness', central both to Montaigne's depiction of cultural strangeness as well as his understanding of Scepticism's aims. For Montaigne 'nakedness' is the chief symbol of a mind released from the confusion of opinions, one which embraces a life guided by Divine Grace. It is this vein that Montaigne describes the disciple of Pyrrho as being 'naked and empty, acknowledging his natural weakness, fit to

¹¹⁹ Tzvetan Todorov, *Morals Of History*, trans. Alyson Waters (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 40.

receive from above some outside power'.¹²⁰ The task of making oneself 'naked' is also a key stylistic objective of the *Essays* themselves:

If I had written to seek the world's favour I should have bedecked myself better and should present myself in a studied posture. I want straining and artifice because it is myself I portray. My defects will here to be read to the life, and also my natural form, as far as respect for the public has allowed. Had I been placed among those nations which are said to live still in the sweet freedom of nature's first laws, I assure you that I should very gladly have portrayed myself here entire and wholly naked.¹²¹

Here Montaigne blends the figurative and the literal, connecting his act of self-disclosure with physical nakedness, a move which substantially blurs subjective and objective states. Just as Montaigne seeks the tranquillity of divine grace through his Pyrrhonian philosophy, those who are unclad show us the goal of the Sceptical project. In this imagery we observe Montaigne as an advocate not of a cultural anthropology but a theology of restoration. Underneath Montaigne's idealisation of the cultural other in the *Essays* is the intriguing theological proposal that the discovery of the New World offers a bloody and war-weary Christendom a canvas upon which to rediscover a renewed mode of discipleship. Yet, unlike the colonising John Locke a century later who saw America as a literal new beginning, Montaigne was content for this new frontier of America to remain largely a figment of the mind. In picturing a new Eden of naked simplicity across the ocean Montaigne has a spiritual anchor for his philosophy of Augustinian Scepticism. Yet, if primeval nakedness reveals the furthest point of the philosophical quest for Montaigne then it simultaneously reveals the methods needed to achieve this goal. By unburdening ourselves of the clothing of opinion and convention we can live more freely. Montaigne's noticeable distance from his society is not straightforward

¹²⁰ Montaigne, *The Collected Works*, 455.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

relativism, much less disinterest. Rather it is meant to designate a life which does not inordinately concern itself with faulty human opinions but is principally concerned with following the will of God. Far from upholding an anthropological gaze that negates transcendent meaning, Montaigne advocates the use of what is distant and exotic to illustrate a life under grace.

7. CONCLUSION: REDEFINING SECULARITY

The object of this article has been to offer an affirmative alternative to Radical Orthodox accounts of secularity by establishing Michel de Montaigne as a significant theological voice within the bounds of the Augustinian tradition. In particular it has sought to uncover Montaigne's value as a significant intermediary towards a Christian vision of secularity by offering theological explanations for outwardly secular-modern attitudes and practices. Drawing into contention the rather polarising narrative of faith and secularity as provided by Milbank and Ward, I claim that Montaignian theology forwards the provocative claim that secular space in its relativism, privacy and fluid identities can facilitate patterns of discipleship. Montaigne illustrates that his secularity is not the negation of theological values but their elucidation in various contexts. While I think it highly unlikely that such an interpretation of Montaigne will gain much traction within anti-secular theological circles, I do suggest that Montaigne's religious thought has the potential to undermine habitual patterns of thought, moving discussion off more polarised terrains. In this respect, if in no other, Montaigne has the capacity to contest overly simplistic accounts of the relationship between religion and liberal secularity. Such a move has the potential not only to encourage a different range of responses to complex theological and historical questions, but perhaps also to provide an opportunity for dialogue. With its strong Anglo-Catholic texture, Radical Orthodoxy may find in Montaigne's dual resistance to Protestant innovation and Scholastic

consolidation an intriguing expression of faith with which to seriously engage. Yet in offering such alternative theological reading, Montaigne's theology possesses a defensive as well as dialogical function. Positing the existence of a Christian mode of secularity serves to clear the way for a more substantial re-reading of Christian responses to modernity, in particular to liberal politics with which secularity is invariably twinned. Since secularity is both a backdrop and feature of self-described liberal societies, to re-define or indeed theologise the secular is also to suggest, at least tentatively, the co-dependent claim that a Christian liberal politics can be inferred from the Montaignian-secular space. By articulating a theological grounding for pluralism, privacy and individual autonomy Montaigne helps us uncover an obscured form of liberal modernity with tolerant generosity at its centre. Rejecting trajectories of nihilism, atomism and normative atheism, Montaigne imagines secularity as a settlement which preserves the dignity of the individual's spiritual life while acknowledging cultural diversity. In these commitments Montaigne's Sceptical theology offers a striking challenge to public theologians who seek to depict secularity in monolithically negative terms. By fusing autonomy with discipleship, Montaigne offers a compelling bridge between Christendom and the character of our contemporary world.