

Between faith and scepticism: Nicholas Rengger's reflections on the 'hybridity' of modernity

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ire**Vassilios Paipais**

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Abstract

In this essay, I offer a brief assessment of Nicholas Rengger's engagement with arguments arising from the theological critique of modern politics and of his take on the relationship between faith and philosophy in modernity. Rengger's scepticism, a peculiar mix of naturalism and philosophical idealism, combining insights from Oakeshott, Santayana and Augustine, did not cordon off faith but sought to work out its tensive relationship with practical forms of reasoning in modernity, a condition he described as a 'hybrid'. Rengger's critique of the hybridity of modernity rests on assumptions that expose some of the unresolved tensions of his anti-Pelagian scepticism.

Keywords

faith, hybridity, life, Nicholas Rengger, scepticism, thought

Nicholas Rengger was a pioneer in introducing insights from the history of theology and the transdisciplinary subfield of political theology into the study of international relations as part of his general penchant for, and commitment to, a genuinely interdisciplinary and pluralistic International Relations (IR).¹ In this essay, I shall offer a brief assessment of his engagement with arguments arising from the theological critique of modern politics and of his take on the relationship between faith and philosophy in modernity.

I argue that there is an abiding tension in Rengger's work between his discussion of the role and status of religious beliefs and theological ideas in world politics, on the one hand, and his philosophical reflections on the nature of modernity, on the other, a tension I regard as premised on Oakeshottian scepticism. His position may also bear some similarities to what Leo Strauss has described in the history of political philosophy as an

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implacable division between faith and reason, revelation and philosophy, Jerusalem and Athens.² Arguably, a milder version of this argument regarding the tension-ridden relationship between the two may lie behind Rengger's idea of the 'hybridity' of modernity. Rengger, however, did not exactly envisage it in the Straussian version of two clashing perspectives, but rather in the Oakeshottian manner of two separate domains working out their uneasy, yet 'civilised', accommodations.³

I would like to commence by drawing on his 2013 paper in this journal, a significantly modified version of which reappeared as a chapter in the Mavelli and Petito edited volume.⁴ The central critical point Rengger raises in both papers, inspired by John Milbank's theological critique of modernity,⁵ is that modern international relations developed as a 'hybrid' blending ambiguously a morally realist universalism and a voluntarist nominalism.⁶ In Rengger's own words:

. . . international relations in the modern world – and indeed a good deal of politics in general – is effectively a hybrid between a system built on will and artifice yoked together with a rhetoric that effectively assumes the older 'realist' transcendent conception of reality. One can see this in many respects throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, where the likes of Grotius and Vattel (Kant's 'sorry comforters') consistently try and emphasise the voluntaristic character of human agency with a sense of transcendent truth. And the whole history of the idea of Natural Law from the thirteenth century to the present is clearly marked by this dilemma. Hobbes is in this, as in many other things, the most far-sighted and the most consistent of his contemporaries in refusing the hybrid and saying point blank that (for example) the 'Mortall God', the Leviathan, creates what is good and what is just, rather than as the – now intellectually hollowed out – tradition of Natural Law would suggest discovers what is good and what is just. . . Can one coherently have a fully and only constructed and artificial sense of agency and society and a belief that anything is universal?⁷

For Rengger, then, the 'hybrid' gives rise to irresolvable tensions in modern thought between politics and morality, law and justice, faith and reason. In International Political Theory, which Rengger helped develop, this is translated as the tension between universalism and particularism, or in English School terms, a more solidarist commitment to human rights versus a pluralist allegiance to the idea of unconditional sovereignty. Rengger may have been talking about hybridity here, but his analysis seems to strike a chord with the Straussian argument that what lies at the roots of modern nihilism is a process of 'forgetting' the constitutive clash between philosophy and religion. Strauss' argument, important as much as controversial in the history of philosophy and political thought, accorded a special place to philosophy as a dangerous discourse of relentless questioning (Socrates' *zetetic* approach). Rengger would draw inspiration from Strauss' critique of modern nihilism⁸ but the latter's tendency to see faith and reason as totally irreconcilable was not his preferred way of putting the matter, only because it brought it to a premature close. Indeed, Rengger was equally open-minded to aspects of Alasdair McIntyre's traditionalist critique of modernity and John Milbank's post-liberal effort to reconcile faith and reason or, negatively, to divest us of our illusion that modern reason may occupy a place of neutrality or ground some version of common morality.⁹

That said, Rengger was, nevertheless, quite unwilling to abandon his sceptical disposition for a post-liberal or a traditionalist alternative.¹⁰ And yet, he himself was perfectly

aware that contributions to the study of religion in IR often dodge ‘the most important general question relevant to thinking about religion in international relations, which is not about influence, relevance or importance *but one of truth or falsity*’.¹¹ Rengger, nevertheless, insisted that he carried his scepticism lightly¹² as part of an Oakeshottian pluralist ‘conversation of mankind’ whereby discourses such as art and religion belong to the poetic mode of experience (or ‘voice’ of a civilisation) while philosophy’s task is to examine the presuppositions underlying those aspects of practical (or poetic, as a later addition to the Oakeshottian modes of experience) activity that can be religious, aesthetic or political.¹³ To quote from Oakeshott’s *On Human Conduct*, philosophy proper is an inquiry ‘in which questions are asked not in order to be answered but so that they may themselves be interrogated with respect to their conditions’.¹⁴ One might remark that such a response is perhaps dodging the question too (i.e. truth or falsity), but the Oakeshottian in Rengger was adamant that one should not mix apples with oranges, that is, confuse different modes of experience with the intellectual activity that interrogates their presuppositions. To Rengger’s mind, the Oakeshottian tension between ‘the politics of faith’ and ‘the politics of scepticism’ remained unabated.¹⁵

I argue that this is a distinctly modern or, better, perhaps early modern (humanist) disposition, that accords primacy to the critical function of thought as the relentless interrogation of the grounds of knowledge and the presuppositions of life. Indeed, one that views epistemological scepticism as the motor behind the development of modern philosophy, from Machiavelli and Montaigne through Descartes and Hobbes to Kant and Nietzsche (either as something to be contained for reasons of social utility or something to be accorded free rein). In this respect, Rengger’s sensibility was close to that of the Straussian Mark Lilla who in his *The Stillborn God* views favourably Hobbes’ ‘Great Separation’ of politics from religion that kept the poison of political messianism at bay in the seventeenth century. Rengger recognised a similar anti-perfectionist impulse in Eric Voegelin’s reading of modern ‘political religions’ (Liberalism, Communism, Fascism) as secularised Gnostic eschatologies.¹⁶ Intellectual affinities apart, Rengger knew all too well that the modern concept of ‘religion’ (as treated, for instance by John Gray and Mark Lilla) is an invented category reflecting secularist biases and that there are theological traditions, such as Augustinian pessimism, that are not only anti-utopian, but also counter-apocalyptic.¹⁷

Rengger defended the Oakeshottian sensibility of the ‘religious man’, in direct opposition to the ‘worldly man’, as a type of anti-rationalistic, pluralistic Self that ‘sees all things in the light of his own mind, and desires to possess nothing save by present insight’.¹⁸ The religious man is the lover of the life of the present open to a poetic understanding of existence that learns how to favour the standards of the Self over the standards of the World, not vice versa. That is not, however, the task of theory or philosophy. Rather, the latter remains compartmentalised as an activity of thought. Surely, an activity of thought that does not impose itself on – or seek to capture – life, yet also one that does not necessarily (perhaps only contingently so) connect with it, either. In Rengger’s own words:

‘[theory has no] necessary connection with what goes *in* [the] word. The task of theory one might say – if, indeed it can be seen as a ‘task’ at all – is simply to *be* theoretical; to follow the argument wherever it goes and to be as honest as one can be about one’s assumptions, presuppositions and conclusions’ (emphasis in the original).¹⁹

A limitation that perhaps Rengger's thought here shares with George Santayana's,²⁰ whom Rengger admired, is that both would regard thinking, whether in science, art or politics, as an activity of the spirit (*psyche*) to be kept apart from the effects upon it of social influences they would both regard as 'contagion'. This is understandable as a critique of social conformism (either of the conservative or the progressive kind), but it leaves the relationship between thinking and 'society' or 'culture' unspecified. If life is not thought, what is this peculiar activity called 'thought' that is separate from life? Or, otherwise put, can theory and practice, mind and life, be so securely sequestered?

This tension remained unresolved in Rengger's thought, a tension that he himself perhaps had not fully worked out but one he lived with, dismissing its aporetic structure with Oakeshottian irony. Granted, he would have agreed with those who argue that belief is not a matter of apodictic truth or philosophical reflection, but rather the expression of a way of life. He also knew too well that philosophy was not always viewed merely as a discipline of thought but used to be practiced itself as *a way of life*, a spiritual exercise, to recall Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault.²¹ In other words, truth and thought were once practical concerns themselves or what we would today call existential commitments (or lived experiences), rather than disembodied, abstract, de-contextualised activities.²² And yet, he was perhaps too much of a British sceptic to go all the way with existentialist understandings of truth as proclamation of, or commitment to, a way of life that currently abound in continental philosophical thought, from Badiou to Žižek and Agamben.²³ He would have probably dismissed the recent post-Marxist reappraisal of Paul the Apostle as a new form of Pelagianism, or atheistic utopianism, mixing poetry and practice and allowing the latter to dominate the former. While he might have been justified up to a point, such a blanket assessment would not only be unfair but also sweeping in that it obscures an alternative, and perhaps more engaged, way of grasping the relationship between truth, theory and practice.

My point is that, had he entertained such a perspective, he might have appreciated that the choice is not necessarily between Oakeshott's, Strauss', Lilla's, or even Santayana's 'sceptical pessimism' on the one hand, and Milbank's or McIntyre's post-liberal moral realism, on the other. Instead, a third option might be available that reads the 'hybridity of modernity' and the ensuing nihilism it produces, not as an aporetic or a tension-filled antinomic structure (or, even, a fool's worry, as it was for Oakeshott and Rorty), but as an opportunity for another philosophy to arise, a *philosophy to come* that may transform our understanding both of politics and theology, and open them up to a new use for the sake of life. According to this perspective, the relationship between faith and reason is not an object of lamentation (on account of its irreparability), perpetual melancholy, or cheerful detachment (closer to Rengger's attitude), nor of restoration (through the resurrection of past forms of life that would amend the 'broken middle' of social order), but a dynamic one, continuously evolving in intertwined ways and, in the process, changing both philosophy and religion, politics and theology. If so, theology and International Relations may not be destined to remain perennially in tension, strangely made to serve late Rengger's increasingly pessimistic anti-Pelagian scepticism, but rather may find themselves open to interconnections that can also suggest more charitable readings of the human predicament.

Be that as it may, his scepticism was not dogmatic. Like Oakeshott, he liked to think we need both scepticism and some measure of faith. His preferred 'style' or 'disposition', however, was scepticism as a way of life (*agōgē*) dwelling on irresolvable 'dilemmas' (a word he cherished) and exposing contradictions. Whether he eschewed contradictions himself is less likely, but in our personal communication he would often dismiss such a comment with a shrug: 'life is, and has always been, simply life, nothing more or less than that, and there is nothing to bemoan in this'. Beyond tragic despair or messianic hope, Rengger would opt for scepticism for the sake of life in all its complexity, plurality, and unpredictability. In so doing, – his compartmentalisation of thought, notwithstanding – his 'dealing in darkness' did not carry any despairing connotations but only the excitement for, and affirmation of, life's contingency and unpredictable multiplicity.²⁴ And yet, the questions linger: what was 'life' for him? Can it be posited apart from thought or as a force both outside and inside history? Can it, namely, be evoked as a historical constant that disrupts thought without thought's mediation? Santayana and Oakeshott, Spinoza and Hegel, naturalism and (philosophical) idealism were, perhaps deliberately and playfully (as part of his cheerful, ironic scepticism), never reconciled in his thought.

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Notes

1. Nicholas Rengger, 'Pluralism in International Relations Theory: Three Questions', *International Studies Perspectives*, 16(1), 2015, pp. 32–9. On political theology, see his posthumous contribution to a JIRD Special Issue on 'Political Theologies of the International': Nicholas Rengger, 'Between Transcendence and Necessity: Eric Voegelin, Martin Wight and the crisis of modern international relations', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 22(2), 2019, pp. 327–45.
2. Leo Strauss, 'Athens and Jerusalem: Some Introductory Reflections', *Commentary*, 43, 1967, pp. 45–57.
3. Nicholas Rengger, *The Anti-Pelagian Imagination in Political Theory and International Relations: Dealing in Darkness* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 119.
4. Nicholas Rengger, 'On Theology and International Relations: World Politics Beyond the Empty Sky', *International Relations* 27(2), 2013, pp. 141–57 and Nicholas Rengger, 'Post-secular Global Order: Metaphysical Not Political?' in Luca Mavelli and Fabio Petito (eds), *Towards a Post-secular International Politics: New Forms of Community, Identity, and Power* (London: Palgrave, 2014), pp. 65–80.
5. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).
6. 'A realist ghost in a nominalist machine', as Rengger put it, largely siding with insights offered by Michael Gillespie and Charles Taylor. See Michael A. Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008) and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA; London: Belknap Harvard University Press, 2007). Here Rengger refers to metaphysical, not IR, realism. Metaphysical realism is the doctrine, with origins in medieval debates, that universals, such as humanity, justice, or 'redness' (the property of being red) are ontologically real entities in which particular objects participate.

The opposite doctrine is nominalism arguing that universals are but mental names (*nomina*) that do not pre-exist but only follow after (*post-res*) the existence of particular entities which are the only ones considered real.

7. Rengger, 'On Theology and International Relations', p. 144.
8. Inspiration for Rengger's scepticism was also provided by Donald McKinnon's work (he too stressed the irreconcilable nature of modernity's tensions) which may also explain Rengger's interest in his work, an interest he sadly did not have the chance to materialise. Rengger shared with me that he had intended to write a paper on McKinnon, a theologian who was one of the first appointed members of the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics but who is hardly remembered today within the IR community. In our personal communications, Nick had mentioned that he had read McKinnon's papers (at least those that still exist and he could have gotten access to) and that he had interviewed one of McKinnon's most illustrious PhD students, the former Archbishop of Canterbury Prof Rowan Williams. Sadly, to the best of my knowledge, he left no such draft manuscript behind.
9. See Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981) and John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).
10. Rengger, 'Post-secular Global Order: Metaphysical Not Political?'
11. Nicholas Rengger, 'Eternal Return? Modes of Encountering Religion in International Relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 32(2), 2003, pp. 327–36, at p. 335 (emphasis added).
12. Rengger would often describe himself in conversations as a Bohemian nihilist or a Tory anarchist, fully enjoying the bafflement he caused to his interlocutors. I would describe him as an 'aesthetic Anglican' paraphrasing one of his major influences, George Santayana, who used to describe himself as an 'aesthetic Catholic'. Rengger would often repeat to me Santayana's witticism: 'there is no God and Mary is His mother'.
13. See Nicholas Rengger, 'The Boundaries of Conversation: A Reply to Dallmayr', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 30(2), 2001, pp. 357–64 and Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933).
14. Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 11.
15. See his approval of Santayana's claim that 'scepticism is the chastity of the intellect' and his argument for a 'sceptical, anti-perfectionist political philosophy' in his 'Dystopic Liberalism' essay in Rengger, *The Anti-Pelagian Imagination*, p. 77; see also Michael Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, Timothy Fuller ed., (New Haven, CO: Yale University Press, 1996).
16. Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007); Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: an introduction* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1952); Rengger, 'Between Transcendence and Necessity'.
17. For Gray's anti-apocalypticism see John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007) and Rengger's review in Nicholas Rengger, 'The Exorcist? John Gray, Apocalyptic Religion and the return to Realism in World Politics', *International Affairs*, 83(5), 2007, pp. 951–9.
18. Michael Oakeshott, 'Religion and the World' in Timothy Fuller (ed.), *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 38.
19. Rengger, *The Anti-Pelagian Imagination*, p. 16.
20. See George Santayana, *Dominations and Powers: Reflections on Liberty, Society, and Government* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995).
21. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995); Michel Foucault, *The Courage to Truth: The Government of Self and Others II* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011).

22. Rengger agreed that moral reasoning can never be separated from the circumstances of life as his appreciation for the work of Jonsen and Toulmin on casuistry betrays (see Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). But, even in this case, Rengger lamented the decline of practical judgement in modernity from the perspective of someone who had no illusions about the conditions supplanting its revival in the modern world. His endorsement, therefore, of a more pluralist, humane, and compassionate form of reason(ing), has to be read in the context of his priority being not 'truth' but the 'conversation'.
23. See Alain Badiou, *St Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).
24. At least his critique of Gray's Schopenhauerian 'dark pessimism' and his reflections on tragedy, pessimism, life, theory and practice in his essays in the *Anti-Pelagian Imagination* volume strongly suggest so, even though he never systematically spelled out the relation of 'life' to the 'intellect' in his work.

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