

Ideology as Barbarism and Infinite Regression: Jorge Luis Borges's "The Theologians"

by Kevin P. Keating

In "The Theologians," Jorge Luis Borges succinctly describes, in the opening paragraph of his famous short story, the destruction of a monastery during the waning days of the Roman Empire. Though he never specifies the date, we can deduce an approximate year since the Huns did not establish their dominion over Europe until around 400 BCE. Perhaps the precise year, and even the identity of the invading army, are of little consequence to the general plot since, in the first sentence, Borges reveals his usual themes and, one might argue, the major preoccupation of much of his fiction—namely, the centrality of books and the fundamental misreadings of their esoteric ideas. But something here is worth noting. In this fictionalized account of a rampaging army, the Huns do not, as one might expect, set their sights on the more practical and militarily strategic targets found in most monasteries—the stable, the pigsty, the fishery, the smithy, the storeroom, the brewhouse—but instead, and rather comically, desecrate a church and its religious paraphernalia before stampeding their horses into the library where they "mangled the incomprehensible books and reviled and burned them." In the final analysis, the destruction of books and the eradication of the ideas contained therein are, for Borges, the quintessence of barbarism.

If one is to take Borges literally, books are not merely conventional symbols of knowledge and collective wisdom, but rather symbols of the entire universe. "The Universe is one vast book," wrote the Sufi mystic and poet Mohyddin ibn-Arabi, an idea found time and again in much of Borges's fiction and poetry. Whereas the cultural anthropologist and historian of religious ideas, Mircea Eliade, elucidated on the concept of the *Axis Mundi*, the Rosicrucians of the 17th century often employed, or perhaps invoked, the phrase *Liber Mundi* to describe the true world center. For Borges books are

indeed a *Liber Mundi*, the divine *Logos* made manifest on the page and translated into intelligible language. The Huns, fearful that “the letters of these books might harbor blasphemies against their god, which was a scimitar of iron,” immediately set fire to the library. Within a single sentence, Borges, in a wonderful act of literary compression, identifies, rather ironically, the second theme of his story. Books and ideas, he implies, are not only spiritually and intellectually dangerous but, like a glimmering scimitar, dangerous to one’s physical wellbeing. Indeed, a scimitar is a weapon intentionally designed to be maximally harmful, and human beings, as history has shown, will often extract pathological ideologies from books and use their warped dogmatism as an immensely powerful, and even genocidal, weapon.

In the next sentence, Borges presents the reader with a minor miracle. He describes how the Huns burn palimpsests and codices but that “in the heart of the bonfire, among the ashes, there lay, virtually untouched by the flames, the twelfth book of the *Civitas Dei*...” One might argue that Augustine’s *City of God* becomes, at least among the intellectuals in “The Theologians,” a kind of cult object, a hierophony that enjoys “a special veneration.” It is a sort of holy relic akin to the Grail. In many medieval Grail legends, manuscripts are often associated with the chalice in that the quest for the Grail (and therefore books) was the search for the missing “Word,” the highest form of wisdom that, over the course of centuries, had been lost and therefore inaccessible to the common man. Certainly, it was inaccessible to nomadic horsemen from Central Asia who made it their mission to destroy, rather than to hear, such a divinely-inspired message uttered aloud.

The significance of fire cannot be discounted. From Ancient Rome to Mongolia, fire was universally regarded as an image of purification and regeneration. Legend tells how Christ and his saints brought the dead to life by passing their bodies through the fires of a blacksmith’s furnace. Later, medieval alchemists would claim to forge immortality in the fire of their furnaces. For Borges, the concept of immortality, or perhaps “the eternal,” or better yet *the myth of the eternal return*, is of

critical importance here. For in the pages of the *Civitas Dei*, we learn that Plato, in ancient Athens, “once taught that at the end of time all things will return again to where they once were—that he, in Athens, before the same circle of listeners, will one day teach that doctrine once again.” According to Plato’s theory, had the *Civitas Dei* been burned, it would one day “return” only to be burned again an infinite number of times. From this concept, Borges presents the reader with the so-called heresy of circular time that will serve as the central conflict of the story.

In his books *Cosmos and History* and *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade argues that all cultures, no matter their level of empirical sophistication, see Time as being essentially circular—the circle of the seasons, the phases of the moon, the rhythm of vegetation. What’s more, Time is both a sacred reality and divine creation that centers around a sacred structure of some kind like a temple, a cathedral, gigantic trilithons, even a tree or a standing stone. For Borges, the library represents this *Axis Mundi*, or perhaps even, as is the case with “The Theologians,” a single book written by Augustine. According to Eliade, “For religious man, the world is renewed annually; in other words, with each new year it recovers its original sanctity, the sanctity that it possessed when it came from the Creator’s hands.”

These concepts segue quite seamlessly into the next sentence of the story where Borges introduces us to the protagonist, and one might say religious propagandist, Aurelian, the bishop-coadjutor of the then prominent Adriatic city of Aquileia, who, in his role as bureaucratic administrator, social functionary, and middling intellectual, will take the Church’s dogmatic concepts of a Creator, and the Creator’s true intentions, so literally that, by the story’s end, he will be responsible not only for the torture and death of an innocent colleague but for his own horrific immolation. Both men, of course, are sent to the flames—the first is burned at the stake while the other is roasted when a lightning storm sets a nearby forest ablaze. Whether both burn in hellfire for all eternity is a matter best left to the reader, although Borges intimates, at the end of the story, that the rival theologians

find themselves in a metaphorical afterlife in which there is an absence of Time. But one can certainly intuit a psychological dimension here. Hell, at least in Christian iconography, is often depicted as a bottomless pit because there is no end to the suffering found there. Likewise, one could argue that Aurelian's egomaniacal nature is bottomless and thus hellish. On the other hand, Borges writes, "In Paradise Aurelian learned that, for the unfathomable divinity, he and John of Pannonia (the orthodox believer and the heretic, the abhorner and the abhorred, the accuser and the accused) formed one single person." The concept that good and evil are two sides of a single coin is, like the *Axis Mundi*, a universally acknowledged metaphysical reality and ubiquitous symbol. Clement of Rome argued that God could be symbolized as a single individual with His right hand symbolizing Christ and His left hand symbolizing Satan. This indicates that even the most sophisticated and mystical accounts of the divine go beyond mere duality and are truly monotheistic in a way that might make any ideologically possessed worshiper shout, "Heresy!" One could also argue that John is, in Carl Jung's words, "the shadow" to Aurelian's light (or vice versa, depending on how one views Aurelian). "Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is," writes Jung. "At all counts, it forms an unconscious snag, thwarting our most well-meant intentions."

It is here (and keep in mind that we are still examining the first paragraph of the story) that Borges introduces us to his third theme, namely the psychological aspects of his protagonist, specifically the role that dominance and competence hierarchies play in shaping entire societies like medieval Europe, organizations within that society like the Catholic Church, and "well intentioned" individuals such as Aurelian. Borges concludes the first paragraph by briefly mentioning the common people at the bottom of the hierarchy in this post-apocalyptic new world order ruled by the murderous Huns. One hundred years after the Huns sacked Rome, Borges tells us, "Fear gripped all men's hearts, yet all were comforted by the rumor that John of Pannonia, who had distinguished himself by a treatise on the seventh attribute of God, was preparing to refute [the] abominable heresy [of circular time]."

As we learn in the first line of the second paragraph, Aurelian, who will prove himself an obstinately bookish fellow incapable of connecting with the masses, “deplores” the idea of John easing the fears of the proverbial flock.

He makes his first fatal flaw by believing, rather arrogantly, that the heresy of circular time is “too strange, too shocking, for the danger to be very serious.” Borges goes on to write, parenthetically, “The heresies we ought to fear are those that can be confused with orthodoxy.” The problem with this line of thinking is that the notion of circular time isn’t a cultural construct, or even the invention of a single man (i.e. Plato as reported by Augustine in the *Civitas Dei*), but a concept deeply ingrained in the human psyche, one that certainly predates written history. It is a primordial symbol and, in some sense, a “structural” component to storytelling in that, like all archetypes, it is grounded in biological reality. As Mircea Eliade argues, the idea of circular time became, even in archaic, pre-empirical societies “an exemplary model for all human rites and all significant human activities.”

These matters are, to be sure, rather mystical in nature, but Borges always has one foot grounded in reality. “I have no use for politics,” he once claimed (despite being hounded by Perón and taking courageous stands against authoritarianism and anti-Semitism), but in “The Theologians” he clearly recognizes the importance not only of the dominance hierarchy but of the *competence* hierarchy. Incompetent dictators, tyrants, popes, bishops, inquisitors, and religious institutions may use force and violence to maneuver their way to the top of the social and political pyramid, but the individual who is far more likely to succeed in his quest for domination is usually one who possesses remarkable competence in his particular field and who also is capable of attracting a large following from so-called “ordinary” people who do not place a high value on esoteric arguments.

What gives John his particular competence as a theologian is his grand reputation for having written about “the seventh attribute of God,” whatever this might be. In an ancient commentary of the Hebrew scriptures, a group of rabbis speculated that God can be defined by three attributes rather

than seven: omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence. But, according to this rabbinical wisdom, God lacks one important thing—limitations. Since everything in the known universe is bounded by some kind of conceptual frame, God's lack of limitations makes Him, by definition, a manifestation of Chaos, a concept that clearly troubles Borges. In much of his work, Borges seems to imply that without a discernible pattern, the universe is truly random, and quite possibly absent of purpose or meaning.

Resolved to write his own snarky condemnation of this perceived heresy (whereas John would “thunder down on the [heresiarchs] with the gravity of a prophet, he himself resolved to come at the problem from a different tack and chose derision”), Aurelian unintentionally implicates himself in one of the Church’s most egregious sins—the human intellect in love with its own creations. Evil, as defined by the Church, is the force that believes its own knowledge of the world is complete and absolute. In other words, the human intellect, believing it knows all there is to know about the cosmos, is the ultimate Satanic archetype.

Aurelian, who purports to be a champion of the common people, is not at all concerned about the fate of the underclass. Indeed, such men often find the poor and uneducated masses repellent and beneath contempt. Like so many neurotic and self-conscious intellectuals who adhere unwaveringly to a radical ideology, he is motivated by bitterness, resentment and jealousy. He is also driven by a grievance for inherited “power” structures that prevent him from ushering forth a Utopia or the Kingdom of God.

Borges further implies that Aurelian, by composing his epic theological treatise against a group of people he deems heretical, is in reality trying but unable to “cure himself of the grudge he held for [John].” There are some Freudian overtones here. Borges begins the third paragraph by writing, “There are those who seek the love of a woman in order to stop thinking of her, to put her out of his mind.” One can, of course, brush this line off as one of Borges’s witticisms. Ursula K. Le Guin argues

that Borges was the direct inheritor of the British literary tradition, with all of its dry humor and fantasy, and that he was directly influenced by writers like Stevenson, Kipling and Chesterton. In many of his essays, Borges himself admits as much, acknowledging his debt to all of these men, and in “The Theologians” his humor, while invariably sober, is on full display. That said, one must acknowledge the psychosexual component creeping into the story. In his book *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud argues that much of our suffering stems from “a social source.” He claims that a group of men who are able to limit and restrain their own gratifications (both sexual and intellectual) will soon collectively discover that they are more powerful than any one individual. By following the Church’s rules of celibacy for its clergy, Aurelian has learned to restrain at least of one of these natural impulses. The problem, of course, is that his aggressive nature, repressed for so long, mutates into an outward projection of primitive, indeed Hun-like, behavior. It then becomes a question of whether Aurelian can harness these impulses and direct them toward a significant social purpose and positive outcome. Indeed, Aurelian even describes himself as a “soldier” in an “army” determined to destroy an “Enemy.”

Borges spends much of the third paragraph describing Aurelian’s absurd attempt to formulate a coherent argument against these blasphemers, a “vast labyrinth” constructed of “*nego*’s and *autem*’s and *nequaquam*’s...” This becomes all the more tragic and absurd if we grant that Aurelian’s treatise is based on a misreading of the text and that he may perceive blasphemy where no blasphemy exists in the actual source material. The *City of God*, and its allusions to Plato, are only valuable because Aurelian does not have access to Plato in the original. At the time the story takes place, Europe had already begun its inexorable descent into the Dark Ages. Nevertheless, Aurelian, ignorant of Greek, not to mention the missing books from the *City of God*, obsessively crafts a series of solipsistic syllogisms built on clause after clause in which “bad grammar seemed manifestations of disdain.” He also, rather ironically, uses as his models not the image of Jesus who, in Christian tradition, is said to represent

the straight and narrow path, but, to repeat, “a vast labyrinth” of pagan myths. “In his painstakingly trivial way, [Aurelian] compared the impious to Ixion, with Prometheus’ liver, with Sisyphus, with the King of Thebes...and other heathen fables.” He also relies on writers from antiquity like Cicero and Plutarch.

One should probably pause here to note that Borges forgoes the use of hackneyed expressions like “Aurelian worked like a human dynamo.” In fact, he seems to have no interest at all in describing, in the conventional sense of the word, his primary character. He does not provide, as one might expect, the typical laundry list of realistic physical traits or compelling mannerisms. It is not critically important that we know, for instance, that Aurelian has brown eyes or blue, or that as a young man he studied the orations of Cicero. Height, age, weight, scars, both physical and emotional, style of dress, and the precise cut of his tonsure are of no significance here. In most works of short fiction, character is deftly defined by speech, but in “The Theologians” dialogue is virtually non-existent. Nevertheless, Borges is regarded in some literary circles as a great prose stylist. Mario Vargas Llosa believed the deliberate absence of conventional detail “functions extraordinarily well, giving life and credibility to a world of sophisticated intellectual and abstract ideas and curiosities. In this world, philosophical systems, theological disquisitions, myths and literary symbols...are the raw material of invention.” With Borges, characters are almost always subordinate to ideas, but what he does seem to care about are the choices his characters make, and the actions they take.

At the end of the third paragraph, Borges advances the plot, where one can discern a plot, by telling (rather than showing) the reader how Aurelian labored on this project for nine days and that on the tenth “[he] received a copy of the refutation written by John of Pannonia.” At this point in the narrative, Borges heightens the tension and conflict via the revelation of this long-awaited refutation. When dealing with any story by Borges, one must use the terms “conflict” and “rising action” with some caution since the protagonist, more often than not, is engaged in a war of ideas rather than, say,

direct physical or even psychological combat. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. One need only think of his early “apprenticeship” stories, especially those dealing with gangsters on the mean streets of Buenos Aires and legendary caballeros galloping across the Argentine pampas. It should also be noted that John, an innocent victim of Aurelian’s neuroses, is quite unaware that the proverbial battle lines have now been drawn. Here Borges informs us that Aurelian feels “an almost physical humiliation” when he concedes that John’s refutation is “universal” and “seemed not to have been written by a concrete person, but by any man or, perhaps, by all men.” What specifically troubles Aurelian, as we later find out, is John’s use of “twenty words,” but Borges, rather slyly, never reveals what these twenty words are. We only know, in paragraph four, that the refutation was “ludicrously brief,” an unexpected turn of events since, in paragraph two, we are told that Aurelian has always been troubled by John’s “verbose” treatise *De septum affectione Dei sire de aeternitate*.

The two men do find common ground in their hatred for the sect that “History has come to know by many names” and the sect’s supposed misreadings of the gospels and letters of Paul. We can also sense foreshadowing in Aurelian’s condemnation of their belief in circular time. He insists, “Time does not restore what we lose; eternity holds it for glory, and also for the fire.” But it is also worth noting the degree to which Aurelian despises the *Histrioni* (as these heretics come to be called). Psychologists inform us that hatred of “the other” goes well beyond ideological contempt. It actually triggers a disgust mechanism. Disgust is not just a physical sensation; it is a powerful emotional warning sign. Although it initially helped keep our species away from rotting food and contagious disease, the defense mechanism changed over time to affect the distance we keep from one another. When allowed to play a role in the creation of social policy, disgust can, in some instances, actually cause more harm than good as evidenced by Aurelian’s hyperbolic, irrational, and dehumanizing perceptions of the *Histrioni*:

There is no heresiologue who does not express shock as he counts their wild customs.

Many *Histrioni* professed asceticism; some mutilated themselves, like Origen; others lived underground in the sewers; others put out their eyes; still others...grazed on grasses like the oxen...From mortification and severity, they sometimes graduated to crime... others to sodomy, incense, and bestiality. All were blasphemous; they cursed not only the Christian God, but even the arcane deities in their own pantheon.

One can surmise that Aurelian, who prides himself on his superior intellect, is no longer thinking clearly about the issues, if he ever was, but instead has focused much of his hatred on his fellow human beings who, in his grim view, have become filthy animals worthy of extermination. In other words, his perspective is not merely overly theatrical—it is downright *histrionic*. Evidence-based arguments are completely absent in his work, but it is precisely at this point that we must wonder how much of the story is told from a limited third person perspective (Aurelian's) and how much is told in the voice of a narrator (perhaps Borges himself). For in the same paragraph we read, “In 1658, Sir Thomas Browne wrote the following: ‘Time has annihilated the ambitious *Histrioni* gospels...’” Aurelian, presumably composing his refutations sometime in the 6th century, could not know about Browne and his work.

It is here that Borges begins to play his usual tricks by alerting us to the fact that the *Histrioni* “imagined that every man is two men, and that the real one is the other one...They also imagined that our acts cast an inverted reflection, so that if we are awake, the other man is asleep.” Within the context of the story, these lines can be read as a simple commentary on the distinction, or lack thereof, between Aurelian and John of Pannonia, but they can also be read as playfully self-referential. Borges, in all likelihood, is asking the reader to deduce things about the imagined author of the story itself. “To the Mirror,” a short poem, comes immediately to mind, as do countless stories, including “Tlön,

Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” a tale generally viewed as a parabolic discussion of totalitarianism, in which Borges famously writes, “Mirrors and copulation are abominable, since they both multiply the numbers of men...” Like many of his stories, “The Theologians” challenges the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. Borges mentions several quite real historical human beings but often attributes fictional aspects to them. At the same time, he calls into question the very idea of authorship, suggesting that new perspectives and interpretations can be opened by treating this story—indeed, any story—as though it were told by different and competing narrators, one a real man (Borges) and one entirely invented in the reader’s mind. Indeed, in his essay “Borges and I,” the author himself calls into question his own being. Is he himself an invention, a kind of fiction that has been culturally constructed? The heretics described in the “The Theologians” “wove many, and diverse mythologies; some preached asceticism, others preached license—all preached confusion.” Much the same can be said of Borges himself.

The inevitable mirror metaphor is given full dramatic force as the story draws to a close. Borges reports, “Suddenly a sentence of twenty words came to [Aurelian’s] spirit. With joy he wrote it on the page; immediately afterward, he was disturbed by the sense that it was someone else’s.” Aurelian quickly recalls the twenty words written by John that so disturbed him so long ago, but he now hesitates from removing the plagiarized sentence from his own work because it would “weaken the force of his argument” *against John himself*, who is subsequently accused by Church authorities of disseminating heretical ideas. Again, Borges never reveals the secret behind this sentence, but the irony is obvious. The *Civitas Dei* is misinterpreted because the rest of the work has been destroyed, and John’s twenty words are used against him because the context of his treatise has been forgotten. We can, however, guess that in his infamous twenty words, John *condemns* the concept of circular time but supports the *Histrion*’s belief that events can only happen once. The mischievous narrator reports, “The *Histrioni* believed that the world would end when the number of possibilities was exhausted;

since there can be no repetitions, the righteous are duty-bound to eliminate (commit) the most abominable acts so that those acts will not sully...the coming of the kingdom of Jesus.” The narrator then provides a specific example of how the heresy has grim consequences for an unlettered, working-class family: “A blacksmith, on the Aventinus, driven to delusions by the misrepresentations of the *Histrioni*, set a great iron ball upon the shoulders of his little son so that the child’s double might fly.”

In the end, based largely on the horrific death of this child, John is put on trial and condemned to be burned at the stake. “Aurelian witnessed the execution, because to have avoided it would have been to confess himself responsible for it.” It is here, and only here, that Borges, for one full paragraph, writes anything that amounts to a conventional “scene”—and a rather gruesome piece of prose it is. He describes the place of execution, the stake pounded deep into the ground, the bundles of firewood, and John’s bestial cries as he is dragged kicking through the dust to his death and then consumed by the flames. “It was as though the fire itself were screaming.” Many years later, plagued by guilt and living on the edge of a forest in the wilds of Ireland, Aurelian is also burned alive when, at high noon, a lightning bolt sets the trees on fire.

In his book *The Art of Fiction*, David Lodge points out that meta-fiction, though hardly a modern invention, is a mode of writing that has special appeal for twentieth century writers like Borges who, weighted by the anxiety of influence, “fear that whatever they might have to say has been said before” and that they are thus “condemned by self-consciousness.” The point of all such stories is that everything is capable of a double interpretation, for there can be nothing that is unambiguous. Certainly “The Theologians” reads like a hallucinatory externalization of Borges’s thoughts on this topic, and Aurelian may be a manifestation of the author’s guilt and self-hatred, a shadowy figure who mistakes his double for himself and feels compelled to attack and mutilate it. However, in his book *Genius*, Harold Bloom cautions us against this interpretation, claiming, “Borges thought that polemic and rivalry has no part in the drama of influence” and that the writer’s highest aim was to be “everyone

and no one,” a living labyrinth of literature. Such ideas can easily lead to nihilism, but Bloom feels that in today’s pernicious, post-modernist, neo-Marxist academic climate, Borges, who despised ideological thinking of all stripes, is the antidote to the claims made by those well-intentioned Leftists who have all but destroyed the humanities by reducing the canon to little more than an insidious expression of tyrannical patriarchal power. It seems indisputable that Borges felt ideologies were not merely dangerous but positively murderous in their intent. But, then again, this entire essay is just one more misreading of an infinitely complex story.

About the Author

Kevin P. Keating's first novel *The Natural Order of Things* (Vintage 2013) was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prizes/First Fiction award and received starred review from *Publishers Weekly* and *Booklist*. His second novel *The Captive Condition* (Pantheon 2015) was launched at the San Diego Comic Con International and received starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and *Library Journal*. He teaches at several colleges in the Cleveland, Ohio area. The author maintains a blog at: <http://kevinpkeating.blogspot.com>