

What are you giving up for Lent?

As we approach the festival of Easter, we aim to experience something of what Jesus felt on the Cross. In his cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” **God confesses the absence of God.**

...let the atheists themselves choose a god. They will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation; only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist
—G.K. Chesterton

During Lent, we will expose ourselves to some of **the great atheist critics of religion**, in order to purge ourselves of a faith in which doubt is bad and God is used as a crutch to cope with the uncertainties and hardships of life.

In the process, we hope to discover **a richer faith** in which our experiences of **the absence of the presence of God** are recognised and remembered.

Atheism for Lent

a 6-week Course exploring what it might mean to

give up God for Lent

contact details katharinesarahmoody@gmail.com

Course Booklet

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This Course relies heavily upon Merold Westphal's *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007[1998]), as well as print publications and online media by Pete Rollins. A very good book which introduces various theories of religion (including Freud and Marx) is Daniel L. Pal's *Eight Theories of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

Commitments

Giving up God for Lent means that we will...

- contribute to a **supportive** group environment in which we can experience together the trauma of wrestling with perceptive criticisms of religion and God,
- **read** the preparatory material before the group meets,
- let these critics **judge us** (as well as critically judging them), allowing our faith to be put into question,
- **reflect** on our experiences of the absence of the presence of God, and
- commit fully to this Lenten process of **purging** and to see the Course through to the end.

The Role of the Facilitator(s) is...

- NOT to refute atheist criticisms of religion and God
- NOT to reassure the group that faith can withstand these criticisms
- to enable the group to get the most out of the events
- to join the group in the process of questioning and self-reflection
- to facilitate understanding and discussion
- to experience with the group the possibility that “the atheist other” can be an instrument of our own transformation

Introduction: Atheism for Lent

There was once a world-renowned philosopher who, from an early age, set himself the task of proving once and for all the nonexistence of God. Of course, such a task was immense, for the various arguments for and against the existence of God had done battle over the ages without either being able to claim victory.

He was, however, a genius without equal, and he possessed a singular vision that drove him to work each day and long into every night in order to understand the intricacies of every debate, every discussion, and every significant work on the subject.

The philosopher's project began to earn him respect among his fellow professor when, as a young man, he published the first volume of what would turn out to be a finely honed, painstakingly researched, encyclopaedic masterpiece on the subject of God. The first volume of this work argued persuasively that the various ideas of god that had been expressed throughout antiquity were philosophically incoherent and logically flawed. As each new volume appeared, he offered, time and again, devastating critiques of the theological ideas that had been propagated through different periods of history. In his early forties, he completed the last volume, which brought him up to the present day.

However, the completion of this work did not satisfy him. He still had not found a convincing argument that would demonstrate once and for all the nonexistence of God. For all he had shown was that all the notions of God up to that time had been problematic.

So he spent another sixteen years researching arguments and interrogating them with a highly nuanced, logical analysis. But by now he was in his late fifties and had slowly begun to despair of ever completing his life project.

Then, late one evening while he was locked away in his study, bent wearily over his old oak desk, surrounded by a vast sea of books, he felt a deep stillness descend upon the room. As he sat there motionless, everything around him seemed to radiate an inexpressible light and warmth. Then, deep in his heart he heard the voice of God address him:

“Dear friend, the task you have set yourself is a futile one. I have watched all these years as you poured your being into this endless task. Yet, you fail to understand that

your project can be brought to completion only with my help. Your dedication and single-mindedness have not gone unnoticed, and they have won my respect. As a result, I will tell you a sacred secret meant only for a few... Dear friend, *I do not exist.*"

Then, all of a sudden, everything appeared as it was before, and the philosopher was left sitting at his desk with a deep smile breaking across his face. He put his pen away and left his study, never to return. Instead, in gratitude to God for helping him complete his lifelong project, he dedicated his remaining years to serving the poor.

—Pete Rollins, *The Orthodox Heretic*¹

My first encounter with this secret occurred a number of years ago while I was walking home, late one evening. As I weaved my way through the half-dead trees that inhabited a piece of wasteland connecting my origin to my destination, I heard an inner voice calling my name. I stood still and listened intently to what I took to be nothing less than the solemn, silent voice of God. As I stood there, rooted to the ground, God spoke to me, repeating four simple words, "I do not exist."

"I do not exist"? What could this possibly mean?

One thing for sure was that this was not a simple atheism, for it was God who was claiming God's nonexistence. In that wasteland, I was confronted with something different. I was confronted with the erasure of God by none other than God. I was confronted with the idea that, while God may not be something, that did not imply that God was nothing.

Up until then I had considered God to be just one more thing in the world, albeit the greatest. But after this event, I wondered whether this was an inappropriate way of approaching God. Perhaps God ought not to be thought of as an object in the world, but rather as that which transforms my interaction with all objects in the world.

What if I was being taught that every time I affirm God I simultaneously affirm something less than God? What if this God I affirm is always a delusion formed from the materials of my imagination and desires?

—Ikon, "The God Delusion"²

Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche

are three of the great atheist critics of religion and 'we stand accused by their critique of being Pharisees, of practicing a self-serving religion that is idolatrous by our own standards.'³ These same criticisms of religion can be found within Christianity itself, issued by prophets like Amos and Isaiah – who have God say, "I hate your church; what I want is justice"⁴ – the Apostle James, Saint Paul, and Jesus himself. These biblical and philosophical figures share, then, a protest against what can be called '*instrumental*

¹ Peter Rollins, *The Orthodox Heretic and Other Impossible Tales* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009), pp.104-106.

² Ikon, "The God Delusion: Where does your faith lie?," Greenbelt Arts Festival, Aug 26 2007.

³ Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007[1998]), p.59. Originally published by W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1993.

⁴ Amos 5:21-24 and Isaiah 1:11-17, paraphrased.

*religion, the piety that reduces God to a means or instrument for achieving our own human purposes with professedly divine power and sanction.*⁵ This means that engaging with the work of Freud, Marx and Nietzsche as critics of instrumental religion can form part of a Lenten practice of purging ourselves of a faith in which God and religion are used as masks for self-interested desire and aggression, as crutches to cope with the uncertainties and hardships of life, and as legitimation for the oppression and persecution of others.

Key to this process is thinking about the differences between our 'apparent motives' and our 'operative motives,'⁶ between the rationalisations or reasons we give for our beliefs and actions (to ourselves as well as to others) and the motives that are revealed when we direct attention to the functions or operations of those beliefs and actions. How do our religious beliefs and actions function? Do these functions reveal 'the anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery, the terror of death, the thirst for revenge, and appetite for food and other necessities'?'⁷ Do they reveal, in other words, a mature faith, or a faith 'formed from the materials of [our] imagination and desires?'⁸ Since 'religion can hide from us as nothing else can the face of God,'⁹ we attempt through this "Atheism for Lent" Course a careful self-examination, to perhaps discover a richer faith beyond an instrumental religion of immediate self-interest.

Further, we hope to experience something of the Crucifixion story that is too often neglected. Jesus' cry from the cross – "Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani?" "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" – is a moment of divine abandonment, a moment when even God experiences the absence of God, feeling deserted and alone. At this Easter time, we can recall our own experiences of the absence of the presence of God, knowing that Christianity is a religion which recognises and remembers these very real experiences. Doubt and disbelief are not only for the atheists.

⁵ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.6 (emphases in original).

⁶ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.29.

⁷ David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. H.E. Root (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), p.31.

⁸ Ikon, "The God Delusion."

⁹ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p.18.

Freud's Critique of Religion

The permanence of conflict is Freud's leading theme, and part of his hostility to religion stems from an awareness that religion somewhere assumes a fixed point... at which conflict is resolved. In contrast, Freud maintains an intractable dualism; self and world remain antagonists, and every form of reconciliation must fail.

—Philip Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist*¹

[Religion is a] system of doctrines and promises which on the one hand explains to ["the common man"] the riddles of this world with enviable completeness, and, on the other, assures him that a careful Providence will watch over his life and will compensate him in a future existence for any frustrations he suffers here. The common man cannot imagine this Providence otherwise than in the figure of an enormously exalted father. Only such a being can understand the needs of the children of men and be softened by their prayers and placated by the signs of their remorse. The whole thing is so patently infantile, so foreign to reality, that to anyone with a friendly attitude to humanity it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life.

—Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*²

Religion as Wish-Fulfillment

For Freud, the human predicament is bleak. The world that is antagonistic to the self is both natural and cultural. Against the disasters, decay and death in the natural world, human culture is a consoling force, since '[e]very human society is, in the last resort, men banded together in the face of death.'³ But this comfort is also a burden to the self, as culture demands the renunciation of sexual desires and aggressive instincts. This means that '[c]ivilized man has exchanged a portion of his possibilities of happiness for

¹ Philip Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1961), p.292.

² Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953-74), vol.21, p.74.

³ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967), p.52.

a portion of security.⁴ Freud's worldview is therefore tragic, despairing of the self's happiness in the face of the dual external threats of nature and culture, which mirror the dual internal threats of the id and the superego, respectively.

For Freud, the self (the ego, the "I" that we think of as our selves, as "me") serves 'three tyrannical masters...: the external world, the super-ego and the id.' The ego is

driven by the id, confined by the super-ego, [and] repulsed by [external] reality... If the ego is obliged to admit its weakness, it breaks out in anxiety – realistic anxiety regarding the external world, moral anxiety regarding the super-ego and neurotic anxiety regarding the strength of the passions in the id.⁵

The id (nature as desires, instincts, drives, or passions) and the ego are 'like a weak rider on powerful horse.'⁶ Whilst the rider (the ego) guides the power of the horse (the id), most of the time 'a rider, if he is not to be parted from his horse, is obliged to guide it where *it* wants to go; so in the same way the ego is in the habit of transforming the *id's* will into action *as if it were his own*.'⁷

The super-ego (culture as conscience, social constraints) also asserts power over the ego, confining it not with the voice of reason or of God, but with the voice of culture, which places the restrictions and requirements of social norms on the ego with such cruel violence – Freud refers to the super-ego as merciless and sadistic⁸ – that the ego experiences intense guilt and shame. Amidst these pressures of nature, culture, id and super-ego, it is little wonder, then, that Freud writes that '[o]ne feels inclined to say that the intention that man should be "happy" is not included in the plan of "Creation".'⁹ Despite the impossibility of ever fulfilling what Freud calls the "pleasure principle," there is a 'reduced sense' in which happiness is possible and it is the task of the ego to attempt to acquire it.¹⁰ But this happiness is the ability to be nothing more than 'better armed' against the general human predicament of 'common unhappiness.'¹¹

Part of Freud's hostility towards religion stems from its tendency to impose 'on everyone its own path to the acquisition of happiness and protection from suffering,'¹² but his critique of religion consists of both scepticism and suspicion. As 'foreign to reality,' religion is an error, whilst as 'so patently infantile,' religion is an illusion.¹³ Merold Westphal's distinction between scepticism and suspicion makes the difference between these two critiques clearer. While scepticism is a function of an 'evidential atheism' – an atheism which requires of theism evidential proof of its claims¹⁴ –

⁴ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.21, p.115.

⁵ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.22, pp.77-78.

⁶ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.36.

⁷ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.19, p.25; my emphases.

⁸ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.19, p.53.

⁹ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.21, p.76.

¹⁰ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.21, p.83.

¹¹ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.2, p.351.

¹² Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.21, p.84.

¹³ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.21, p.74.

¹⁴ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.13.

suspicion is a “hermeneutic,” a method or principle of interpretation. Freud, Marx and Nietzsche, who have been called the “masters of suspicion,”¹⁵ practice a *hermeneutic of suspicion*, which, according to Westphal, is a way of interpreting beliefs and practices in an attempt to ‘expose the self-deceptions involved in hiding our actual operative motives from ourselves, individually or collectively, in order not to notice how and how much our behaviour and our beliefs are shaped by values we profess to disown.’ Suspicion is cast not upon the “truth” of religious beliefs themselves, but upon the believers’ motives and the function(s) of their beliefs. ‘Skepticism is directed towards the elusiveness of things, while suspicion is directed towards the evasiveness of consciousness. Skepticism seeks to overcome the opacity of facts, while suspicion seeks to uncover the duplicity of persons.’¹⁶

Freud’s suspicion links religion to his theory of dreams. It is easy to see that daydreams, as ‘scenes and events in which the subject’s egoistic needs of ambition and power or his erotic wishes find satisfaction,’ are direct fulfilments of wishes, desires and needs.¹⁷ Freud argues that dreams in our sleeping state also function in this way, but often only indirectly, since the wishes, desires and needs they fulfil are shameful to our waking consciousness and consequently repressed. The ensuing censorship and distortion of these desires mean that, in analysis, it is necessary to distinguish between dreams’ manifest and latent contents. Dreams are, therefore, the *disguised* fulfilment of a *suppressed* wish. Freud writes that,

there are some dreams which are undisguised fulfilments of wishes. But in cases where the wish-fulfilment is unrecognizable, where it has been disguised, there must have existed some inclination to put up a defense against the wish; and owing to this defense the wish was unable to express itself except in distorted shape.¹⁸

From this, Freud generalises from dreams to all thoughts of the human mind, including religious thoughts.

...religious ideas have arisen from the same need as have all the other achievements of civilisation: from the necessity of defending oneself against the crushingly superior force of nature. To this a second motive was added – the urge to rectify the shortcomings of civilization which made themselves painfully felt... We shall tell ourselves that it would be very nice if there were a God who created the world and was a benevolent Providence, and if there were a moral order in the universe and an after-life; but it is a very striking fact

¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p.32.

¹⁶ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.13.

¹⁷ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.15, p.98.

¹⁸ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.4, pp.141-142.

[noteworthy, rather than surprising] that all this is exactly as we are bound to wish it to be.¹⁹

Because, as Francis Bacon notes, 'what a man had rather were true he more readily believes' and 'whatever his mind seizes and dwells upon with peculiar satisfaction is to be held in suspicion,'²⁰ psycho-analysis is therefore 'justly suspicious' of religious belief.²¹ For Freud, then, religious beliefs are also the disguised fulfilment of repressed wishes, 'fulfilments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind.'²²

As such, they are 'illusions,' a technical term which has a specific meaning for Freud: 'we call a belief an illusion when a wish-fulfilment is a prominent factor in its motivation, and in doing so we disregard its relations to reality.'²³ Therefore, the 'psychological nature' of religious beliefs as illusory²⁴ does not involve 'the truth of the foundation of religious ideas but their function in balancing the renunciations and satisfactions through which man tries to make his life tolerable.'²⁵ Religious beliefs function as illusions when

[w]e represent God to ourselves, not in accordance with the evidence available to us but in accordance with our wishes; in other words, we create God in our image, or at least in the image of our desires. Now we have three things to be ashamed of: (1) the desires that govern this operation, (2) our willingness to subordinate truth to happiness, and (3) our [hubris] in making ourselves the creator and God the creature. If we are not utterly shameless, we will do our best to distract attention, especially our own, from what is going on.²⁶

For example, when God is 'only seemingly stern,' or when we are God's 'only beloved child, his Chosen People,'²⁷ 'I need fear no punishment and can count on rewards, both quite independently of what I deserve'²⁸ – and quite independently of the biblical evidence which suggests that the chosen people have a special responsibility rather than enjoying a special exemption.²⁹ Further, as David Hume notes of these 'comfortable views' of God, '[w]hat so corrupt as some of the practices, to which these systems give rise?'³⁰ A religion whose God is constructed in believers' own image serves to legitimate

¹⁹ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.21, pp.21 and 33.

²⁰ Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, XLIX, LVIII.

²¹ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.5, p.517.

²² Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.21, p.30.

²³ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.21, p.31.

²⁴ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.21, p.33.

²⁵ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, pp.234-235.

²⁶ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.62.

²⁷ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.21, pp.19-20.

²⁸ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.63.

²⁹ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.64.

³⁰ David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. H.E. Root (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), p.76.

“our” way of structuring the social world and ‘buttress’ the persecution of anything “other,” by authorising ‘the social status quo’ or by its simple compatibility with it.³¹

For Freud, religious practices are akin to neurotic symptoms.³² He writes,

I am certainly not the first person to have been struck by the resemblance between what are called obsessive actions in suffers from nervous affections and the observances by means of which believers give expression to their piety. The term “ceremonial,” which has been applied to some of these obsessive actions, is evidence of this. The resemblance, however, seems to me to be more than a superficial one, so that an insight into the origin of neurotic ceremonial may embolden us to draw inferences by analogy about the psychological processes of religious life.³³

While neurotic ceremonials are private and individual in nature and sexual in origin, and religious ceremonials are public and communal and related to pride, they share an ‘underlying renunciation of the activation of instincts that are constitutionally present.’³⁴ They share the dual function, therefore, of symbolic re-enactment and symbolic repudiation of forbidden desires.³⁵ The intolerable wish seeking fulfilment is displaced, replaced by more bearable notions and the resulting symptoms of obsessive symbolic actions. Think, for example, of Lady Macbeth, whose concerns about moral purity (wish-fulfilment) become displaced by the idea of physical cleanliness (displaced wish-fulfilment) and who consequently experiences an abnormal compulsion to wash her hands (symptom).

Neurotic and religious ceremonials are richly meaningful, but those who perform such an action do so ‘without understanding its meaning – or at any rate its chief meaning.’³⁶ This means that the conscious reasons we give for what we do are rationalisations of what we are doing, but not the real meanings of our actions. According to Freud, ceremonials are ‘penitential measures,’³⁷ expressing repentance on the one hand and self-imposed punishment on the other. Self-reproach is therefore key to ceremonials of both kinds, since they function as a defence not only against our guilt in relation to the original desire or act, but also against the anxiety associated with our on-going temptation to fulfil the desire or to repeat the act.

Freud further highlights the connection between neurotic ceremonials and religious practices in his study of the totemic cultures of tribal societies, *Totem and Taboo*.³⁸ He suggests that cultural taboos against touching or harming the totem (the

³¹ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.131.

³² Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.77.

³³ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.9, p.117.

³⁴ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.9, pp.126-127.

³⁵ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.98.

³⁶ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.9, p.122.

³⁷ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.3, p.173.

³⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (1913).

tribe's sacred animal) are so strong since they correspond to a repressed desire to do precisely what is prohibited. This ambiguity results because, for Freud, the totem represents the father. On the one hand, the totemic taboos against killing the totem and having sexual relations with women of the same totem (tribe) are designed to defend against the Oedipal guilt of wanting to kill the father and sleep with the mother. On the other hand, however,

[t]otemic religion not only comprised expressions of remorse and attempts at atonement [in the form of ethical obedience], it also served as a remembrance of the triumph over the father. Satisfaction over that triumph led to the institution of the memorial festival of the totem meal, in which the restrictions of deferred obedience no longer held. Thus it became a duty to repeat the crime of parricide again and again in the sacrifice of the totem animal³⁹

Together, these religious ceremonials (the taboo against killing the totem and the festival at which the totem is killed and eaten) form the symbolic renunciation and symbolic re-enactment of aggression, hostility and rebellion directed towards powerful figures, such as parents – and ‘at bottom God is nothing other than an exalted father.’⁴⁰

Thus, for Freud, *all* religious ceremonials share with neurotic ceremonials this defensive character, since a *symbolic* re-enactment of wish-fulfilment (eating the totem) replaces such an action *in reality*, and therefore allow us to “cancel out” our guilt. The purpose of participating in religious rites is to circumvent the punishment that would be meted out were the taboo(s) in question to actually be breached. The renunciation involved – of various kinds, depending on the ritual; for example, sacrifice of some possession, or atonement through abstention from certain activities and behaviours for a period of time – replaces the renunciation that would be involved in the punishment for any violation of the prohibition. But whilst renunciation *ostensibly* expresses remorse, it *actually* repeats the offence, since through the self-imposed substitution of one renunciation (of “some thing” in ritual sacrifice) for another (of “some freedom” in ethical abstention) it is possible to both “cancel” our guilt and renew the rebellion by offering sacrifices as a bribe in exchange for continued disobedience and defiant freedom.

Freud writes that, ‘filial rebelliousness also emerges, in the *later* products of religion, often in the strangest of disguises and transformations.’⁴¹ Do we, in our own contemporary contexts, as well as in these tribal societies, attempt to “bargain” with a god we have created in our own image, “purchasing” ‘the right to guilt-free rebellion’?⁴² Are our religious beliefs and practices re-enactments of our hostility towards and our desire to control or cheat God? Does belief in Christ’s atonement for our sins reveal a wish to displace blame and disown responsibility? Does this belief allow us to “buy” our

³⁹ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.13, p.145.

⁴⁰ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.13, pp.147-148.

⁴¹ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.13, p.145.

⁴² Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.114.

continued revolt? Does the practice of Eucharist both renounce and re-enact the torture and execution of the father? Does this ceremonial allow us to symbolically renounce our guilt, yet symbolically re-enact our triumph, over breaching the prohibition “thou shalt not kill”? Do we insolently refuse to ethically renounce “some freedom” by substituting for this the ritual renunciation of “some thing”? Does our participation in religious beliefs and practices function as a bribe for rebellion? To the extent that it does function in this way, perhaps our religious beliefs and practices are indeed formed from our needs, wishes and wants. From our fears and anxieties. Our ambitions, aspirations or pride. Our anger or envy. Our cynicism or mistrust. Our resentment, bitterness or spite. But if religious beliefs are wish-fulfillments and religious practices are strategies to manage guilt and mutiny, what happens to my faith?

Marx's Critique of Religion

Man has found in the imaginary reality of heaven where he looked for a superman only the reflection of his own self. He will therefore no longer be inclined to find only the appearance of himself, the non-man, where he seeks and must seek his true reality... The foundation of irreligious criticism is this: man makes religion, religion does not make man... Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people... The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about their condition is a demand to give up a condition that requires illusions... Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chains not so that man may bear chains without any imagination or comfort, but so that he may throw away the chains and pluck the living flowers... It is therefore the task of history, now the truth is no longer in the beyond, to establish the truth of the here and now. The first task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, once the *holy* form of self-alienation has been discovered, is to discover self-alienation in its *unholy* forms. The criticism of heaven is thus transformed into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.

—Karl Marx, "Towards a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*"⁴³

The idea that our political, legal, economic, moral, religious, and metaphysical theories are deeply conditioned by the world into which they are born, in which they live, and from which they die, especially by the economic class struggles of that world, is expressed by Marx in a single word, "ideology."

—Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*⁴⁴

⁴³ Karl Marx, "Towards a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction," cited in Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, pp.134-140; my emphases.

⁴⁴ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.159.

Religion as Ideology

It is a familiar Marxist commentary upon religion that it is ‘the opium of the people,’⁴⁵ a comparison also made by both Freud, for whom religion and ‘intoxicating substances’ are alternative strategies for dealing with the human predicament,⁴⁶ and Nietzsche, who refers to Christianity and alcohol as ‘the two great European narcotics.’⁴⁷ These substances to which religion is likened are, for these critics, addictive painkillers that treat symptoms of disease rather than the disease (or dis-ease, i.e. ‘common unhappiness’⁴⁸) itself. But Marx differs from Freud and Nietzsche in his diagnosis of religion as distracting from not a *necessary* and *natural* or *essential* hopelessness but from an *unnecessary* and *social* hopelessness.⁴⁹ It is in this difference that Marx can be said to radicalise Ludwig Feuerbach’s critique of religion.

Feuerbach’s theory of religion involves the central assertion that religion is a projection – not, as Freud suggests, of humanity’s shameful desires and needs, but of humanity’s own best attributes, ‘that which is worthy of adoration.’⁵⁰

What man praises and approves, that is God to him... Religion is a *judgement*. The most essential condition in religion – in the idea of the divine being – is accordingly the discrimination of the praiseworthy from the blameworthy, of the perfect from the imperfect⁵¹

For Feuerbach, then, ‘[m]an first *unconsciously* and *involuntarily* creates God in his own image, and after this [it is believed that] God *consciously* and *voluntarily* creates man in his own image.’⁵² However, rather than the unconscious projection of *individual desires*, religion for Feuerbach is the unconscious projection of *collective ideals*. He writes that ‘God is the idea of the species as an individual,’⁵³ and that, ‘[t]he divine being is nothing else than the human being, or, rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective.’⁵⁴ In other words, ‘while the perfections we represent to ourselves as divine are really human, they belong not to the individual but to the species,’ or to ‘the human spirit in some collective sense.’⁵⁵ This means that, according to Feuerbach’s theory of projection, ‘[t]he secret of *theology* is

⁴⁵ Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.64.

⁴⁶ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.21, p.75.

⁴⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1954), p.507.

⁴⁸ Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol.2, p.351.

⁴⁹ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.123.

⁵⁰ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1975), p.12.

⁵¹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, p.97.

⁵² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, p.118, my emphases.

⁵³ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, p.153.

⁵⁴ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, p.14.

⁵⁵ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, pp.125-126.

anthropology,⁵⁶ such that '[c]onsciousness of God is self-consciousness, knowledge of God is self-knowledge.'⁵⁷ As the unconscious projection of the self-consciousness of humanity, then, 'religion is man's earliest and also indirect form of self-knowledge.' It is a necessary, albeit juvenile, stage in humanity's self-discovery, one which Merold Westphal suggests is analogous to the 'discovery of the true ontological status of Santa Claus, who turns out to be but the personification of the human spirit of giving.'⁵⁸

But Feuerbach, like Freud, naturalises or essentialises the unhappiness against which religion is a defence and escape. As such, Marx writes, 'I approve of Feuerbach's aphorisms, except for one point: he directs himself too much to nature and too little to politics.'⁵⁹ For Marx, this unhappiness or hopelessness is not an inevitable condition of the essence of human nature but a social circumstance that is historical and contingent and, as such, capable of being altered. In other words, happiness and hope are possible. It is in reference to Feuerbach's critique of religion that Marx writes, therefore, that, 'philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.'⁶⁰ His atheistic project makes explicit the links between religion and social complacency, between the critique of religion and the critique of ideology, and, therefore, between religion and the possibility of protest.

In the opening paragraphs (reproduced in abridged form above) of one of his earliest philosophical essays, Marx writes that '[a]s far as Germany is concerned, the criticism of religion is essentially complete, and the criticism of religion is the presupposition of all criticism.'⁶¹ Westphal explains that, here, Marx asserts that the critique of religion offered by philosophers like Feuerbach 'has gone as far as it can go while concerning itself merely with religion,' and that it must now 'go on to play its proper role';⁶² namely, as illustrative of the critique of ideology more generally. When Marx writes in the same early essay that 'man has found in the imaginary reality of heaven where he looked for a superman only the reflection of his own self,' he deduces that humanity 'must seek his true reality' elsewhere.⁶³ Since religion is, for Marx, a 'general theory of the world,' the world's 'logic in popular form,' its 'moral sanction' and 'universal basis for consolation and justification,' he concludes that, 'the struggle against religion is indirectly the struggle against the world whose spiritual aroma [i.e. deodorant] is religion.'⁶⁴ This is why he writes that the critique of religion presupposes all criticism, since '[t]he criticism of religion ends with the doctrine that man is the highest being for man, that is, with the categorical imperative to overthrow all

⁵⁶ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings of Ludwig Feuerbach*, trans. Zawar Hanfi (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972) p.153.

⁵⁷ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, p.12.

⁵⁸ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.127.

⁵⁹ Karl Marx, in Schloomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p.10.

⁶⁰ Marx, *Selected Writings*, p.158.

⁶¹ Karl Marx, "Towards a Critique," cited Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, 134.

⁶² Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.136.

⁶³ Marx, "Towards a Critique," cited Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.136.

⁶⁴ Marx, "Towards a Critique," cited Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.137.

circumstances in which man is humiliated, enslaved, abandoned, and despised.’⁶⁵ The critique of religion must play its proper role in the critique of the world as it is currently socially, politically and economically ordered. Marx’s critique of religion can thus be seen as intricately linked to his critique of the state, and understanding the latter can shed further light on the nature of the former.

Marx turns his attention to both the Christian and the secular states. Of the Christian state, he observes that religion merely operates as ‘a sacred cloak to hide desires that are... very secular,’⁶⁶ since ‘[r]eligion is to support secular matters without the latter’s being subject to religion.’⁶⁷ The Christian state is, therefore, not really Christian but idolatrous since it forms, in practice, ‘the religion of domination, the cult of the will of the government.’⁶⁸ Whilst manifestly Christian, the latent god of the Christian state is the state itself. Of the secular state, Marx notes the schizophrenic ‘separation of man into a public and private man.’⁶⁹ This dissection means that ‘we have a private, exclusive, self-seeking role to play and a public, communal, common-good seeking role to play at the same time.’⁷⁰ These demands are functions of our dual existence within both civil society – ‘the capitalist marketplace of individual economic self-interest’ – and the political state – a domain in which we experience community and pursue the general good.⁷¹ Privatised within the secular state, religion becomes ‘the spirit of civil society, the sphere of egoism, the [war of all against all];’ it is therefore ‘the expression of the separation of man from his common essence, from himself and from other men.’⁷² For Marx, religion in a religious state is self-restrictive and oppressive, whilst religion in a secular state is self-alienating and repressive. In both forms of state, however, religion therefore plays a large role in legitimising the political status quo – the contingent, rather than natural, social order.

In a crucial passage linking his critique of religion to his critique of politics, Marx explains further the nature of the ‘double life’ – ‘a heavenly one and an earthly one’ – that we lead,

[Man] has a life both in the political community, where he is valued as a communal being, and in civil society where he is active as a private individual, treats other men as means, degrades himself to a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers... The political state... stands in the same opposition to civil society and overcomes it in the same manner as religion overcomes the limitations of the profane world, that

⁶⁵ Marx, *Selected Writings*, p.69.

⁶⁶ Marx, *Selected Writings*, p.17.

⁶⁷ Karl Marx, *Writings of the Young Karl Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. L.D. Easton and K.H. Guddat (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967), pp.77-78.

⁶⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964; reprinted Atlanta: scholars, 1982, introduction by Reinhold Niebuhr), p.36.

⁶⁹ Marx, *Selected Writings*, p.47.

⁷⁰ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.148.

⁷¹ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.148.

⁷² Marx, *Selected Writings*, p.47.

is, it must likewise recognize it, reinstate it, and let itself once more be dominated by it.⁷³

In other words, in the same way that religion claims to overcome the profane (or sinful) world, yet remains dominated by it, the political state claims to overcome civil society, the (profane or sinful) world of self-interest, yet remains dominated by it. As Westphal explains, 'this is what makes politics so "heavenly." For it is in the same way that religion overcomes the evil in the world, in theory but not in fact.'⁷⁴ As an example, Marx asks, '[d]o you offer your right cheek when you are struck upon the left, or do you not institute proceedings for assault? Yet the Gospel forbids that.'⁷⁵

Religion attempts to overcome evil and sin with 'high-sounding stories'⁷⁶ of love, justice and forgiveness, just as the state's narrative of common good will attempts to overcome individual self-interest. But since 'religion is the archetype of politics,'⁷⁷ the critique of religion is the presupposition of the critique of the state and of socio-political relations in general. However, as Westphal summarises, 'Marx is telling the story of the ways in which religion not only endures but eventually embraces evil.'⁷⁸ He writes, clearly bitterly, that

...[t]he social principles of Christianity justified the slavery of Antiquity, glorified the serfdom of the Middle Ages and equally know, when necessary, how to defend the oppression of the proletariat, although they make a pitiful face over it.

The social principles of Christianity preach the necessity of a ruling and an oppressed class, and all they have for the latter is the pious wish the former will be charitable.

The social principles of Christianity transfer the... adjustment of all infamies to heaven and thus justify the further existence of those infamies on earth.

The social principles of Christianity declare all vile acts of the oppressors against the oppressed to be either the just punishment of original sin and other sins, or trials that the Lord in his infinite wisdom imposes on those redeemed.

So much for the social principles of Christianity.⁷⁹

For Marx, both religion and the state are illusions, then, manifestly professing to overcome, yet latently preserving, current socio-economic divisions and injustices.

[T]he political illusion consists in the unreality of the community and general will, which is so prominent in political

⁷³ Marx, *Selected Writings*, pp.45-46.

⁷⁴ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.151.

⁷⁵ Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, p.35.

⁷⁶ Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rainbow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983), p.108.

⁷⁷ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.151.

⁷⁸ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.152.

⁷⁹ Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, pp.83-84.

self-consciousness, *and* in the unrecognized reality of conflict among the classes generated by the division of labour...

Similarly, the religious illusion consists in the unreality of the happiness it promises *and* in the unrecognized reality of the class interests at work in ethical-religious and metaphysical-religious ideas.⁸⁰

For Marx, 'religion offers an illusory comfort and politics an illusory community,'⁸¹ both forming *unreal illusions* that purport to overcome but actually sustain the *real worlds* of sin and self-interest. Thus they are illustrative of what Westphal calls "The Illusion of Overcoming the World," to which we shall return shortly.

Marx has a materialist conception of history, which came to be referred to as his "historical materialism." Just as suspicion is directed at the historical question of the extent to which beliefs self-deceptively hide our own operative motives and not the metaphysical question of the "truth" of those beliefs, so Marx's materialism is not an answer to the metaphysical question of 'whether mind or matter is the basic stuff of the universe' but expresses an historical concern to ask about the material relations 'between economic, political and intellectual factors in social structures and their transformation.'⁸² His materialism exposes another illusion of both religion and the state, "The Illusion of Autonomous Origin," which relates to the conditioned character of religious and political beliefs and practices. Marx writes that,

[t]he ideas of the ruling class [or classes] are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production... The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships.⁸³

When we lose sight of the contingent and conditioned nature of ideas and practices, which according to Marx express the dominant ordering of relationships between classes, we are trapped in The Illusion of Autonomous Origin. We are, in other words, unaware of the way in which ideas and practices are expressions of certain "ideologies."

The term "ideology" refers to 'any interpretation of history which is based on... ideas divorced from the social-economic realities in which those ideas originate.'⁸⁴ Further than this, however, these interpretations are characterised not only by 'our unawareness of their origin in social conditions' – The Illusion of Autonomous Origin – but by our ignorance of 'the part they play in maintaining or altering those conditions'⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.157.

⁸¹ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.156.

⁸² Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, pp.154-155.

⁸³ Marx, *Selected Writings*, p.176.

⁸⁴ Louis Dupré, *The Philosophical Foundations of Marxism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), p.146.

⁸⁵ Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, vol.1: *The Founders*, trans. P.S. Falla (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.154.

– what Westphal calls “The Illusion of Neutrality.” That we are unaware of the social impact of ideas and practices is the key to the operation of ideology, ‘[f]or to the degree that [The Illusion of Neutrality] prevails the victims of political power will feel less resentful and the perpetrators of political power will feel less guilty.’⁸⁶ The Illusions of Overcoming the World and of Autonomous Origin therefore function to support the central illusion at work in ideology, the Illusion of Neutrality, and together these illusions act to mask the fact that ideology is ‘the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence’⁸⁷ and forestall questions from both the perpetrators and victims of political power about its injustices. For Marx, both religion and the state perform this ideological function, serving to mask the contingent ordering of society that benefits some whilst oppressing others.

Because Marx gives to religion ‘an enormous responsibility for the political and economic shape of human life,’⁸⁸ it is possible, however, to also read in his critique of religion the prospect of religion as a form of social protest. But having introduced early on in his career the possibility of religion as ‘at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering,’⁸⁹ Marx himself then ignores it quite completely thereafter. His scathing observations of the history of Christian social principles quoted above perhaps indicate the main reason for his cynicism, but Karl Mannheim also points to the privatisation of religion, when he writes that ‘[t]o live consistently, in the light of Christian brotherly love, in a society which is not organized on the same principle is impossible.’⁹⁰ Whilst such pessimism may be a function of his *sceptical* atheism, Marx’s hermeneutic of *suspicion* provides an opportunity to ask some hard questions of our own faith. How do our religious beliefs and practices function materialistically? In other words, what sort of material social relations do they legitimise? How do our religious beliefs and practices function ideologically? Or, how do they act as the legitimation of an imaginary or unreal relationship with our own and others’ real conditions of existence?

What kinds of injustice and suffering do our beliefs and practices legitimise by tolerating the economic and political ways in which the social order is currently structured? Does Christianity mask special interests as the common good? ‘Whose wars does it bless? Does it leave unchallenged the nationalism and consumerism that lie at the heart of so much of the world’s suffering?’⁹¹ How might our beliefs and practices do this? Does, for example, ‘spiritualizing, allegorizing, inwardizing, and futurizing the Kingdom of God’ make Christianity latently compatible with the social evils that it otherwise manifestly disavows?⁹² How else is the critical potential of Christianity – the

⁸⁶ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.160.

⁸⁷ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and the State,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p.162.

⁸⁸ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.165.

⁸⁹ Marx, “Towards a Critique,” cited Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.137.

⁹⁰ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward A. Shils (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1936), pp.194-195.

⁹¹ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.171.

⁹² Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.189.

critique of idolatrous religion and unjust politics inherent to the Christian religion itself – neutralised? How can our beliefs and practices be more than a painkilling opiate? How can they be more than a deodorant to mask the bad aroma of today’s capitalistic society?

To rebut the charge of being the “opium of the people,” in which Marx and later Lenin summed up an irrefutable historical experience, is more than a matter of theory: it is a matter of political and social practice. And it is for Christians and their Church to give this practical proof.⁹³

If religious beliefs are projections of humanity’s highest attributes that simultaneously justify their lowest – by ideologically validating oppressors and consoling the oppressed and thereby encouraging social complacency – what happens to my faith?

⁹³ Roger Garaudy, *Marxism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. René Hague (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), p.163.

Nietzsche's Critique of Religion

The greatest recent event – that “God is dead,” that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable – is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe. For the few at least, whose eyes – the *suspicion* in whose eyes is strong and subtle enough for this spectacle – some sun seems to have set and some ancient and profound trust has been turned into doubt; to them our old world must appear daily more like evening, more mistrustful, stranger, “older.” But in the main one may say: The event itself is far too great, too remote from the multitude’s capacity for comprehension even for the tidings of it to be thought of having *arrived* as yet. Much less may one suppose that many people know as yet *what* this event really means – and how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined because it was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown in it; for example, the whole of our European morality. This long plenitude and sequence of breakdown, destruction, ruin, and cataclysm that is now impending – who could guess enough of it today to be compelled to play the teacher and advance proclaimer of this monstrous logic of terror, the prophet of a gloom and an eclipse of the sun whose like has probably never yet occurred on earth?

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), p.279, cited in Lee Spinks, *Friedrich Nietzsche* (London: Routledge, 2004[2003]), p.118.

I call Christianity the one great curse, the one enormous and innermost perversion, the one great instinct of revenge for which no means are too venomous, too underhand, too underground and too petty – I call it the one immortal blemish of mankind.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*⁹⁵

Religion as Revenge

According to Nietzsche, the philosopher ‘has a *duty* to suspicion today, to squint maliciously out of every abyss of suspicion.’⁹⁶ Squinting suspiciously at religion, he writes that, ‘[i]n former times one sought to prove that there is no God – today one indicates how the belief that there is a God could arise and how this belief acquired its weight and importance: a counter-proof that there is no god thereby becomes superfluous.’⁹⁷ He calls his hermeneutics of suspicion “genealogy,” a method of inquiring into the origins of beliefs and practices unconsciously concealed by self-deceit and hypocrisy. Genealogy is not archaeology, since it seeks not a transcendent origin or *archē* (beginning, first cause) ‘*behind* the world’ but, rather, origins *within* the world. These immanent origins are not found at the surface of things, however, since beliefs and practices ‘are *never* what they appear to us to be!’⁹⁸ Nietzsche therefore describes himself as a ‘subterranean man’ and a ‘solitary mole’ that ‘tunnels and mines and undermines,’⁹⁹ concerning himself with searching for the conditions out of which religious beliefs and practices emerged and, in particular, out of which moral values arose.

This involves putting into question the very criteria by which we evaluate values and, therefore, the ways in which we come to prize the moral values that we do. Since he is willing to question the very formation of morality, which many might consider immoral, Nietzsche calls himself an “immoralist.” He asks whether the act of adopting moral values is done for reasons that accord with the very morality being adopted, noting in the process that the operative motives for espousing a certain morality are, on the one hand, historically conditioned and, on the other, ‘uncontaminated by moral restraint and, just for that reason, repressed and unconscious.’¹⁰⁰

The more Freudian element in Nietzsche is due to their shared pessimism regarding the essentially tragic nature of humanity. For Nietzsche, this finds expression in his ontological or metaphysical theory of “the will to power.” Both the individual and

⁹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Book 5, Section (hereafter §) 343, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), p.448, cited in Dave Robinson, *Nietzsche and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1999), p.9.

⁹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), §34.

⁹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), §95.

⁹⁸ Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §116.

⁹⁹ Nietzsche, Preface to *Daybreak*, §1.

¹⁰⁰ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.222.

the community are driven by ‘the psychical extravagance of the lust for power.’¹⁰¹ The individual body and the body politic,

if it is a living and not a dying body... will have to be an incarnate will to power, it will strive to grow, spread, seize, become predominant because life simply *is* will to power... “Exploitation” does not belong to a corrupt or imperfect and primitive society; it belongs to the *essence* of what lives, as a basic organic function; it is a consequence of the will to power, which is after all the will of life.¹⁰²

The will to power is joined by a more Marxian element in Nietzsche, which seeks to identify the historical or sociological origin of beliefs and practices, and finds expression in what he calls “the morality of mores.” Nietzsche’s “genealogy of morals” illustrates the ways in which ‘morality is nothing other (therefore *no more*) than obedience to customs.’¹⁰³ For him, ‘[t]o be moral, to act in accordance with custom, to be ethical means to practice obedience towards a law or tradition established from of old.’¹⁰⁴ Mores, customs and traditions emerge from a community’s sense of self-preservation, and morality is nothing more than obedience to these norms. This means that morality is plural; different communities have different self-interests which give rise to different mores and therefore different moralities. When morality is the ‘social straitjacket’ a given community enforces to preserve itself,¹⁰⁵ its socially conditioned nature means that different moral virtues will be useful to different societies in different situations. In other words, ‘[h]e is called good because he does what is customary,’ yet what is customary will differ.¹⁰⁶ In relation to the morality of our adoption of morals, then, Nietzsche writes that, ‘[t]o become moral is not in itself moral... Subjection to morality can be slavish or vain or self-interested or resigned or gloomily enthusiastic or an act of despair, like subjection to a prince: in itself it is nothing moral.’¹⁰⁷

Together, these essentialist (the will to power) and historical (the morality of mores) theses form Nietzsche’s central argument that what is operative in any given morality is that community’s will to power. That there is no *one* morality, no *one* perspective from which to judge what is right and wrong, is part of what Nietzsche is referring to when he writes that ‘God is dead.’ Briefly examining his “death of God” thesis will enable us to begin to recognise the relationship between his genealogy of morals and his critique of religion. The parable that most clearly expresses this thesis is found in Section 125, “The Madman,” of *The Gay Science*,

¹⁰¹ Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §113.

¹⁰² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §259.

¹⁰³ Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §9.

¹⁰⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), §96.

¹⁰⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 2, §2, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967).

¹⁰⁶ Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, §96.

¹⁰⁷ Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §97.

Haven't you heard of that madman who in the bright morning lit a lantern and ran around the marketplace crying incessantly, "I'm looking for God! I'm looking for God!"

Since many of those who did not believe in God were standing around together just then, he caused great laughter. Has he been lost, then? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone to sea? Emigrated? – Thus they shouted and laughed, one interrupting the other.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Where is God?" he cried; "I'll tell you! *We have killed him* – you and I! We are all his murderers.

"But how did we do this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren't we straying as though through an infinite nothing? Isn't empty space breathing at us? Hasn't it got colder? Isn't night and more night coming again and again? Don't lanterns have to be lit in the morning?

"Do we still hear nothing of the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we still smell nothing of the divine decomposition? – Gods, too, decompose! God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers! The holiest and the mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood from us? With what water could we clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves? Is the magnitude of this deed not too great for us? Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it? There was never a greater deed – and whoever is born after us will on account of this deed belong to a higher history than all history up to now!"

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; they too were silent and look at him disconcertedly.

Finally he threw his lantern on the ground so that it broke into pieces and went out. "I come too early," he then said; "my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightening and thunder need time; the light of the stars needs time; deeds need time, even after they are done, in order to be seen and heard, This deed is still more remote to them than the remotest stars – *and yet they have done it themselves!*"

It is still recounted how on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there started singing his *requiem aeternam deo*. Led out and called to account, he is

said always to have replied nothing but, “What then are these churches now if not the tombs and sepulchres of God?”¹⁰⁸

Primarily addressed to those who do not believe in God, the madman’s proclamation of the death of God remains prophetic even to atheists, since this death is ‘too great, too remote from the multitude’s capacity for comprehension even for the tiding of it to be thought of having *arrived* as yet.’¹⁰⁹ The idea of God’s death is ‘too great’ to comprehend because, when, as Nietzsche observes, God has become nothing more than the foundation for and guarantee of meaning and purpose, the death of God brings the death of any absolute (religious or non-religious) systems of value and morality. As a ‘prophet of doom’ to both theists and atheists,¹¹⁰ then, Nietzsche’s madman announces the death of any viable “God’s eye” perspective on, transcendent source of, or justification for any universal moral principles, including those provided by atheistic Reason. When Martin Heidegger writes that, now, ‘[t]he ultimate blow against God and against the suprasensory world consists in the fact that God, the first of beings, is degraded to the highest value,’¹¹¹ he explains that, after the death of God, “God” becomes – in an elevation that is simultaneously a degradation – a “value,” a tradition, a custom to obey, an instrument of the human will to power.

Returning to his genealogy of moral pluralism, Nietzsche identifies ‘two basic types’ of morality – “master morality” and “slave morality” – within ‘the many subtler and coarser moralities.’¹¹² The difference between these two moralities illustrates how Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity centres on the charge that it is a religion born ‘out of the spirit of *ressentiment*’ or resentment.¹¹³ These two moralities differ in origin, with master morality found among the strong and powerful, and slave morality among ‘the violated, oppressed, suffering, unfree, who are uncertain of themselves and weary.’¹¹⁴ But they also differ in content, as Nietzsche’s account of master morality highlights.

The concept good and evil has a two-fold prehistory: *firstly* in the soul of the ruling tribes and castes. He who has the power to requite, good with good, evil with evil, and also actually practices requital – is, that is to say, grateful and revengeful – is called good; he who is powerless and cannot requite counts as bad. As a good man one belongs to the “good,” a community which has a sense of belonging together... As a bad man one

¹⁰⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003[2001]), §125 (pp.118-119), paragraph indentations added.

¹⁰⁹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1974), p.279, cited in Spinks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, p.118.

¹¹⁰ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1974), p.279, cited in Spinks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, p.118.

¹¹¹ Martin Heidegger, “The Word of Nietzsche: ‘God is Dead,’” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p.105.

¹¹² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §260.

¹¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecco Homo*, p.312, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecco Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967).

¹¹⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §260.

belongs to the “bad,” to a swarm of subject, powerless people... Good and bad is for a long time the same thing as noble and base, master and slave. On the other hand, one does not regard the enemy as evil: he can requite. In Homer the Trojan and the Greek are both good.¹¹⁵

As ‘the soul of the ruling tribes and castes,’ the master morality consists of ‘the evaluative traditions and customs’ of a particular community of the strong and the powerful.¹¹⁶ As such, revenge, which is the power to requite evil with evil in the service of the community, is a virtue, a natural expression of that community’s will to power. The primary dualism within master morality is good/noble versus bad/base (rather than versus evil) such that even ‘the enemies of the good are themselves good and not evil.’ To designate the enemy or the weak as bad/base is ‘not to signify some harmful quality they possess, some essence they exhibit, but rather to express the “*pathos of distance*” in which they are recognized as lacking what makes life worth living for the strong, what makes the good good.’¹¹⁷ Further, since the primary value within master morality is good/noble, rather than bad/base, the key to this morality is, as Merold Westphal notes, that ‘the goodness of the good does not depend on the badness of the bad.’¹¹⁸ As Nietzsche puts it, ‘every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself’ rather than from a denigration of its enemies.¹¹⁹ This means that, within master or noble morality, ‘no one is evil.’¹²⁰

However, Nietzsche observes, ‘[w]hen man possesses the feeling of power he feels and calls himself *good*: and it is precisely then that the others upon whom he has to discharge his power feel and call him *evil!*’¹²¹ This latter point introduces the primary characteristic of a second morality in Nietzsche’s prehistory, slave morality.

That lambs dislike great birds of prey does not seem strange: only it gives no ground for reproaching these birds of prey for bearing off little lambs. And if the lambs say among themselves: “these birds of prey are evil; and whoever is least like a bird of prey, but rather its opposite, a lamb – would he not be good?” there is no reason to find fault with this institution of an ideal, except perhaps that the birds of prey might view it a little ironically and say, “we don’t dislike them at all, these good little lambs; we even love them: nothing is more tasty than a tender lamb.”¹²²

Within slave morality, then, the wickedness of the wicked is primary, with the goodness of the good emerging in comparison to enemies already designated as evil: ‘He has

¹¹⁵ Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, §45.

¹¹⁶ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.233.

¹¹⁷ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, §2.

¹¹⁸ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.233.

¹¹⁹ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, §10.

¹²⁰ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, §2.

¹²¹ Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §189.

¹²² Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, §13.

conceived “the evil enemy, “*the Evil One*,” and this in fact is his basic concept, from which he then evolves, as an afterthought and pendant, a “good one” – himself!”¹²³ This means that, for Nietzsche, “good” has ‘two diametrically opposed meanings, depending on whether its opposite is bad or evil, or, to be more specific, depending on whether it designates the values perceived by the masters to be in their interest or those perceived by the slaves to be in theirs.’¹²⁴ For example, “justice” (to which we shall return shortly) is understood within slave morality as altruism and equality, but this is because it has much to gain from such a virtue whilst master morality has everything to lose. Accordingly, master morality understands justice in the sense of ‘the primordial law of things,’¹²⁵ the way things are and should continue to be, because it is from this that *it* benefits: ‘Big fish eat little fish.’¹²⁶

But because slave morality is that of the weak, weary, and oppressed, it ‘gives no ground for reproaching’ the evil enemy.¹²⁷ This means that whilst revenge is a virtue, as it is for master morality – remembering Nietzsche’s will to power thesis, revenge will be all-pervasive in morality – within slave morality it has no means of exacting this revenge. This resentment is, then, ‘the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge,’ whereas in master morality, revenge, ‘if it should appear in the noble man, consummates and exhausts itself in an immediate reaction, and therefore does not *poison*.’¹²⁸ In slave morality, resentment cannot be acted upon, is an impotent resentment, and is compensated with what Nietzsche calls an imaginary or ‘spiritual revenge,’¹²⁹ in which resentment festers and grows. Whilst master morality can be honest about its vengeance, slave morality has reason to be ashamed: ‘It is a morality that preaches forgiveness, but whose motivation is revenge, that preaches love of enemies, but is the creation of the enemy as the incarnation of evil.’¹³⁰

It is not hard to see, therefore, that Nietzsche’s critique of biblical religion (both Judaism and Christianity) is that it operates within slave morality. When he writes that the Jews ‘mark the beginning of the slave rebellion in morals’¹³¹ and that ‘[o]ne knows *who* inherited this Jewish revaluation’ of morality,¹³² Nietzsche is emphasising both the “Jewishness” of Christianity and the “Jewishness” of Christian anti-Semites – thereby scorning rather than securing later Nazi attempts to appropriate his philosophical legacy for the purpose of fascism. For him, biblical religion is a religion of priestly power, by which he means an impotent power. Whilst priests are a caste that can acquire great political power, even supremacy, and enjoy a strong social function, the origin of their power is weak, or, as Nietzsche increasingly refers to it, “sick,” since it is

¹²³ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, §10.

¹²⁴ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, §11.

¹²⁵ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §265.

¹²⁶ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.235.

¹²⁷ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, §13.

¹²⁸ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, §10.

¹²⁹ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, §7.

¹³⁰ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.236.

¹³¹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §195.

¹³² Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, §7.

grounded not in master morality but in the slave morality that first labels its enemies as evil and then labels itself as good. Priests emerge from a slave '*ressentiment* without equal, that of an insatiable instinct and power-will that want to become master,'¹³³ but '[i]t is because of their impotence that in them hatred grows to monstrous and uncanny proportions, to the most spiritual and poisonous kind of hatred.'¹³⁴ But priests must also be powerful:

Dominion over the suffering is his kingdom, that is where his instinct directs him, here he possesses his distinctive art, his mastery, his kind of happiness... He must be sick himself... but he must also be strong, master of himself even more than of others, with his will to power intact, so as to be both trusted and feared by the sick, so as to be their support, resistance, prop, compulsion, taskmaster, tyrant, and god.¹³⁵

As Paul Ricoeur notes, '[t]his passion is all the more treacherous for it believes itself to be serving the truth.'¹³⁶ This truth is what Nietzsche calls an "ascetic ideal," shaped by religious and ethical beliefs and practices, which forms the 'moral basis of pastoral power'¹³⁷ and acts as the 'best instrument of power' and the 'supreme license for power.'¹³⁸ That ascetic ideals might function to *legitimise* the power of its priestly keepers is clear. As an instrument of power, however, ascetic ideals also enable priests to *apply* their power since these ideals and values are, for Nietzsche, the origin of guilt and bad conscience.

Nietzsche describes Greek gods as 'those reflections of noble and autocratic men, in whom *the animal* in man felt deified and did *not* lacerate itself, did *not* rage against itself!' – a projection which enabled the Greeks to avoid guilt about desires and actions, 'the very opposite,' Nietzsche writes, 'of the use to which Christianity puts its God,' which functions to instead *encourage* bad conscience.¹³⁹ Evil as an expression of resentment and an instrument of revenge is thereby applied by Christians to themselves, and this "guilt before God" is then exploited by priestly power.

"I suffer: someone must be to blame for it" – thus thinks every sickly sheep. But his shepherd, the ascetic priest, tells him: "Quite so, my sheep! someone must be to blame for it: but you yourself are this someone... you alone are to blame for yourself!" – This is brazen and false enough: but one thing at least is achieved by it, the direction of *ressentiment* is altered.¹⁴⁰

¹³³ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 3, §11.

¹³⁴ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, §6-7.

¹³⁵ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 3, §15.

¹³⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, trans. Charles Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), p.179.

¹³⁷ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.241.

¹³⁸ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 3, §1.

¹³⁹ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 2, §23.

¹⁴⁰ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 3, §15.

In needing to be shepherd of the 'sickly sheep,' priestly power manipulates both weakness and guilt into fear and trust. In this way, Christian virtue is, according to Nietzsche, 'the cunning of impotence.' An impotent slave morality says, '[w]e weak ones are, after all, weak; it would be good if we did nothing for which we are not strong enough,' making a virtue of weakness and turning 'anxious lowliness into "humility"; subjection to those one hates into "obedience"... [and] inability for revenge is called unwillingness to revenge, perhaps even forgiveness,' such that impotence becomes 'a voluntary achievement, willed, chosen, a *deed*, a *meritorious* act.'¹⁴¹ By further examining some specific moral virtues, it becomes clearer why Nietzsche's hermeneutics of suspicion interpret Christian morality as slave morality and therefore why he disdains it as a 'great curse' and an 'immortal blemish' of humanity.¹⁴²

For Nietzsche, justice and love (including, compassion, charity or pity) are 'parallel expressions of the revenge of the resentful.'¹⁴³ Within slave morality, whilst distributive justice (equality) expresses the latent envy of those who have the least share, retributive justice (punishment) expresses an operative desire to be executioners. This is why Nietzsche has Zarathustra say, '[m]istrust all in whom the impulse to punish is powerful... the hangman and bloodhound look out of their faces. Mistrust all who talk much of their justice.'¹⁴⁴ In their mouths, the word "justice" is 'like poisonous spittle.'¹⁴⁵ Nietzsche's comments on the dangers of eager moral judges raise the question of moral fanaticism, even of terrorism and fascism.

Nietzsche is easy to deal with when he can be treated as a proto-Fascist whose doctrine of the will to power portends Hitler. [But a]... more disturbing [suggestion is]... that the great gulf we have fixed between ourselves and fascism is largely wishful thinking... We would like to say that the fascists and the terrorists represent the distortion and misuse of the ideals of justice. Nietzsche's reply is that those ideals are in essence, and not accidentally, moral distortions because of their origin in resentment. Probably nothing makes his case stronger than comparing the fascist Final Solution with the Christian Final Judgement.¹⁴⁶

In a similar way, love within slave morality is a virtue that expresses revenge. In any act of giving, we are able to demonstrate that we are 'the more powerful' and to experience 'the taste of superiority.' In 'active gratitude,' we enact 'benevolent revenge.' But the object of love, compassion, charity or pity experiences this as a form of 'contempt,'¹⁴⁷

¹⁴¹ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, §§13-14.

¹⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Book 5, §343, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), p.448, cited in Robinson, *Nietzsche and Postmodernism*, p.9.

¹⁴³ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.252.

¹⁴⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1966), Part 2, Chapter 7.

¹⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 3, §4.

¹⁴⁶ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, pp.255-256.

¹⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §133-138.

since, '[g]reat indebtedness does not make men grateful, but vengeful; and if a little charity is not forgotten, it turns into a gnawing worm.'¹⁴⁸

Within both justice and love, then, will to power within slave morality, 'the will to power of the weakest,'¹⁴⁹ expresses the repressed resentment that cannot otherwise find expression in a form of moral superiority. Nietzsche refers to this unconscious vengeful moral supremacy as Pharisaism, since Pharisees are 'all men of *ressentiment*... a whole tremendous realm of subterranean revenge,' who 'walk among us as embodied reproaches.'¹⁵⁰ In slave morality, 'the good *must* be Pharisees – they have no choice,' since their goodness depends on the evilness of others.¹⁵¹ 'Pharisaism is not a degeneration in a good man,' Nietzsche writes, 'a good deal of it is rather the condition of all being good.'¹⁵² In slave morality, moral superiority is therefore inbuilt in the moral value "good." From biblical descriptions of Pharisees, it is not hard to see why Nietzsche uses this term to describe the moral superiority of slave morality. Think, for example, of the Pharisee who prays, 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector' (who prays beside him).¹⁵³

Remembering that '[o]ne does not have to be a Pharisee in order to be a Pharisee,'¹⁵⁴ to what extent do our beliefs and practices unconsciously express moral superiority? How close, then, do they lie to moral fanaticism and even fascism? What happens to our manifest beliefs in forgiveness, salvation or love of neighbour, if our notions of "goodness" depend on latent comparisons with those whom we have first deemed "evil"? How can we forgive 'those on whose wickedness [our] own goodness depends?'¹⁵⁵ Do we make virtues out of weakness and various forms of impotence? Do we mask fear and cowardice as obedience and humility? If "God," "morality," "truth," and other Christian "ascetic ideals" are nothing more than means to justify an unconscious desire for revenge, what happens to my faith?

¹⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part 2, Chapter 3.

¹⁴⁹ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 3, §14.

¹⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 3, §14.

¹⁵¹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part 3, §12.26.

¹⁵² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §135.

¹⁵³ Luke 18:11.

¹⁵⁴ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.267.

¹⁵⁵ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.272.

“Derren Brown: Messiah”

Richard Dawkins: Where does your scepticism come from?

Derren Brown: Well, in terms of my history, I used to be a very devout Christian when I was younger, but didn't have a Christian family, didn't have Christian friends... but it came from a Bible reading class when I was young; it was an unpleasant childhood indoctrination. But because I grew up without a Christian peer group, when I got to university it was relatively easy for me to kind of think my way out of it, to start to challenge it and not feel too much guilt... At the same time I was getting into magic and, through magic, realising how things like tarot cards and psychics really work and that there's nothing mystical about it that could therefore be seen as dangerous, but it's just simply sort of rubbish and charlatanism and psychology at work... I'd talked to psychics and I'd listened to their sort of circular beliefs and I remembering thinking, "I am doing exactly the same thing, but as a Christian." The only difference is that it's easier to laugh at them because it's a fringe belief, whereas my belief is so much more endorsed institutionally, it's more respectable, that I thought, "I'm just being a hypocrite," so I started to read some theology texts and books about how the Bible really came together and a kind of mixture of books that I hoped would at least challenge my easy, pat answers that I had as a young Christian. And I felt that if I could just undo all the easy answers, if I just had a bunch of questions, that I might actually be able to build a much stronger, more defensible faith from it. And then that sort of just didn't happen, it just all seemed silly and I realised that there was no going back, and once you realise that the Bible isn't an historical account of things that have happened, then, you're sort of left with no basis for it at all. From that, then, I wanted to defend my non-belief as strongly as I felt that I should've been able to defend it as a believer, so that's something that's been left with me.

—Derren Brown, interview with Richard Dawkins for “The Enemies of Reason”¹

¹ Derren Brown, in Richard Dawkins interview with Derren Brown, available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EsIEBK1ZTBU&feature=relmfu> [last accessed March 05 2011]. Filmed for Channel 4's “The Enemies of Reason.”

Derren Brown takes his debunking mission to America. In a country where his mind control skills are unknown, he sets out once again to demonstrate just how easy it is to dupe people in believing five impossible things (almost) before breakfast.

He tries to convince five leading figures that he has powers in their particular field of expertise: Christian evangelism, alien abduction, psychic powers, New Age theories and contacting the dead.

Can he succeed in convincing the five “experts” of his powers? And will they go further and openly endorse him as a true practitioner?

—“Messiah,” 2005. Channel Four²

Religion as Trickery

Derren Brown is a performer who ‘combines magic, suggestion, psychology, misdirection and showmanship in order to seemingly predict and control human behaviour.’³ Behind his performances lie both an atheistic *scepticism* and a form of *suspicion* which ask questions about ‘why we believe things.’⁴ His study of religion, psychology, magic, hypnosis, psychic ability, spiritualism, and New Age beliefs such as crystal energy and alien abduction leads him to debunk as delusions and deceptions contemporary religious, spiritual, or paranormal beliefs and practices, as well as the ‘mind tricks’ of entertainment, alternative medicine, and other everyday “bad sciences.”⁵ His books and TV shows therefore encourage a suspicion of *appearances* that presupposes the distinctions made by Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche between manifest and latent motives. Brown’s *conscious* manipulation of human behaviour, including performances in which he converts people to Christianity ‘with a single touch,’⁶ acts as a mirror to aid reflection upon some of the operative yet *unconscious* motivations involved in all systems of belief and practice.

What Brown does primarily interests him (and his audiences) not at the transcendent level at which metaphysical questions are asked about the existence of God or UFOs, the ability of psychics, or the power of crystal energy – but at the immanent level at which historical, sociological and, particularly, psychological questions are asked about how and why we come to believe and do certain things.

Talking to a psychic, there’s the cheap illusion of her psychic ability or his psychic ability that’s questionable, but what to me is more interesting is the human level, the fact that I could sit

² <http://derrenbrown.co.uk/tv-shows/messiah/> [last accessed March 02 2011]

³ <http://derrenbrown.co.uk/about-derren/> [last accessed March 05 2011]

⁴ Derren Brown, “Derren Brown: Messiah,” available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLbesxxKzcM&oref=http%3A%2F%2F&has_verified=1 [last accessed March 05 2011]

⁵ The phrase ‘mind tricks’ is derived from Derren Brown, *Tricks of the Mind* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2007). Brown’s website recommends Ben Goldacre’s *Bad Science*, Christopher Wanjek’s *Bad Medicine*, and Simon Singh and Edzard Ernst’s *Trick or Treatment?* See further <http://derrenbrown.co.uk/dbstore/recommended-reading/> [last accessed March 05 2011]

⁶ Brown, “Messiah.”

and listen to a psychic and be so convinced, what that actually says about me and us as people and the way we interact and the way that we do form those patterns, the way that we will see design where there is none, the way that we'll come to those conclusions, at a purely psychological level is so much more interesting, 'cos that says something about us as humans, which ultimately has to be more powerful and more beautiful than nonsensical guff about the ether.⁷

The more interesting illusions that Brown suspects are involved in religion – as well as, for example, in cold reading (whereby the reader conveys more details about another person than s/he actually does know) and slight-of-hand entertainment – are not related to degrees of either incredulity or gullibility. He does, however, stress the importance of information.⁸ He says, 'it doesn't really matter how much you believe in it or [don't] believe in it;' instead, it depends on whether you have 'specific knowledge about specific skills' that magicians or psychics or religious institutions and practitioners employ.⁹ For example, he notes that '[r]eligions tend to encourage either high-energy crowd activity or candle-lit monotony to invoke a suggestible state among the congregation.'¹⁰ As 'intelligent human beings,' Brown suggests therefore that 'we should be prepared to question our beliefs and [to question] the people who encourage us to make life decisions based on the information they give us.'¹¹

Knowledge about what he calls the 'false logic' involved in these practices can help in this process. Thus Brown's work often hinges on exhibitions and explanations of the human ability to anticipate and manipulate the actions of others, demonstrating powers that condition and convince, transform and convert, as well as revealing luck, fate or destiny to be intricately linked to aptitudes for working with predictability and probability. The elements of illusion involved here come, therefore, from the performer's adeptness at misdirection and misinformation, rather than from the subject's gullibility – though what Brown sees as a 'hard-wired' susceptibility to make patterns and tell stories that make sense of our experiences of impossibility plays a part as well.

As far as what I do goes, I see it about playing very specifically to people's intelligence [and not naivety]. You create a false logic. You create what appears to be an A, B, C. So, you know, in the case of a card trick, A is you pick a card, B is I make some

⁷ Nigel Warburton interview with Derren Brown, "Magic and Being Human: In Conversation with Derren Brown," [last accessed March 05 2011] available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UlpMu_moqJ8&feature=BF&list=SP91411E46A271892E&index=6

⁸ Brown, in Dawkins interview.

⁹ Derren Brown, in Nigel Warburton interview with Derren Brown, "Appearance and Reality: In Conversation with Derren Brown," [last accessed March 05 2011] available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1cMmz7m3AA&feature=BF&list=SP91411E46A271892E&index=2> [last accessed March 05 2011]

¹⁰ Brown, "Messiah."

¹¹ Brown, Messiah."

magic thing over it, and C is it's in my pocket, and that seems impossible.

But you miss, in fact, between A and B there was another stage, where maybe you picked a card and then maybe I took them back and gave them a little shuffle and then handed them back to you or there was something in the way that you picked the card that actually I was forcing a card on you, I was controlling your decision, but it doesn't seem important so you don't remember that.

And similarly between me doing the magic part [B] and it ending up in my pocket [C] maybe I did something else, maybe I asked you to put the cards in your pocket and I gestured in my pocket as I did that and that's when I loaded the card in, but it doesn't seem important to the story and you remember an A, B, C that's impossible.

But if you see it in terms of that's actually A, C, E and the real route actually goes A, then B, then C, then D, then E, then it becomes quite possible.

So to me that's not about gullibility, that's about a certain grammar that people will follow... We can't function unless we form those patterns and this presumably goes back to, "if you see half a sabre-toothed tiger coming round the corner at you, you don't wait for the other half, you run." ...In the same way, the magician creates that pattern knowing that we are hard-wired, probably, to fall for that, and fall for the easier pattern that's presented to us.¹²

Just as we might have missed the steps that would expose our experience of an impossible card trick to be based on a false logic that is in turn grounded in a lack of information about the knowledge and skills of a talented magician, might there be steps – that are *consciously* taken and thereby exposed by Brown, but perhaps *unconsciously* taken by those in the institutions and 'industries'¹³ around religious, spiritual and paranormal beliefs and practices – that we also miss? What are the steps – A, C, and E – which we use to form our beliefs and practices? To what extent do we only 'notice what supports our beliefs' in order to construct patterns, and 'disregard the rest'?¹⁴ What might steps B and D actually be? What aspects of our beliefs and practices don't we consciously remember or don't seem important? Are we telling ourselves the story of the easier pattern? If religious beliefs and practices operate on the unconscious false logic of a magic trick, what happens to my faith?

¹² Brown in "Appearance and Reality."

¹³ Brown, "Messiah."

¹⁴ Brown, "Messiah."

“The Invention of Lying”

It's better to know the truth... My Mum only lied to me about one thing. She said that there was a God... I wish there was a God. I wish there was. It'd be great. From what I've heard, he's brilliant... But you can't believe in something you don't. Also, if there is a God, why did he make me an atheist? That was his first mistake. Well, the talking snake was his first mistake.

—Ricky Gervais, on “Inside the Actors Studio”¹⁵

I've been an atheist all my life, but I always knew that if my mum asked me when she was dying if there was a heaven I'd say yes. I'd lie. I think that's how religion started – as a good lie.

—Ricky Gervais, “When Shortlist Met Ricky Gervais”¹⁶

...thank you, God, for making me an atheist.

—Ricky Gervais, hosting The Golden Globes, January 16 2011

Religion as Lie

‘Why don't you believe in God? I get that question all the time,’ Ricky Gervais writes. ‘I always try to give a sensitive, reasoned answer. This is usually awkward, time consuming and pointless. People who believe in God don't need proof of his existence, and they certainly don't want evidence to the contrary. They are happy with their belief. They even say things like “it's true to me” and “it's faith.” I still give my logical answer because I feel that not being honest would be patronizing and impolite. It is ironic therefore that “I don't believe in God because there is absolutely no scientific evidence for his existence and from what I've heard the very definition is a logical impossibility in this known universe,” comes across as both patronizing and impolite.

‘Arrogance is another accusation. Which seems particularly unfair. Science seeks the truth. And it does not discriminate. For better or worse it finds things out. Science is

¹⁵ Ricky Gervais, on “Inside the Actors Studio,” available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8gsIuEvEs0> [last accessed March 05 2011]

¹⁶ Ricky Gervais, interview in *Shortlist*, “When Shortlist Met Ricky Gervais,” <http://www.shortlist.com/movies/article/when-shortlist-met-ricky-gervais/2> [no longer available]

humble. It knows what it knows and it knows what it doesn't know. It bases its conclusions and beliefs on hard evidence – evidence that is constantly updated and upgraded. It doesn't get offended when new facts come along. It embraces the body of knowledge. It doesn't hold on to medieval practices because they are tradition. If it did, you wouldn't get a shot of penicillin, you'd pop a leach down your trousers and pray. Whatever you "believe," this is not as effective as medicine. Again you can say, "It works for me," but so do placebos. My point being, I'm saying God doesn't exist. I'm not saying faith doesn't exist. I know faith exists. I see it all the time. But believing in something doesn't make it true. Hoping that something is true doesn't make it true. The existence of God is not subjective. He either exists or he doesn't. It's not a matter of opinion. You can have your own opinions. But you can't have your own facts.

'Why don't I believe in God? No, no no, why do YOU believe in God? Surely the burden of proof is on the believer. You started all this. If I came up to you and said, "Why don't you believe I can fly?" You'd say, "Why would I?" I'd reply, "Because it's a matter of faith." If I then said, "Prove I can't fly. Prove I can't fly see, see, you can't prove it can you?" You'd probably either walk away, call security or throw me out of the window and shout, "F—ing fly then you lunatic."

'This, is of course a spirituality issue, religion is a different matter. As an atheist, I see nothing "wrong" in believing in a god. I don't think there is a god, but belief in him does no harm. If it helps you in any way, then that's fine with me. It's when belief starts infringing on other people's rights when it worries me. I would never deny your right to believe in a god. I would just rather you didn't kill people who believe in a different god, say. Or stone someone to death because your rulebook says their sexuality is immoral. It's strange that anyone who believes that an all-powerful all-knowing, omniscient power responsible for everything that happens, would also want to judge and punish people for what they are. From what I can gather, pretty much the worst type of person you can be is an atheist. The first four commandments hammer this point home. There is a god, I'm him, no one else is, you're not as good and don't forget it. (Don't murder anyone, doesn't get a mention till number 6.)

'When confronted with anyone who holds my lack of religious faith in such contempt, I say, "It's the way God made me."

'But what are atheists really being accused of?

'The dictionary definition of God is "a supernatural creator and overseer of the universe." Included in this definition are all deities, goddesses and supernatural beings. Since the beginning of recorded history, which is defined by the invention of writing by the Sumerians around 6,000 years ago, historians have cataloged over 3700 supernatural beings, of which 2870 can be considered deities.

'So next time someone tells me they believe in God, I'll say "Oh which one? Zeus? Hades? Jupiter? Mars? Odin? Thor? Krishna? Vishnu? Ra?..." If they say "Just God. I only believe in the one God," I'll point out that they are nearly as atheistic as me. I don't believe in 2,870 gods, and they don't believe in 2,869.

'I used to believe in God. The Christian one that is.

'I loved Jesus. He was my hero. More than pop stars. More than footballers. More than God. God was by definition omnipotent and perfect. Jesus was a man. He had to work at it. He had temptation but defeated sin. He had integrity and courage. But He was my hero because He was kind. And He was kind to everyone. He didn't bow to peer pressure or tyranny or cruelty. He didn't care who you were. He loved you. What a guy. I wanted to be just like Him.

'One day when I was about 8 years old, I was drawing the crucifixion as part of my Bible studies homework. I loved art too. And nature. I loved how God made all the animals. They were also perfect. Unconditionally beautiful. It was an amazing world.

'I lived in a very poor, working-class estate in an urban sprawl called Reading, about 40 miles west of London. My father was a laborer and my mother was a housewife. I was never ashamed of poverty. It was almost noble. Also, everyone I knew was in the same situation, and I had everything I needed. School was free. My clothes were cheap and always clean and ironed. And mum was always cooking. She was cooking the day I was drawing on the cross.

'I was sitting at the kitchen table when my brother came home. He was 11 years older than me, so he would have been 19. He was as smart as anyone I knew, but he was too cheeky. He would answer back and get into trouble. I was a good boy. I went to church and believed in God – what a relief for a working-class mother. You see, growing up where I did, mums didn't hope as high as their kids growing up to be doctors; they just hoped their kids didn't go to jail. So bring them up believing in God and they'll be good and law abiding. It's a perfect system. Well, nearly. 75 percent of Americans are God-fearing Christians; 75 percent of prisoners are God-fearing Christians. 10 percent of Americans are atheists; 0.2 percent of prisoners are atheists.

'But anyway, there I was happily drawing my hero when my big brother Bob asked, "Why do you believe in God?" Just a simple question. But my mum panicked. "Bob," she said in a tone that I knew meant, "Shut up." Why was that a bad thing to ask? If there was a God and my faith was strong it didn't matter what people said.

'Oh...hang on. There is no God. He knows it, and she knows it deep down. It was as simple as that. I started thinking about it and asking more questions, and within an hour, I was an atheist.

'Wow. No God. If mum had lied to me about God, had she also lied to me about Santa? Yes, of course, but who cares? The gifts kept coming. And so did the gifts of my new found atheism. The gifts of truth, science, nature. The real beauty of this world. I learned of evolution – a theory so simple that only England's greatest genius could have come up with it. Evolution of plants, animals and us – with imagination, free will, love, humor. I no longer needed a reason for my existence, just a reason to live. And imagination, free will, love, humor, fun, music, sports, beer and pizza are all good enough reasons for living.

'But living an honest life – for that you need the truth. That's the other thing I learned that day, that the truth, however shocking or uncomfortable, in the end leads to liberation and dignity.

'So what does the question "Why don't you believe in God?" really mean. I think when someone asks that they are really questioning their own belief. In a way they are asking "what makes you so special? "How come you weren't brainwashed with the rest of us?" "How dare you say I'm a fool and I'm not going to heaven, f— you!" Let's be honest, if one person believed in God he would be considered pretty strange. But because it's a very popular view it's accepted. And why is it such a popular view? That's obvious. It's an attractive proposition. Believe in me and live forever. Again if it was just a case of spirituality this would be fine.

"Do unto others..." is a good rule of thumb. I live by that. Forgiveness is probably the greatest virtue there is. But that's exactly what it is – a virtue. Not just a Christian virtue. No one owns being good. I'm good. I just don't believe I'll be rewarded for it in heaven. My reward is here and now. It's knowing that I try to do the right thing. That I lived a good life. And that's where spirituality really lost its way. When it became a stick to beat people with. "Do this or you'll burn in hell."

'You won't burn in hell. But be nice anyway.'¹⁷

Gervais' (2009) film *The Invention of Lying* is set in a world where human beings have not evolved the fictional gene that allows them to lie. Not only can't they lie – which precludes the possibility of story-telling, mythology and, therefore, religion – but they have to actively tell the truth, which means that characters air their thoughts without regard for how these thoughts are received by others, since this is how the world has worked throughout centuries of human history. Individual self-interest is palpable in this world, with the central female character, Anna (Jennifer Garner), primarily concerned with finding a sexual partner who is a good genetic, social and economic match (like Rob Lowe's Brad). This leads unattractive, overweight, anti-social losers like Mark (Gervais), Greg (Louis C.K.) and Frank (Jonah Hill) to despair, drunkenness and depression. When Mark one day evolves the lying gene, he hopes it will help him attain the wealth and status to attract Anna, but the ability has worldwide theological and ethical consequences when he is overheard lying about life after death in an attempt to console his dying mother.

This is the point at which 'the film swings off in a wild new direction' and, according to one reviewer, 'achieves vertiginous lift-off.' His lie that he has new knowledge about what happens after you die – knowledge about heavenly mansions, given to him by a "Man in the Sky" – leads him to write a "Gospel" and to institute a new ethic of "three strikes and you're out." Thus this-worldly self-interest morphs easily into otherworldly self-interest and the sentiment, expressed by a homeless man's placard, 'screw it, soon I'll be in my mansion.'¹⁸ For a mainstream Hollywood romantic comedy, this is perhaps 'something rather radical,' indeed. 'It's one thing for Gervais to air his

¹⁷ Ricky Gervais, "Why I'm an Atheist," December 19 2010, available from <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2010/12/19/a-holiday-message-from-ricky-gervais-why-im-an-atheist/> [last accessed March 05 2011]

¹⁸ Gervais, *The Invention of Lying*.

atheism on the standup circuit. It's quite another to do so in the guise of a glossy, user-friendly sitcom pitched squarely at the huddled masses in the American multiplex.¹⁹

The supposition at the heart of this movie is that religion is so closely linked to story-telling and historical embellishment that it is understood as lying. Here, the distinctions made by Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche in their critiques of religion between appearance and reality, or manifest and latent meanings, becomes that between lies and the truth. But in this world there are no such terms; there are simply "things that are" (the truth) and "things that aren't" (lies), just "the way things are" and Mark's new-found ability to say "something that wasn't." This language of being or existence denotes Gervais' *scepticism*: 'God doesn't exist... Hoping that something is true doesn't make it true.'²⁰ But Gervais' *suspicion* is also apparent in the ways that Mark's theological inventions function as psychological wish-fulfillments, oppressive ideologies, and vengeful morality. Framed in the *sceptical* language of falsehood and lies, is it possible to more clearly see the functions that critics *suspect* religion plays? If religion existed in a world where we (like Mark) *knew* it to be deceitful, which of our religious beliefs and practices could we more readily identify as harmful? In other words, if religion is a lie, what happens to my faith?

¹⁹ Xan Brooks, "The Invention of Lying: Ricky Gervais's new comedy is glossy, but honestly subversive," *The Guardian* (October 02 2009), available from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/oct/02/the-invention-of-lying-review> [last accessed March 05 2011]

²⁰ Gervais, "Why I'm an Atheist."

A/Theism and the Absence of God

Christianity is a fascinating religion because, whereas lots of religions have a place for doubt, in Christianity *God* doubts God.
—Pete Rollins, “Doubt”²¹

When the world shook and the sun was wiped out of heaven, it was not at the crucifixion, but at the cry from the cross: the cry which confessed that God was forsaken of God. And now let the revolutionaries of this age choose a creed from all the creeds and a god from all the gods of the world, carefully weighing all the gods of inevitable recurrence and of unalterable power. They will not find another god who has himself been in revolt. Nay (the matter grows too difficult for human speech), but let the atheists themselves choose a god. They will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation; only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist.

—G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*²²

Atheism is such a difficult perspective to grasp, that only the religious believer can do it. Only the Christian can be an atheist.
—Pete Rollins, “Divine Atheism”²³

Religion as A/Theism

Examining their theories of religion, we have seen that for Freud religion is primarily ‘ontological weakness seeking consolation;’ for Marx it is primarily ‘sociological power seeking legitimation;’ and for Nietzsche it is primarily ‘sociological weakness seeking revenge.’²⁴ But perhaps it is also possible for a hermeneutic of suspicion to interpret these critics’ sceptical atheism similarly? Perhaps atheism is also wish-fulfilment? Does atheism also function as an oppressive ideology? Does it also operate within slave morality? The claim that atheism – the “new-” or “neo-atheism” of Richard Dawkins,

²¹ Peter Rollins, “Doubt,” available from <http://vimeo.com/18878442> [last accessed March 06 2011]

²² Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Orthodoxy: The Romance of Faith* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009[1908]), p.207.

²³ Peter Rollins, “Divine Atheism,” available from <http://vimeo.com/18881658> [last accessed March 06 2011]

²⁴ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, p.229.

Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, etc. in particular – is also a form of religious (i.e. dogmatic) belief system is often made in Christian rebuttals of atheist critiques of religion. But perhaps atheism and religion are alike in more radical ways than this.

Both Ricky Gervais and Derren Brown note the pervasiveness of atheism, even amongst theists. Brown says, '[t]he reality is we're all atheists regards every other "god" that's ever been believed in or is still believed in, we just may not be atheists about "the one God" we believe in. So we all know what it is to be an atheist.'²⁵ As emerging church author and speaker Pete Rollins, founder of Ikon, Belfast, explains, 'every concrete theism creates its negative, its atheism. There are as many atheisms as there are theisms.'²⁶ This means that 'atheism is always regional, it's always local, it's always connected to an affirmation,'²⁷ since '[a]ll affirmations create their negations.'²⁸ However, he writes that 'the atheistic spirit within Christianity delves much deeper than this – for we disbelieve not only in other gods but also in the God that we believe in.'²⁹

There are both more radical and more traditional elements within Rollins' work. The latter can be placed squarely within the tradition of negative theology, according to which 'we ought to affirm our view of God while at the same time realizing that that view is inadequate.' The result is both a theism and an atheism, an "a/theism" that is 'not some agnostic middle point hovering hesitantly between theism and atheism but, rather, actively embraces both out of a profound faith.'³⁰ For Rollins, this is

a deeply religious and faith-filled form of cynical discourse, one which captures how faith operates in an oscillation between understanding and unknowing. This unknowing is to be utterly distinguished from an intellectual lazy ignorance, for it is a type of unknowing which arises not from imprecision but rather from deep reflection and sustained meditation.³¹

This is the form of un-knowing that is operative within negative theology, which describes God through negations, knowing God by knowing what God is not. Thus this theological method functions as a guard against idolatry. In a similar way, Rollins' notion of a/theism introduces what he describes as 'a type of heat-inducing friction that prevents our liquid images of the divine from cooling and solidifying into idolatrous form.'³² It is 'an atheism that rejects our understanding of God precisely because it recognizes that God is bigger, better and different than we could ever imagine,'³³ one 'not designed to undermine God but to affirm God.'³⁴ Because 'God remains concealed

²⁵ Nigel Warburton interview with Derren Brown, "Right or Wrong? In Conversation with Derren Brown," available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QnSNZ9eWt4> [last accessed March 05 2011],

²⁶ Peter Rollins, "Dis-Courses Theory (Part 3)" available from <http://vimeo.com/18995434> [last accessed March 06 2011]

²⁷ Pete Rollins, "Divine Atheism."

²⁸ Rollins, "Dis-Courses Theory (Part 3)."

²⁹ Peter Rollins, *How (Not) To Speak of God* (London: SPCK, 2006), p.25.

³⁰ Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak*, p.25.

³¹ Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak*, p.26.

³² Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak*, p.27.

³³ Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak*, pp.100-101.

³⁴ Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak*, p.26.

amidst revelation,³⁵ Rollins suggests that ‘the believer should not repress the shadow of doubt that hangs over all belief (the potential *lie* that may dwell in the heart of every belief).’³⁶ If ‘God is beyond all conception’ and ‘can’t be grasped by language,’ if ‘all theological discourse is a dis-course that sends [us] off course,’³⁷ then the religious beliefs about God that are thereby formed may well be “lies.”

While the strands of negative theology in Rollins’ first publication, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, forms a type of ‘believing *in* God while remaining dubious about what one believes *about* God,’³⁸ more radical implications can be drawn, since there can be not just doubt about ‘*who* or *what* God is’ but, further, ‘doubt about *if* God *is*.’³⁹ Rollins’ second book, *The Fidelity of Betrayal*, follows the deconstructive theology of Derridean philosopher John D. Caputo to make a distinction between, on the one hand, the *name* and *being* of God and, on the other, the *event* of God.⁴⁰ This is in order suggest a betrayal of religious beliefs and practices that emphasise the *existence* of God in fidelity to those that encourage the transformative *event* of God. This more radical thread within Rollins’ work stresses that ‘[f]or Christians, it is a happening, an event, that we affirm and respond to, regardless of the ebbs and flows of our abstract theological reflections concerning the source and nature of this happening,’⁴¹ such that ‘[t]here is no doubt for the believer that God dwells with us (as an event), yet there is a deep uncertainty about who, what, or even if God is (as a being).’⁴² This betrayal, negation or atheism is, Rollins suggests, integral to the Christian religion. This means that critics of religion can be helpful in demonstrating the essentially a/theistic nature of Christianity.

In particular, Freud, Marx and Nietzsche, as well as contemporary atheists like Derren Brown and Ricky Gervais, can aid our own recollection of and reflection upon those experiences of doubt and uncertainty in which we most keenly feel isolated from and abandoned by God. This is, after all, an experience that ‘we bear witness to at the very heart of Christianity itself.’

For in the Cross, when Christ cries out, “My God! my God! why have you forsaken me?” we see that the absence of God, the felt absence of the divine, is brought into the very heart of the faith. Instead of seeing it as some kind of test that we have to endure, or the result of our sin and our finitude, what we see is God experiencing the absence of God. Therefore the absence of God is seen to be a part of the life of faith. If a Christian is to

³⁵ Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak*, p.25.

³⁶ Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak*, p.34.

³⁷ Rollins, “Divine Atheism.”

³⁸ Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak*, p.26.

³⁹ Peter Rollins interview with Katharine Moody, August 27 2007.

⁴⁰ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006).

⁴¹ Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal: Towards a Church Beyond Belief*, (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2008), p.141.

⁴² Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal*, p.144.

participate in the Crucifixion, to stand with Christ, then part of the Christian experience is that absence itself.⁴³

This is, however, no ‘simple atheism,’ for Christ’s cry represents *God’s own* feelings of abandonment by God, *God’s own* doubt, *God’s own* atheism.⁴⁴ This is an a/theism, then, that is both a *theistic* atheism in the tradition of negative theology – a mystical affirmation of God’s absence, or “distance” from, our beliefs and practices that idolatrously attempt to grasp and make God present – and a more radically *atheistic* theism – an existential affirmation of the absence of God’s presence itself. The latter is ‘analogous to the experience of waiting for one whom we love in a café. The later they are, the more we experience their absence. Our beloved is absent to everyone in the room but we are the only one who *feels* it.’⁴⁵ This is perhaps, then, what Rollins means when he says that ‘[o]nly the Christian can be an atheist.’⁴⁶

What does the local atheism of our own religious beliefs and practices look like? Do we see that atheism as integral to our theism? Do our beliefs and practices celebrate or disavow our own experiences of doubt, disbelief, and abandonment by God? If Christianity is a/theistic, what happens to my faith?

Forsaken by God

Towards the end of the “Atheism for Lent” Course, we will create a worship service for Good Friday to reflect on the content of the Course. Remembering Jesus’ words on the Cross and God’s own atheism, this service will also help us to feel something of what God felt at the Crucifixion when God experienced the absence of God.

How might a worship service enable us to call to mind those times when we have been guilty of what these great atheist critics of religion accuse us? Of using Christianity instrumentally? To fulfil our own psychological needs, desires and wishes? To legitimise various forms of oppression and justify our social complacency? Or to enact revenge through moral superiority? What kinds of words, acts and performances can we stage to encourage others to ask these questions?

How might a worship service allow us to recollect through liturgy and ritual our doubts and our uncertainties? Our very real experiences of the absence of the presence of God? Our theism, atheism and a/theism?

⁴³ Rollins, “Dis-Courses Theory (Part 3).”

⁴⁴ Ikon, “The God Delusion: Where does your faith lie?,” Greenbelt Arts Festival, Aug 26 2007.

⁴⁵ Ikon, “Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani?,” in Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak*, p.82.

⁴⁶ Rollins, “Divine Atheism.”