

Some Thoughts on the Divine Ex-sistence

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Abstract:

This paper elaborates on the divine God through the Lacanian concept of ex-sistence. While avoiding the various possibilities of interpreting the ex-sistence of God (imaginary, symbolic...), this article will focus on the ex-sistence of God in the practice of love. We should not understand the love for God, but the love for the neighbours, as announced by Jesus Christ.

Keywords: Real, Lacan, Christianity, God, ex-sistence

At the beginning of Ridley Scott's *Prometheus*, the sequel to the *Alien* trilogy, a hovering spacecraft departs our Earth deep in prehistoric times, while a humanoid alien who remained on the Earth drinks a dark bubbling liquid and then disintegrates – when his remains cascade into a waterfall, his DNA triggers a biogenetic reaction which led to the rise of humans. The story then jumps to 2089, when archaeologists Elizabeth Shaw and Charlie Holloway discover a star map in Scotland that matches others from several unconnected ancient cultures. They interpret this as an invitation from humanity's forerunners, the "Engineers". Peter Weyland, the elderly CEO of Weyland Corporation, funds an expedition to follow the map to the distant moon LV-223, aboard the scientific vessel *Prometheus*. The ship's crew travels in stasis, while the android David monitors their voyage. Arriving in 2093, they are informed of their mission to find the Engineers. After long battles with the Engineers, the last of them forces open the lifeboat's airlock and attacks Shaw, who releases her alien offspring onto the Engineer; it thrusts a tentacle down the Engineer's throat, subduing him. Shaw recovers David's remains, and with his help, launches another Engineer spacecraft - she intends to reach the Engineers' homeworld, in an attempt to understand why they wanted to destroy humanity. In the film's last scene, Shaw (played by Noomi Rapace) desperately shouts at the homicidal alien: "I need to know why! What did we do wrong? Why do you hate us?" Is this not an exemplary case of the Lacanian "*Che vuoi?*", of the impenetrability of gods of the Real?¹

Gods of the Real

So where do we find these living gods? In the pagan Thing: God

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1 Ehrenreich 2012, pp. 132-137

dies in itself in Judaism, and for itself in Christianity. The destructive aspect of the divine, the brutal explosion of rage mixed with ecstatic bliss, which marks a living god is what Lacan aims at with his statement that gods belong to the Real. An exemplary literary case of such an encounter of the divine Real is Euripides's last play *Bacchae*, which examines religious ecstasy and the resistance to it. Disguised as a young holy man, the god Bacchus arrives in Thebes from Asia, where he proclaims his godhood and preaches his orgiastic religion. Pentheus, the young Theban king, is horrified at the explosion of sacred orgies and prohibits his people to worship Bacchus; the enraged Bacchus leads Pentheus to a nearby mountain, the site of sacred orgies, where Agave, Pentheus' own mother, and the women of Thebes tear him to pieces in a Bacchic sacred destructive frenzy. The play outlines four existential positions towards the sacred orgiastic ritual. First, there is Pentheus himself, an enlightened rationalist and a sceptic in matters religious; he rejects the Bacchic sacred orgies as a mere cover for sensual indulgence and is determined to suppress them by force:

“It so happens I've been away from Thebes,
but I hear about disgusting things going on,
here in the city—women leaving home
to go to silly Bacchic rituals,
cavorting there in mountain shadows,
with dances honoring some upstart god,
this Dionysus, whoever he may be. Mixing bowls
in the middle of their meetings are filled with wine.
They creep off one by one to lonely spots
to have sex with men, claiming they're Maenads
busy worshipping. But they rank Aphrodite,
goddess of sexual desire, ahead of Bacchus.”²

Then, there are the two positions of wisdom. Teiresias, a blind man of pious and reverent soul, preaches fidelity to traditions as our sacred and imperishable inheritance:

“To the gods we mortals are all ignorant.
Those old traditions from our ancestors,
the ones we've had as long as time itself,
no argument will ever overthrow,
in spite of subtleties sharp minds invent.”

However, his advice is nonetheless sustained by a Marxist-

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All *Bacchae* quotes are from <https://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/euripides/euripides.htm>.

sounding notion of religion as opium for the people: Bacchus

“brought with him liquor from the grape,
something to match the bread from Demeter.
He introduced it among mortal men.
When they can drink up what streams off the vine,
unhappy mortals are released from pain.
It grants them sleep, allows them to forget
their daily troubles. Apart from wine,
there is no cure for human hardship.”

This line of thought is radicalised by Cadmus, the wise old counsellor to the king who advises caution and submission:

“You should live among us,
not outside traditions. At this point,
you're flying around — thinking, but not clearly.
For if, as you claim, this man is not a god,
why not call him one? Why not tell a lie,
a really good one?”

In short, the position of Cadmus is that of Plato in his *Republic*: ordinary people need beautiful lies, so we should pretend to believe to keep them in check. And, finally, beneath these three positions, there is the wild (feminine) mob itself: while the debate between the three is going on, we hear from time to time the passionate cries and wild ecstatic prayers of the Bacchantes who proclaim their scorn for “the wisdom of deep thinkers,” and their devotion to the “customs and beliefs of the multitude.” Bacchantes are anti-Platonic to the extreme: against abstract rationalism, they assert fidelity to the customs which form a particular life-world, so that, from their view, the true act of madness is to exclude madness, it is the madness of pure rationality – the true madman is Pentheus, not the orgiastic Bacchantes. Teiresias draws the same conclusion:

“You've got a quick tongue and seem intelligent,
but your words don't make any sense at all.
/.../ You unhappy man, you've no idea
just what it is you're saying. You've gone mad!
Even before now you weren't in your right mind.”

In other words, the true point of “madness” is not the excess of the ecstatic Night of the World, but the madness of the passage to the Symbolic itself, of imposing a symbolic order onto the chaos of the

Real. (In his analysis of the paranoiac judge Schreber, Freud points out how the paranoiac “system” is not madness, but a desperate attempt to *escape* madness – the disintegration of the symbolic universe – through an ersatz universe of meaning.) Every system of meaning is, thus, minimally paranoiac, “mad” – recall Brecht’s slogan: “What is the robbing of a bank compared to the founding of a new bank?” Therein resides the lesson of David Lynch’s *Straight Story*: what is the ridiculously-pathetic perversity of figures like Bobby Peru in *Wild at Heart*, or Frank in *Blue Velvet*, compared to deciding to traverse the US central plane in a tractor to visit a dying relative? Measured with this act, Frank’s and Bobby’s outbreaks of rage are the impotent theatrics of old and sedate conservatives... In the same way, we should say: what is the mere madness caused by the loss of reason, like the crazy dancing of Bacchantes, compared to the madness of reason itself?

This living god continues his subterranean life and erratically returns in multiple forms that are all guises of the monstrous Thing. Let us recall J. Lee Thompson’s *The White Buffalo*, based on the novel by Richard Sale, definitely “one of the most bizarre curiosities ever released in cinemas.”³ In this strange Western variation on *Moby Dick*, Wild Bill Hickok (Charles Bronson) is an “Ahab of the West” haunted by the dreams of a giant white (albino) buffalo (also a sacred native American animal). In 1874, Hickok has just returned from play-acting on Eastern stages with Buffalo Bill; now 37, he wears blue-tinted glasses to protect his fading eyes from the “Deep Serene” – the result of a gonorrhoeal infection – and his various bullet wounds have brought on premature rheumatism. Among his travels, he meets Chief Crazy Horse, who is roaming the plains in an obsessive search for a giant white buffalo that killed his young daughter, and Hickok teams up with him to hunt down the beast.

Significantly, Bronson wears dark sunglasses, the codified sign of the blinded gaze and of impotence (Bronson’s impotence is clearly ascertained in the film: when he meets his old love, Poker Jenny (Kim Novak in her last role!), he is unable to fulfill her expectations and to engage in sexual intercourse with her). However, paradoxically, the same (impotence) holds even more for the White Buffalo itself, so that it would be easy to propose the elementary Freudian reading: the White Buffalo is the primordial father who is not yet dead and who, as such, blocks the hero’s sexual potency – his desperate sound is homologous

3 Jeff Bond, at <http://www.creaturefeatures.com/2010/05/the-white-buffalo/>

to that of *shofar* in Jewish religion; the scene the hero endeavors to stage is thus that of the parricide. White Buffalo, thus, stands for the dying primordial father whose blind strength is the obverse of its impotence – in a way, the beast’s impotence is the impotence of its raw strength itself. The White Buffalo is, thus, like the god encountered by Job: omnipotent, but morally insensitive and stupid.

In the course of the film, both heroes track the sacred beast to a great cave where it lives with its cows. Hickok wants the pelt as a moneymaking display item, while Crazy Horse wants it for wrapping up his dead daughter, to ease her way across the great stars. The whole movie points towards their showdown with the demon, a delirium of action and horror; this showdown is presented as a well-staged and organised climactic *scene* of the final confrontation, when, on a narrow mountain pass, the buffalo will attack the hero and he will kill him. It is crucial to bear in mind this aspect of the film: there is nothing elementary or spontaneous in the final showdown, it is presented as a carefully staged event (prior to the expected assault of the beast, Hickok and Crazy Horse carefully examine the mountain pass and arrange details here and there). What further strengthens this effect of artificiality is the mechanic nature of the beast (the film was shot before the invasion of digital creatures, and the beast’s movement are clearly those of a clumsy puppet), plus the obvious studio sets for the final confrontation (artificial snow, plastic rocks, etc.). Far from ruining the desired effect, all these features engender the somnambulistic-clumsy quality of a carefully prepared mechanic theatre scene.

Such an Event of encountering the Real Thing is brought to extreme when the Thing is no longer an inner-worldly entity but the abyss itself, the void in which inner-worldly things disappear. This abyss exerts a strange mixture of horror and attraction; it pulls us towards itself – in what direction? The famous lines of the *chorus mysticus*, which conclude *Faust* are Goethe’s “wisdom” at its worst: “Everything transient is just a simile; the deficient here really happens; the indescribable is here done; the eternal-feminine pulls us upwards.” If nothing else, this pseudo-deep bubbling gets the direction wrong: it pulls us DOWN, not up – down in the sense of Maelstrom from Edgar Allan Poe’s “A Descent into the Maelström” (incidentally, if there ever was a political regime where the eternal-feminine claims to draw its subjects upwards, it is today’s North Korea). Poe’s story is told by a narrator, who reports what an old Norwegian fisherman told him at the edge of a huge cliff that overlooks the stormy sea. From time to time, a furious current shapes

the smaller whirlpools of the water into a huge mile-long funnel, the “great whirlpool of the Maelström”: whenever a ship comes within a mile of the full force, it is carried to the bottom and slammed against the rocks until the Maelström ceases. Since its sublime strength seems to defy rational explanation, the narrator is drawn to more fantastic explanations that call the centre the entrance to the abyss in the middle of the Earth. Years ago, one day in July, a terrible hurricane arrives without warning and tears away the masts of the ship of the old man and his brother, who are returning home. When, after being temporarily submerged in the water, the boat recovers and floats back to the surface, the two men discover with horror that they are caught by the Maelström, and they sense their doom. When the waves subside into foam, the old man becomes calm in his despair, thinking of how magnificent it will be to die this way and awaiting his exploration of the Maelström’s depths, even if it is at the cost of his life. The man eventually opens his eyes and sees that his boat is hanging in the black walls of the Maelström, and the force of the boat’s whirling pins him to the boat. He sees a rainbow in the abyss, caused by the movement of the water, and as they slowly spiral downward, the man observes the wreckage that swirls around him and notices how small shapes and cylinders seem to descend most slowly into the abyss. He lashes himself to the water cask and cuts himself loose from the boat; his brother refuses to move from the boat and is lost. The cask sinks much slower than the boat and, by the time it sinks half of the distance between its moment of detachment from the boat and the centre of the abyss, the funnel of the Maelström has become calm. The man finds himself on the surface, where a boat picks him up; he has been saved, but, as he tells the narrator, his black hair has turned white and his face has rapidly aged.

The old man’s ability to overcome fear and reason that small cylinders provide the most of safety in the Maelström makes him similar to Auguste Dupin, Poe’s arch-model of the private detective who is a master in the art of logic and deduction: although “A Descent into the Maelström” is an adventure horror story, it can also be read as one of Poe’s mystery stories in which, at the story’s end, the detective reveals how his reasoning brought him the solution of the enigma. The old man has already resolved the enigma (a fact proven by his being still alive), and is now re-telling his thinking process to a rapt listener whose role is analogous to that of the commonsensical narrator friend of Dupin, the forerunner of Sherlock Holmes’s Watson, and Poirot’s Captain Hastings: he is honest, but lacks the spark that makes Dupin

or the old man that survived the descent into the Maelström the hero of their stories. And, effectively, the subtitle of the story should have been something like “The birth of rational thinking out of the spirit of the deadly vortex”: in the story, cold rational thinking and death drive overlap, since death drive (in its strict Freudian sense) is not the subject’s willing surrender to the abyss, his acceptance of being swallowed by the deadly vortex, but the very repetitive circulation on the edge of the abyss. In other words, the death drive is on the side of reason, not on the side of irrationality. And this brings us back to Hegel’s notion of the abyssal “Night of the World” as the very core of subjectivity: is the abyss of subjectivity not the ultimate Maelstrom? And is rational thinking not the art of circulating on the very edge of this abyss?

The Bond of the Word

So what happens when these living gods withdraw, when they no longer operate in collective libidinal economy? It was already Hegel who said that word is the murder of a thing, which means that the death of gods, far from liberating us from the symbolic link, enforces the power of the Word to the utmost – how? Let us take a perhaps surprising example, *Nightmare Alley* (William Golding, 1947), which follows the rise and fall of a con man. The first thing that strikes the eye about this outstanding *noir* is its circular narrative structure: it begins and ends at a seedy traveling carnival, with the figure of a geek. In the opening scene, Stanton Carlisle (Tyrone Power), who just joined the carnival, expresses his weird fascination at the lowest attraction there, a half-crazy geek who lives totally isolated in his cage and amuses the public by eating live chicken. He asks “How can somebody fall so low?”, but other members of the carnival reproach him for talking about a topic one should keep silent about... The figure of the geek, this “strange attractor” of the film’s universe, stands for a *homo sacer*: the living dead, alive but excluded from the community, not to be talked about. “You never give up!”, Stanton is told in the film – and, effectively, he goes to the end, fully realising his fate and, like Oedipus, becoming fully human only when he ends up as no longer human... The geek-motif underlies the entire film: the crazy laughter of the geek is regularly heard in the background at the key moments of the story.

Stanton works with “Mademoiselle Zeena” and her alcoholic husband, Pete; they were once a top-billed act, using an ingenious code to make it appear that she had extraordinary mental powers, until her

(unspecified) misdeeds drove Pete to drink and reduced them to working in a third-rate outfit. Stanton learns that many people want to buy the code from Zeena, but she won't sell; one night he accidentally gives Pete the wrong bottle of alcohol and Pete dies. Zeena is now forced to tell Stanton the code and train him to be her assistant. Stanton however, prefers the company of the younger Molly; when this is found out, they are forced into a shotgun marriage. Stanton realises this is actually a golden opportunity for him: now that he knows the code, he and his wife leave the carnival. He becomes "The Great Stanton", performing with great success in expensive nightclubs. However, he has even higher ambitions: with crooked Chicago psychologist Lilith Ritter providing him with information about her patients, Stanton passes himself off as someone who can actually communicate with the dead. First it works brilliantly, but when he tries to swindle the skeptical Ezra Grindle, it all comes crashing down. Grindle wants from Stanton a proof that he can really bring back the ghosts of the dead, so he wants to see his long-lost love. Stanton convinces Molly to participate in the trick and play the role of the deceased who appears at a distance in Grindle's park; but when Grindle is totally taken by the performance and kneels down in praying, Molly breaks down and starts to shout she cannot go on. Stanton and Molly have to leave town hurriedly; Stanton sends Molly back to the carnival world, while he gradually sinks into alcoholism. He tries to get a job at another carnival, only to suffer the ultimate degradation: the only job he can get is playing the geek... Unable to stand his life any further, he goes berserk, but fortunately, Molly happens to work in the same carnival, and she brings him back from madness to normal life. The happy ending (Stanton's miraculous redemption by Molly), was, of course, imposed by the studio; there is nonetheless an unexpected echo between these final moments of the film and the scene when Molly breaks down, unable to sustain the game of fake impersonation: it is as if, here, *the (fake) recognition succeeds* – in contrast to Grindle, Stanton is fully duped and taken by Molly's appearance.

The loop of fate which closes upon itself in the films circular structure is obvious to the point of ridicule: when, at the beginning, Stanton encounters the geek, he misses the dimension of *de te fabula narratur*, i.e., he fails to recognise in the geek his own future, what awaits him at the end of the road. The (again, ridiculously-naive) reference to cards, which repeatedly point to catastrophic future for Stanton, plays the same role of emphasising the closed loop of fate. How does this closed loop stand with regard to the basic types of tragedy (classic,

Christian, modern, *noir*)? It fits none of them. In the classic tragedy, the doomed hero assumes the Fate that crushes him, but continues to protest against it, to curse it. In Christianity, the God of Fate is dead and the only bond remaining is that of Word; tragedy ensues when, in the absence of the God of Fate, the subject overlooks this bond of Word and wrongly thinks he can freely manipulate with words without paying the price for it. Modern tragedy is best exemplified by the feminine NO of the great literary heroines, from Princesse de Cleves, to Isabel Archer in *The Portrait Of a Lady* – a mysterious rejection of happiness at the very point when happiness is at the reach of their hand. In *film noir*, the hero is a sucker betrayed by *femme fatale*, and the tragic moment occurs at the end when, close to his death-point, fully aware of how he was the victim of brutal manipulation, the hero nonetheless has to admit that he doesn't regret any of it – if, in full awareness of his downfall, he were to be asked if he would have made the same choice, his answer would have been that he would have done it again... (And, incidentally, if *Nightmare Alley* were to be a traditional *noir*, the story would have been told in a flashback, as in Tod Browning's *Freaks*: at the beginning, we would have seen the group of visitors to the carnival observing a geek who would have remained off-screen; then, in a flashback, somebody (a guide, usually) would have told the geek's story, and, at the end, we would have returned to the carnival site and got a full view of the geek.)

In what, then, did Stanton's "sin" (guilt) consist? In playing tricks with others' beliefs, i.e., in ignoring the bond of Word in a godless world – his tragedy is, thus, closest to the Christian one. When Stanton tries to convince Molly to help him to perform his trick on Grindle, he engages in a strange debate with her: she accuses him of playing God when he cheats about his contact with the spirits of the dead; significantly, Stanton insists that he never mentions God, but just performs harmless tricks which bring satisfaction to customers - this strange respect of God who remains off limits to his manipulations is curious, but crucial. Molly, dressed up as the ghost of Grindle's dead fiancée, breaks down, she cannot go on when the customer is fully duped and falls on his knees praying - *why* couldn't she sustain it, why did she find it unbearable and blasphemous to be identified as the object of other's desire? In order to answer this question, we have to see how the bond of the Word which defines the religions of the dead god necessarily culminates in the well-known words of *Kol Nidre* sang in the evening before Yom Kippur?

“All [personal] vows we are likely to make, all [personal] oaths and pledges we are likely to take between this Yom Kippur and the next Yom Kippur, we publicly renounce. Let them all be relinquished and abandoned, null and void, neither firm nor established. Let our [personal] vows, pledges and oaths be considered neither vows nor pledges nor oaths.”

For obvious reasons (to counter the charge that Jews are not to be trusted since their own sacred song enjoins them to break their vows), interpreters try to relativise this song, pointing out that it concerns only personal vows, i.e., vows one makes to oneself, not vows made to others in public space. However, such a reading obfuscates the much more radical dimension of *Kol Nidre*: the basic insight of Judeo-Christianity is that dissolving the bond of the Word is immanent to *logos*, it functions as its inner limit/excess, as the immanent negativity of the Symbolic. This is why the “pragmatic paradox” of *Kol Nidre* has to be emphasised: it makes a vow to renounce vows, i.e., the renunciation to vows has to be publicly proclaimed, performed as a symbolic act - why? Because, as Lacan put it, there is no meta-language, there is no Other of the Other. That is to say, why do we make promises? Precisely because there is always a possibility that we will break them, and a pledge, an act of obligation, can only occur against the background of this possibility. The Other (the invisible core of another subject) is by definition an abyss lurking beneath all his/her pledges: “You say this, but how do I know that you really mean it?” The paradox resides in the fact that, if we are to dwell fully within the Symbolic, this gap itself has to be reflexively inscribed into the Symbolic, and this is what happens with *Kol Nidre*.

“When the man comes around...”

How do we pass from the living gods of the Real to this dead god of the Word? The only consequent move is to make a step further from describing historical changes in how we think about god and to historicise god himself. This idea was too strong for Schelling himself who introduced it: the key shift from the *Ages of the World* to late Schelling's philosophy of mythology and revelation is that the *Ages of the World* thoroughly historicise God (the process of creation and revelation is a process into which God himself is caught, the becoming of the world is the becoming of God himself, his self-creation and self-revelation, so that the human awareness of god is the self-awareness of God himself), while the late Schelling renounces this radical historicisation

of God (in a return to traditional theology, God is not affected by the process of creation, He remains in himself what he is from all eternity, creation is a totally free and contingent divine decision/act). God as Trinity exists in eternity, as the unity of the three potencies (contraction, expansion, their reconciliation) in their atemporal/virtual state; with the process of creation which opens up temporality, the three potencies acquire autonomy and are actualised as Past, Present and Future (the dark Ground of dense matter, the light of *logos*, the reconciliation of the two in a living personality which is the Self as a point of contraction subordinated to the light of reason). The starting point, the premise, of late Schelling's philosophy of mythology and revelation remains the self-division or self-alienation of divinity:

“It is absolutely necessary for the understanding of Christianity – the *conditio sine qua non* of perceiving its true meaning – that we comprehend this cutting-off [*Abgeschnittenheit*] of the Son from the Father, this being in his own form and hence in complete freedom and independence of the Father.”⁴

However, God in himself is not caught in this division – how can this be? Schelling sees creation as a process of the alienation of god from himself, which proceeds in three steps, and the separation of the Son from the Father is only the last step in this process. First, God sets free his lowest potency, the egotist principle of contraction, what in God is not God, thereby creating matter as something actually existing outside Himself. The goal of creation is for God to reveal/manifest itself in his creation; however, creation takes a wrong turn not intended by God, the created world becomes the fallen world of decay and sorrow, nature impregnated by melancholy. God's first attempt to reconcile created world and himself by way of creating Adam also fails because of Adam's fall into sin, his free choice of sin. At this moment, the higher second potency of God, the principle of love, concretises itself as the demiurge, the “lord of being.” What Schelling saw clearly is that this god as demiurge of the fallen world (recall here the Gnostic notion that our material world was created by the evil demiurge) is a Janus-like two-faced god: he is simultaneously the demiurge, the lord-creator of the world, the transcendent Master elevated above the world, and a homeless god wandering anonymously exiled from eternity and

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4 Schelling p. 39

condemned to wander anonymously in his creation, like Wotan/Odin becoming Wanderer in Wagner's *Ring*. In this ultimate theological coincidence of the opposites, the Master of the world has to appear within the world in its "oppositional determination /*gegensaetzliche Bestimmung*/," as its lowest element with no proper place in it, as an anonymous homeless wanderer excluded from all social groups. (Note how, in a strictly homologous way, a will that actively wills nothing is the oppositional determination of the will which wills nothing in particular, which is a mere possibility of willing.) We thus, arrive at the first opposition in - or, rather, splitting of - the divine: the "pure" God prior to the creation of the world, the anonymous "Godhead," set against the God-demiurge, the Master of creation, who is the God outside of God, the God of the fallen world. Schelling's achievement is to show how the Christian Incarnation can be understood only against the background of this splitting.

The God-demiurge who appears in different guises in pagan religion is the "pre-existing Christ," the mythological god, the god of pagan phantasmagorias, not the actually existing god but its shadowy double, "god outside himself": "Mythology is nothing less than the hidden history of the Christ before his historical birth, the peregrinations of the God outside God."⁵ And it is crucial for Schelling that *the god who in Incarnation becomes man is not God himself or in itself, but this "God outside God," the pagan demiurge*: "Christ must possess an independent ground of divinity, an extra-divine divinity, a claim to sovereignty which he renounces. /.../ as the God outside of God, Christ has his own proper claim to being the God of the fallen world, a claim which he renounces."⁶ With the Christian Revelation, with Incarnation proper in which Christ "enters into the being of the fallen world to the point of becoming himself a fallen being,"⁷ myth becomes fact, an actually existing fully human individual, which is why, as Schelling says, pointing forward towards Kierkegaard, "Christ is not the teacher, as the saying goes, he is not the founder (of Christianity), he is the content of Christianity."⁸ In incarnation, in becoming man, god doesn't empty himself of his deity, but of the *morphe theou*, of the form of god as a

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5 S.J.McGrath 2012, p. 162

6 Ibid., p. 166

7 Ibid.

8 Schelling 1856-1861, p. 35

sovereign demiurge: "he who was in the form of God willed to empty himself of this":⁹ "'God becomes man' means: the divine became man, yet not the divine /in itself/, but rather the extra-divine of the divine became man."¹⁰

We can see clearly here where Schelling deviates from Christian orthodoxy – not so much with regard to the fact that, for him, pagan religions are not simply wrong but an organic part of the divine history, a process that culminates in Incarnation proper, but in how he complicates the process of Incarnation. For Schelling, Incarnation is preceded by the self-splitting of God-in-itself (Godhead), by God's contraction in a God outside the divine, the Lord of the fallen world, so that Christ as mediator does not mediate primarily between God and creation (the fallen world), but between the pure God and the God of the fallen world, the God outside the divine. What this means is that the God who incarnates himself in Christ is not the pure Godhead but the God of the fallen world (the God-demiurge, the God outside the divine): it is *this* God who empties himself of his divinity, who renounces the "form of God," becomes purely human and then dies on the cross. In short, what dies on the cross is the God-demiurge, the God who is outside the divine, and this is why Crucifixion is simultaneously Reconciliation of the divine with itself.

This reference to Schelling allows us to complicate further this figure of Incarnation: two splittings precede Incarnation, first the self-division of God into the pure Godhead and the Lord of Creation; then the splitting of this God of the fallen world himself, the god of pagan mythology, into transcendent Demiurge and the anonymous Wanderer. The first figure of the God in its oppositional determination, God outside himself, is thus already (the standard notion of) God as the transcendent Creator and Master of the universe; the fact that this God-Demiurge again redoubles himself into himself and himself in its oppositional determination (Wanderer) signals the "abstract" character of the God-Demiurge, it signals that this God is already hampered by an imperfection. The nature of this imperfection was indicated in the most radical reading of the "Book of Job" proposed in 1930s by the Norwegian theologian Peter Wessel Zapffe, who accentuated Job's "boundless perplexity" when God himself finally appears to him: expecting a sacred

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9 Schelling 1995

10 Schelling 1856-1861, p.275

and pure God whose intellect is infinitely superior to ours, Job

“finds himself confronted with a world ruler of grotesque primitiveness, a cosmic cave-dweller, a braggart and blusterer, almost agreeable in his total ignorance of spiritual culture. /.../ What is new for Job is *not* God's greatness in quantifiable terms; that he knew fully in advance /.../; what is new is the qualitative baseness.”

In other words, God – the God of the real – is like the Lady in courtly love, it is *das Ding*, a capricious cruel master who simply has no sense of universal justice. God-the-Father, thus, quite literally doesn't know what he is doing, and Christ is the one who does know it, but is reduced to an impotent compassionate observer, addressing his father with “Father, can't you see I'm burning?” – burning together with all the victims of the father's rage. Only by falling into his own creation and wandering around in it as an impassive observer can god perceive the horror of his creation and the fact that the he, the highest Law-giver, is himself the supreme Criminal. Since God-the-demiurge is not so much evil as a stupid brute lacking moral sensitivity, we should forgive him because he doesn't know what he is doing. In the standard onto-theological vision, only the demiurge elevated about particular reality sees the entire picture, while particular agents caught in struggles get only partial misleading insights; in the core of Christianity we find a different vision – the demiurge elevated above reality is a brute unaware of the horror he is creating, and only when he enters his own creation and experiences it from within, as its inhabitant, he can see the nightmare he fathered. (It is easy to discern in this vision the old literary motif of a king who occasionally dresses up as an ordinary man and mingles with the poor to get the taste of how they live and feel.)

It is here that the god of the Real returns with a vengeance in the very heart of Christianity. Postmodern philosophers from Nietzsche onwards as a rule prefer Catholicism over Protestantism: Catholicism is a culture of external playful rituals in contrast to the inner sense of guilt and the pressure of authenticity that characterize Protestantism; we are allowed to just follow the ritual and ignore the authenticity of our inner belief... However, this playfulness should not deceive us: Catholicism is resorting to such subterfuges to save the divine big Other in his goodness, while the capriciously “irrational” predestination in Protestantism confronts us with a god who is ultimately not good

and all-powerful but stained by the indelible suspicion of being stupid, arbitrary, or even outright evil. The dark implicit lesson of Protestantism is: if you want god, you have to renounce (part of the divine) goodness. One can discern the traces of this full acceptance of God's unconditional and capricious authority in the last song Johnny Cash recorded just before his death, “The Man Comes Around,” an exemplary articulation of the anxieties contained in the Southern Baptist Christianity:

“There's a man going around taking names and he decides
Who to free and who to blame every body won't be treated
Quite the same there will be a golden ladder reaching down
When the man comes around

The hairs on your arm will stand up at the terror in each
Sip and each sup will you partake of that last offered cup
Or disappear into the potter's ground
When the man comes around

Hear the trumpets hear the pipers one hundred million angels singing
Multitudes are marching to a big kettledrum
Voices calling and voices crying
Some are born and some are dying
Its alpha and omegas kingdom come
And the whirlwind is in the thorn trees
The virgins are all trimming their wicks
The whirlwind is in the thorn trees
It's hard for thee to kick against the pricks
Till Armageddon no shalom no shalom

Then the father hen will call his chicken's home
The wise man will bow down before the thorn and at his feet
They will cast the golden crowns
When the man comes around

Whoever is unjust let him be unjust still
Whoever is righteous let him be righteous still
Whoever is filthy let him be filthy still”

The song is about Armageddon, the end of days when God will

appear and perform the Last Judgment, and this event is presented as pure and arbitrary terror: God almost appears as Evil personified, as a kind of political informer, a man who “comes around” and provokes consternation by “taking names,” by deciding who is saved and who lost. If anything, Cash’s description evokes the well-known scene of people lined up for a brutal interrogation, and the informer pointing out those selected for torture: there is no mercy, no pardon of sins, no jubilation, we are all fixed in our roles, the just remain just and the filthy remain filthy. Even worse, in this divine proclamation, we are not simply judged in a just way; we are informed from outside, as if learning about an arbitrary decision, that we were righteous or sinners, that we are saved or condemned - this decision has nothing to do with our inner qualities.¹¹ And, again, this dark excess of the ruthless divine sadism – excess over the image of a severe, but nonetheless just, God – is a necessary negative, an underside, of the excess of Christian love over the Jewish Law: love which suspends the Law is necessarily accompanied by the arbitrary cruelty which also suspends the Law.

Recall the strange fact, regularly evoked by Primo Levi and other holocaust survivors, on how their intimate reaction to their survival was marked by a deep split: consciously, they were fully aware that their survival was a matter of meaningless accident, that they are not in any way guilty for it, that the only guilty perpetrators are their Nazi torturers; at the same time, they were (more than merely) haunted by the “irrational” guilt feeling, as if they survived at the expense of others who died there, and are, thus, somehow responsible for their death – as is well-known, this unbearable guilt-feeling drove many of them to suicide. This guilt-feeling displays the agency of the superego at its purest: the obscene agency which manipulates us into a spiraling movement of self-destruction. For this very reason, there is something irreducibly comical about the superego. Let us turn again to Primo Levi – this is how, in *If this is a man*, he describes the dreadful “selekcja,” the survival examination in the camp:

“The *Blockaeltester* /the elder of the hut/ has closed the connecting-door and has opened the other two which lead from the dormitory and the *Tagesraum* /daily room/ outside. Here, in front of the two doors,

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11 Incidentally, there is a traumatic occurrence in *Exodus* 4:24-26 in which precisely “the man comes around”: God himself comes to Moses’s tent in the guise of a dark stranger and attacks him (“the Lord met him, and sought to kill him”); Moses is then saved by his wife Ziporrah who appeases God by offering him the foreskin of their son.

stands the arbiter of our fate, an SSD subaltern. On his right is the *Blockaeltester*, on his left, the quartermaster of the hut. Each one of us, as he comes naked out of the *Tagesraum* into the cold October air, has to run the few steps between the two doors, give the card to the SS man and enter the dormitory door. The SS man, in the fraction of a second between two successive crossings, with a glance at one’s back and front, judges everyone’s fate, and in turn gives the card to the man on his right or his left, and this is the life or death of each of us. In three or four minutes a hut of two hundred man is ‘done’, as is the whole camp of twelve thousand men in the course of the afternoon.”¹²

Right means survival, left means gas chamber. Is there not something properly COMIC in this, the ridiculous spectacle to appear strong and healthy, to attract for a brief moment the indifferent gaze of the Nazi administrator who presides over life and death – here, comedy and horror coincide: imagine the prisoners practicing their appearance, trying to hold head high and chest forward, walking with a brisk step, pinching their lips to appear less pale, exchanging advices on how to impress the SS man; imagine how a simple momentary confusion of cards or a lack of attention of the SS man can decide my fate... do we not get here close to the arbitrary procedure of Predestination? Is the scene staged around “the man who comes around” from Cash’s song not the ultimate *selekcja* with regard to which even the *Auschwitz selekcja* is a relief? The Final Judgment is in Cash’s song not “deconstructed,” it is not transformed into an endlessly-postponed horizon, an event that is always-to-come: the Final Judgment takes place here and now, but as an obscene travesty of divine justice, an act performed by a crazy god who resembles the Nazi selector in *Auschwitz*.

The Deposed God

But, is this god the last word of Christianity? It is the ultimate version of the transcendent God-in-itself, and one has to go through it to reach the core of the Christian atheism. Jean-Luc Marion developed this point in detail: I only exist through being loved by the Other (God, ultimately). This, however, is not enough – God himself only exists through ex-sistence, as the effect of men’s referring to him (in the blockbuster *The Clash of Titans*, Zeus is right to complain that, if men stop praying to gods and celebrating them in their rituals, gods will

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12 Levi 1987, pp., 133-134

cease to exist). Such a properly comical notion of a God who depends on human approbation is, as one would expect it, evoked by Kierkegaard who, in his *Concept of Anxiety*, describes in a mockingly-antihegelian way how Simon Tornacensis (the 13th century scholastic theologian from Paris)

“thought that God must be obliged to him for having furnished a proof of the Trinity /.../ This story has numerous analogies, and in our time speculation has assumed such authority that it has practically tried to make God feel uncertain of himself, like a monarch who is anxiously waiting to learn whether the general assembly will make him an absolute or a limited monarch.”¹³

We should also bear in mind that we are dealing here with a properly dialectical mediation of knowing and being in which being itself hinges on (not-)knowing. As Lacan put it long ago, god doesn't know he is dead (that's why he lives) – in this case, existence hinges on not-knowing, while in Christianity god learns that he is dead. However, already the logical “god of philosophers” is a dead god, although in a different way, so maybe Tornacensis was wrong or at least he should be read in a more ambiguous way: if a philosopher proves the existence of god, is the god who comes to exist in this way not a dead god? So, maybe, what god really dreads is the very success of the proof of his existence, and the situation is here the same as in the well-known anecdote about the Hearst editor: God fears that the proof of his existence will fail, but he fears even more that it will *not* fail. In short, god's impasse is that he is either alive (but as such caught in a terrifying suspension about his existence) or existing, but dead.

Kierkegaard, of course, dismisses the attempts to logically demonstrate the existence of god as absurd and pointless logical exercises (his model of such professorial blindness for the authentic religious experience was Hegel's dialectical machinery); however, his sense of humour cannot withstand the wonderful image of a god in anxiety, dreading for his own status as if it depends on the logical exercises of a philosopher, as if the philosopher's reasoning has consequences in the real, so that, if the proof fails, god's existence itself is threatened. And, one can go even further in this line of Kierkegaardian reasoning: what undoubtedly attracted him to the remark of Tornacensis

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13 Kierkegaard 1980, p. 151.

was the blasphemous idea of a god himself in anxiety.

The divine impasse, thus, resides in the fact that the god whose existence is proven is like a monarch whom the assembly makes an absolute one: the very form of confirming his absolute power (it depends on the whim of the assembly) undermines it. The political parallel is here crucial, since Kierkegaard himself resorts to the comparison of god and king: god exposed to the philosopher's whimsy wit is like a king exposed to the whimsy wit of a popular assembly. But what is his point here? Is it simply that, in both cases, we should reject liberal decadence and opt for absolute monarchy? What complicates this simple and apparently obvious solution is that, for Kierkegaard, the (properly comical) point of the Incarnation is that that god-king becomes a beggar, a low ordinary human. Would it thus not be more correct to conceive Christianity as the paradox of God's abdication – god steps down, to be replaced by the assembly of believers called the Holy Spirit?

This is why authentic religion is incompatible with direct knowledge or unconditional certainty; radical doubt is its innermost component, and the believer him/herself is again and again surprised at unexpected signs of divine presence or intervention (“miracles”). This is how one should read Kierkegaard's point that “a miracle is only a sign that has to be interpreted and therefore /.../ a merely ambiguous indication”: already the Jansenists made the same point when they insisted that miracles are not “objective” miraculous facts which demonstrate the truth of a religion to everyone—they appear as such only to the eyes of believers; to nonbelievers, they are mere fortuitous natural coincidences. This theological legacy survives in radical emancipatory thought, from Marxism to psychoanalysis. In his (unpublished) Seminar XVIII on a “discourse which would not be that of a semblance,” Lacan provided a succinct definition of the truth of interpretation in psychoanalysis: “Interpretation is not tested by a truth that would decide by yes or no, it unleashes truth as such. It is only true inasmuch as it is truly followed.” There is nothing “theological” in this precise formulation, only the insight into the properly dialectical unity of theory and practice in (not only) psychoanalytic interpretation: the “test” of the analyst's interpretation is in the truth effect it unleashes in the patient. This is how we should also (re)read Marx's Thesis XI: the “test” of Marxist theory is the truth effect it unleashes in its addressee (the proletarians), in transforming them into emancipatory revolutionary subjects. The *locus communis* “You have to see it to believe it!” should always be read together with its inversion: “You have to believe [in]

it to see it!" Although one may be tempted to oppose them as the dogmatism of blind faith versus openness toward the unexpected, one should insist also on the truth of the second version: truth, as opposed to knowledge, is, like a Badiouian Event, something that only an engaged gaze, the gaze of a subject who "believes in it," can see. Think of love: in love, only the lover sees in the object of love that X which causes love, so the structure of love is the same as that of the Badiouian Event which also exists only for those who recognize themselves in it: there is no Event for a non-engaged objective observer. In his *Seminar XX: Encore*, Lacan warns against a too simplistic atheism: he says that while god doesn't exist (in the sense of an absolute Entity dwelling somewhere out there independently of us, humans), he nonetheless ex-sists. This ex-sistence, of course, can be understood in different ways, imaginary (god doesn't exist in himself, but only outside himself, as humanity's imaginary projection), symbolic (god ex-sists in human practices and rituals which refer to him, as a symbolic Cause kept alive through human activity), real – the meaning emphasized by Lacan (god is the impossible/real point purely virtual point of reference which resists symbolization, like the unbearable intensity of the *jouissance feminine*). But, we can cut short the looming debate and simply posit that God ex-sists outside himself in our practice of love - not in our love for him, but our love for our neighbors (as Christ put it to his disciples, when there is love among you, I am there). What this means is that man and god are caught in a circle: a religious man perceives god as the presupposition of his entire life, but this presupposition is posited by his serving god and has no meaning outside this relationship. This is why Kierkegaard has to insist on God's thorough "desubstantialization" – God is "beyond the order of Being," He is nothing but the mode of how we relate to him, i.e., we do not relate to him, he IS this relating:

"God himself is this: *how* one involves himself with Him. As far as physical and external objects are concerned, the object is something else than the mode: there are many modes. In respect to God, the *how* is the what. He who does not involve himself with God in the mode of absolute devotion does not become involved with God."¹⁴

The Christian passage to Holy Spirit as Love is to be taken literally: God as the divine *individual* (Christ) passes into the purely *non-substantial*

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14 Kierkegaard 1970, entry 1405

link between the individuals. This is why if aliens were to land on Earth, we can be certain that they would not know about Christ, Christ is exclusively a part of human history - but this is not an argument that Christ is just a human creation/projection or, even worse, that there is one divine Absolute which appears in multiple ways to different groups of people (or other rational beings). And this is also why the genuine dimension of Christian doubt does not concern the existence of God, i.e., its logic is not "I feel such a need to believe in God, but I cannot be sure that he really exists, that he is not just a chimera of my imagination" (to which a humanist atheist can easily respond: "then drop God and simply assume the ideals God stands for as your own"), which is why a Christian subject is indifferent towards the infamous proofs of God's existence. Recall Brecht's famous Herr Keuner anecdote about the existence of god:

"Someone asked Herr Keuner if there is a God. Herr Keuner said: I advise you to think about how your behavior would change with regard to the answer to this question. If it would not change, then we can drop the question. If it would change, then I can help you at least insofar as I can tell you: You already decided: You need a God."¹⁵

Brecht is right here: we are never in a position to directly choose between theism and atheism, since the choice as such is already located within the field of belief (in the sense of our practical engagement). What an authentic believer should do here is to shift the accent of Brecht's anecdote: from God to God's ex-sistence that is fully compatible with materialism. This is why doubt is immanent to an authentic religion: not abstract intellectual doubt about god's existence, but doubt about our practical engagement that makes god himself ex-sist. This doubt is brought to extreme in Christianity where (as Chesterton pointed out) not only do believers doubt God, God himself gets caught in doubt (In his "Father, why have you abandoned me?", Christ himself commits what is for a Christian the ultimate sin: he wavers in his Faith) – and Chesterton is fully aware that we are thereby approaching

"a matter more dark and awful than it is easy to discuss /.../ a matter which the greatest saints and thinkers have justly feared to

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15 Brecht 1995, p. 18

approach. But in that terrific tale of the Passion there is a distinct emotional suggestion that the author of all things (in some unthinkable way) went not only through agony, but through doubt.”¹⁶

What god doubts about is that the bond of human engagement that makes him ex-sist will be broken.

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16 Chesterton 1995, p.145