

# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF BAUDRILLARD STUDIES

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## Which God(s) do you (not) believe in? An interview with Christopher Watkin

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**Interview by:** Jon Baldwin

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**Jon Baldwin:** You write that, “[i]t might at first blush appear that the opening of the twenty-first century has seen one more ‘turn to religion.’” (p.12) This is then problematized, in Badiou’s case, as a turn away from politics or, in Nancy, as merely the contortions of the exhaustion of religion. What are your thoughts on the possibilities and dangers afforded by the (re)turn to religion?

**Christopher Watkin:** To begin with, I don’t think that the notions of a “turn” or a “return” to religion do justice to the complexity of what has happened in philosophy over recent decades, or to what we can see in society more broadly. The idea of such a turn is beset with the same reductionism as the classic secularization thesis. Part of the problem is that “religion” is almost always considered too superficially. It is assumed that any discourse employing terms like “faith”, “miracle” or even “God” must necessarily be religious, and that by implication the lack

of such terms is a reliable indication of the absence of religion. This is a grave error. Meillassoux, for example, is very happy to embrace the notion of miracle, and sees it as an important proof that God does *not* exist. I have critiqued elsewhere this sloppy tendency to go hunting for religious words, and have given it the name “ornitheology”. So one of the dangers, perhaps the main one, is a careless or superficial understanding of what it is that constitutes the religious in the first place, such that one can turn away from or towards it.

If we dig below the surface and think about religion not in terms of listening out, bingo-like, for certain key terms but as a series of structures or rhythms of thought and life then the problem is more acutely posed but no more easily answered. The difficulty is this: what counts as a “religious” way of thinking or acting? Nancy takes to task the sort of position that Badiou holds, characterising it as clinging onto what he calls the move of the “Christmas projection”, the idea of a historical rupture that arrives suddenly and changes everything, like the incarnation in Christianity. But in his own terms Badiou has no problem inscribing his crucial historical break – the rupture of the matheme from the mytheme – within a non-religious story. So how are we to decide what counts as “religious”? Is Badiou’s account of history religious, or isn’t it?

It is often assumed in this debate that any intellectual move present within religion is necessarily religious, or in other words that religion holds the copyright on

everything it thinks and does, with the consequence that when non-religious thought uses those same moves it only ever does so illegally. This is too simple. We need to be careful to make the distinction, case by case, between, on the one hand, the various moves and structures of religious thought and, on the other hand, what is assumed to be irreducible the “religiosity” of certain ways of thinking. Not all religious ways of thinking (in the first sense) are necessarily “religious” (in the second sense). But some are... so there are no quick and easy answers.

Let's take faith as an example. In the book I trace Nancy's argument that every philosophical position must sooner or later recur to a principle or set of starting assumptions that it cannot establish in its own terms, because without them it cannot think anything at all. If positing such principles is a moment of “faith” then faith is universal. Where do you go from there? Do you conclude that there is a “religious” moment in all thought, or do you conclude that faith is not religious after all? Neither of those two answers is rendered unavoidable simply by virtue of the ubiquity of faith. Some other value or assumption must be brought in, explicitly or implicitly, to inform our answer, but what? Whatever that supplement may be, it remains that to identify a moment of faith within a particular philosophical system would not, in this case, imply anything at all about whether that system were part of a “turn to religion” or not in any deep sense.

To sum up, I think the notion of a “turn to religion” assumes too much and says too little. It assumes too much when it proceeds on the basis that there is something identifiable and localizable called “religion” away from which we have turned and to which we can return, whereas I think a much finer-grained analysis is afforded if we understand modern philosophy in terms of a series of ways of reconfiguring the moves and structures of religion rather than departing from them and then returning. The “turn to religion” says too little, finally, because it does not ask what – for me at least – is the really important question: what makes a particular intellectual move “religious” in the first place?

**Jon Baldwin:** *Difficult Atheism* opens with the suggestion that French philosophy is trying to come to terms with the death of God more rigorously than ever before, to think ‘without God’, and move “beyond the simple term ‘atheism’”. (p.1) Insofar as the book concerns itself with difficult atheism(s) can you say something about this simple term ‘atheism’? And what are your thoughts on the popular atheism of the so-called ‘Four Horsemen of atheism’ (Dennett, Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris)? In these cases it would seem that atheism, no less than theism, can be used as a pretext, a rhetorical cover, and manipulated in ulterior causes?

**Christopher Watkin:** The main problem with atheism as it is usually understood is that it assumes one or more of the structures of the theism it seeks to deny. What is not

often made explicit in discussions of atheism is that it can do this in two separate ways. The first way is what in the book I call “residual” or “ascetic” atheism. This view accepts the religious account of reality according to which certain notions that have traditionally been central to our way of thinking and living in the world rely on a transcendent deity: trans-historically and transculturally invariant notions of truth and justice, to give two of the main examples. This residual atheism feels obliged to renounce all such notions when it turns its back on God, and there is perhaps no passage which shows this more vividly than the madman parable in Nietzsche’s *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*. More broadly, this type of atheism tries to live in one half of the religious universe: the half which Heidegger, in the essay ‘Nietzsches Wort: Gott ist tot’ calls the “sensible” as opposed to the “supersensible”. It inherits this religious split more or less unquestioningly, and merely dispenses with one of the two domains.

The second option, and here we are getting closer to the Four Horsemen you mentioned, is “imitative” or “parasitic” atheism. Whereas residual atheism, to its credit, is aware that certain patterns of thought rely on notions of transcendence and personality that are readily afforded by the Western monotheistic religions but extremely difficult (if not impossible) to achieve without God, imitative atheism insouciantly ploughs on under the impression that it can neatly excise God from the picture without having in any fundamental way to rethink

notions like truth and justice. This atheism, I argue in the book, remains structurally parasitic upon the religion that it rhetorically rejects.

So to bring these ideas together, what we are really dealing with here, schematically at least, are two extremisms. The first assumes that nothing touched by religion can survive the death of God, and the second proceeds as though the death of God changes nothing apart from the erudite theological detail of divine existence. They are the mirror image of each other, just as both of them – in different ways – mirror theism.

It is also worth stressing that “residual” and “imitative” atheism are ideal types rather than absolute categories, and almost all atheistic positions will conjure with some sort of combination of the two. Nevertheless, we can say that they share the common difficulty of defining themselves in terms of the very thing they seek to deny. This is one of the reasons why, as I said in my response to the previous question, I think it is more helpful to think in terms of restructuring or reconfiguring religious modes of thinking and living rather than walking away from them completely and then returning to them. Religion runs too deep in our intellectual tradition to be sloughed off like an overcoat.

**Jon Baldwin:** Jean Baudrillard (2001: 131) suggested that, “if the hypothesis of God has disappeared – if He is indeed dead, as Nietzsche said – we still have to deal – now, and for a long time to come – with His Ghost and

His metastases.” It seems to me that Difficult  
Atheism concerns itself with this situation, this Ghost and  
growths, and the possibility or otherwise of thinking  
without them?

**Christopher Watkin:** That’s an interesting summary, but I  
would draw the line somewhat further back than  
Baudrillard. The key moment is not the disappearance of  
the God hypothesis but rather its emergence, in other  
words the moment at which God appears within the  
intellectual landscape precisely as a hypothesis, as an  
object of human thought rather than as its ground. That  
is the point at which, structurally speaking, God ceases to  
be God; the disappearance of the hypothesis merely dots  
the i’s and crosses the t’s.

I fear that Baudrillard’s formulation is committing the  
same error I identified in relation to the “turn to religion”  
in response to a previous question. We cannot arrive at  
an adequate understanding of our current situation if we  
try to approach it in terms of thinking “without God”.

There are two reasons for this. First of all, such an  
approach fails to interrogate to what extent the different  
elements of thinking “with” God are irreducibly religious:  
it assumes that religion has the copyright on everything  
it touches, or in Baudrillard’s terms that everything that  
resembles religion in any way is necessarily a spectre of  
the divine. Secondly, it assumes that it is possible fully  
and finally to exorcise all such spectres, which – as  
Nancy argues – itself resembles a characteristically

religious move. So again, it's impossible to respond to this question adequately before addressing the more fundamental issue of what counts as "religious" or as a ghost of God in the first place. Setting up the problem in terms of "thinking without God" forces us to answer in of two ways: either that we can think without God, or that we cannot. Both of these answers alike, however, assume a black-and-white understanding of being with and without God, which is part of what I want to challenge in the book.

**Jon Baldwin:** In a 'religionless' interpretation of Christianity, blending Lacan and Žižek, Peter Rollins (2015: 65) has written that, "[t]he radical reading of Paul's work on the dark glass is that the event nestled within Christianity signifies the smashing of the barrier, and further, that this destructive act doesn't reveal a fullness, but rather confronts us with the traumatic revelation of an empty space." The latter sentiment here seems to particularly resonate with, and illustrate, your notion of "theology's colonisation of residual atheism" (p.8) which "finds itself quickly consumed by the unfolding narrative of the God whose death it hails" (p.9). What are the dangers of certain post-religious theologies colonising ascetic atheism, and "incorporating atheism's moves within its own trajectory"? (p.10)

**Christopher Watkin:** Dangers for whom? For atheism, the danger is that an ascetic position positively invites a post-metaphysical theological response. To put it crassly,



having killed the God of metaphysics residual atheism finds itself surprised by a religion that never believed in that God anyway, and it sees itself pressed into service as the handmaid of a post-metaphysical theology, relegated to the status of a stepping stone on the way to a theological rebirth. It indignantly finds out that it positively facilitates the very thing it thought it was eradicating.

For theology, on the other hand, the danger is in parasitizing ascetic atheism, in uncritically embracing the trajectory of the death of God in its own terms, in such a way that post-metaphysical theology maintains only a superficial, semantic, distinction from atheism while being structurally indistinguishable from it. In other words, the danger for atheism is that it wakes up to find itself theological after all, and the danger for theology is that it looks at itself in the mirror and sees only atheism. The extent to which these two situations are seen as “dangers” will, of course, depend on one’s understanding of what atheism, and theology, are and should be, and that opens a new set of questions about the complex reasons for adopting one fundamental philosophical set of assumptions over another. I treat these questions briefly in the book, but a full analysis would require a second volume.

One final word here: these two dangers – which I have sketched here only in their broadest terms – are not completely compatible with each other. If (as the first

danger suggests) atheism finds itself a stepping stone on the way to a theological rebirth, then it would seem hard to reconcile with a theology that (according to the second danger) is structurally indistinguishable from atheism. Does atheism find itself turned into theology, or is theology turned into atheism? Surely both cannot simultaneously be the case. This, once more, is why post-secular theology needs to be analysed with tools subtler than the theology/atheism binary. Just because it calls itself “theology” it does not necessarily follow that post-secular theology is different to atheism, nor can we assume it to be the case that “atheism” simpliciter does not already perform quite adequately some, most or even all of the moves of this “theology”. As a prolegomenon to such a deeper analysis, the first question to each of these positions could usefully be “which God(s) do you (not) believe in?”

**Jon Baldwin:** If imitative and residual atheisms were there old game, then the new game is announced to be the attempt to move beyond these positions and approach what you term ‘post-theological integration.’ Here, “[a] thinking radically without God is integrated with a retention of the notions otherwise associated with God.” (p.13) You identify and discuss elements of this project in the work of three ‘post-theological’ thinkers: Alain Badiou’s ‘axiomatic atheism’, Jean-Luc Nancy’s ‘atheology’, and Quentin Meillassoux’s ‘divine inexistence.’ There is a huge risk of simplification, but could you indicate the trajectories here? How might each move

beyond imitative and residual atheism, whilst not “renounc[ing] the notions associated with such gods – namely, truth and justice”? (p.13)

**Christopher Watkin:** With the understanding that any brief response to this question is necessarily going to be very reductive, let me go right ahead and reduce. Badiou sets off down the road of post-theological integration by insisting that “nothing is inaccessible”. In other words, there is nowhere off limits to human reason, no sacred or mystical place for God to be hiding. He then seeks to draw a commitment to universalism and equality out of his mathematical ontology in terms of what he calls a “Platonism of the multiple”. It is axiomatic set theory that gives us the Republican equality and revolutionary impetus that characterize both Badiou’s philosophy and his interventions into political debates.

Nancy resists the “Christmas projection” in Badiou’s thought – namely the idea of “a pure and simple birth” either of Christianity or a similarly epoch-changing moment “which one fine day comes along and changes everything”. His own path to theological integration passes through his “deconstruction of Christianity”, seeking not to leap out of Christianity in one bound (which he dismisses as a religious move), but – as he puts it – to be faithful to something in Christianity deeper than Christianity itself, a certain movement of self-surpassing for which Christianity has only ever been the “front man”. He, like Badiou, also seeks to draw a

certain ethic out of his ontology, but in this case it is not axiomatic set theory but what he calls singular plural being.

Meillassoux provides the most spectacular example of post-theological integration in the book, summed up nowhere more succinctly than in his determination to believe in God not in spite of the fact that he does not exist, but because he does not exist. Meillassoux denies himself no morsel from the cornucopia of religious delights: miracles, resurrection, justice, even a messianic figure he calls the Child of Man. On what basis can he allow himself such religious fancies within a resolutely non-theistic frame? Through his principle of factuality, according to which there is no necessary being and the only necessity is contingency itself: things could always be otherwise. If nothing is necessary and anything could be otherwise then miracles and resurrection pose no problem, in fact they can be brought as evidence for the absence of any absolute or necessary laws. There are some difficulties with this position, especially when it comes to justice, but they would take too long to unpack here.

In passing, it's interesting that almost all Meillassoux scholars seem embarrassed by this overtly religious discourse in his thought, prominent though it is in 'The Divine Inexistence'. It seems that we don't know what to do with someone who denies the existence of God but believes in the resurrection, and this I suspect is

testament to the way in which contemporary thought still holds fast to the oil-and-water binary of theology and atheism that I have been labouring in these answers to expose as inadequate and superficial, and that perpetuates all the simplifications that beset the split between residual and imitative atheism.

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### **About the Author:**

**Jon Baldwin** is from the London Metropolitan University.

**Christopher Watkin**, Monash University, is author of a number of works including *French Philosophy Today*, *New Figures of the Human in Badiou, Meillassoux, Malabou, Serres and Latour* (2016) and *Michel Serres: Figures of Thought* (2020). This interview concerns the ideas in his *Difficult Atheism: Post-theological thought in Badiou, Nancy and Meillassoux* (2011)

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