

ISSN 1751-8229  
Volume Four, Number One

# The Necessity of Belief, Or, The Trouble with Atheism

Todd McGowan – University of Vermont, USA

## I Fighting against Faith

In an article published in the *New York Times* on March 12, 2006, Slavoj Žižek calls atheism “modern Europe’s most precious legacy” (2006). He claims that, amid rising religious violence, the defense of this precious legacy represents “perhaps our only chance for peace” (2006). Though Žižek’s theoretical work has turned toward more explicitly toward Christianity in the last decade, he has simultaneously become more insistent on atheism as the fundamental attitude for the philosopher and for the political activist. In response to theorists who embrace different forms of spirituality or who accept religious practices as an inherent aspect of culture, Žižek proclaims himself a “fighting atheist” with no attachment to any markers of religious faith. But this fighting atheism remains at a distance from the outburst of scientific atheism that has recently become prominent. Žižek accompanies his atheism with a theoretical apology for Christianity. The new atheists—Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and others—take a harder line than Žižek and reject completely any religious forms. This harder line leads them to fall back into an ideological obfuscation just as dangerous as theism.

Though Žižek announces his fidelity to atheism, his theoretical work always leaves a place for the figure of God because he grasps the philosophical and political costs of failing to do so. When one attempts to deny this place, one necessarily misrepresents the structure of signification and hides the gaps within that structure, which is what occurs in the case of the new atheists. The atheism of Dawkins and the others hides the blank spaces within the signifying order, and this is a thoroughly ideological operation. By covering up the ways that the signifier fails, the new atheism ushers in a new form of authority that ironically functions as a quasi-divinity.

Žižek's complex relationship to atheism follows from that of psychoanalysis itself. In one sense, atheism, despite Freud's own professions of it, is not integral to psychoanalysis. Concerning the ontological question of God's existence, psychoanalytic theory insists on a strict neutrality. Neither the actual existence nor non-existence of God bears on the psychoanalytic project in itself because it would not fundamentally alter the problem of subjectivity. With or without God, the subject remains divided from itself and confronts a social order equally divided from itself.<sup>1</sup> But if psychoanalytic thought does not concern itself with God's ontological status, it does devote considerable attention to the phenomenon of religious belief. It shows us that the emergence of religious belief is neither a response to miraculous signs of God's presence nor an attempt to find solace in a cold universe.

It is, instead, an effect of the structure of signification. As psychoanalytic theorist Pierre Daviot puts it, "the theory ruins the ineffable and transcendent character of the spiritual nebula by showing that it is governed by an immutable logic: that of the signifying articulation as it expresses itself across spoken language" (2006: 22, my translation). In this sense, religious belief is wholly necessary, and even the professed atheist shares in it, albeit in a disguised form. At its foundation, religious belief is belief in the lack in the order of meaning—in the incompleteness of the field of signification that one confronts as a subject. By unraveling the nature of religious belief and revealing its structural necessity, psychoanalytic theory has the ability to make the implicit nature of belief explicit and thereby to eliminate the illusions that accompany its form of appearance. In doing so, it might lessen the political power of belief and help to fight against the theocratic impulse in contemporary politics. It reveals that the best way to counteract the power of religious belief is not overt struggle against it—arguing for atheism—but the insistence on the absolute necessity of faith. Žižek's theorizations of Christianity as a political practice are a part of this insistence on the necessity of faith. Rather than trying to topple Christian faith, Žižek wants to sustain its form while transforming its content.

At times, however, Freud himself is far from seeing religious belief as a structural necessity, and in fact, he inveighs against it in the strongest terms. Much of *Civilization and Its Discontents* and all of *The Future of an Illusion* are devoted to attacking the foundations of religious belief. For Freud, “a protection against suffering through a delusional remoulding of reality is made by a considerable number of people in common. The religions of mankind must be classed among the mass-delusions of this kind” (1961: 32). Here, Freud links religious belief with a form of psychosis, and he views it as one of the tasks of psychoanalysis to challenge this cultural form of psychosis. His focus on the believer’s delusion obscures, however, the genuine insight that accompanies belief—its initial affirmation of the gap or failure within the field of signification. To be sure, the believer fills in this gap with a transcendent and supernatural being (which is precisely what Freud objects to), but the religious impulse takes the gap itself as its theoretical point of departure. To insist on atheism in the manner that Freud does is to obfuscate this central religious insight, which is what constitutes the primary source of belief’s appeal. That is, the devoted believe not so much because faith offers consolation in the face of the irremediable horror of existence but because faith provides a way of conceptualizing what is constitutively absent in the everyday world or signifying structure. Religious belief is a way of affirming that everything cannot be said.

Nonetheless, one cannot leave belief in its prevailing form of appearance. Freud rightly combats manifestations of belief for the psychic toll that they take on the subject, and contemporary psychoanalytic theory must take up Freud’s combat, albeit in a different guise. As belief in an ultimately unknowable God consciously intervening in the world, religious faith is a form of psychotic delusion, and it is delusional even if its basic contention—that God exists—is true. Whether God actually exists or not is entirely beside the point for the subject engaged in belief. The problem with the religious delusion lies elsewhere: like all forms of psychosis, it removes the subject from the fundamental problems of subjectivity and thereby depoliticizes it. Belief in its typical form is, as psychoanalysis allows us to see, incompatible with a properly politicized subjectivity or an authentically engaged existence. It interferes with the subject’s ability to intervene in order to change the world.

This idea of an antithesis between belief and politics seems especially evident today, as we see belief align itself with calls for a return to traditional social relations. The fundamentalist critique of modernity, though it often takes the form of right-wing politics, has its basis in the rejection of politics as such. Politics proper involves an embrace of an irreducible antagonism that defines the social field. As Alain Badiou notes in *Metapolitics*, “what true politics undermines is the illusion of the bond, whether it be trade unionist, parliamentary, professional

or convivial” (2005: 77).<sup>2</sup> Politics involves acting on the basis of the incompleteness of the social order, on the basis of the realization that no omnipotent force determines the nature of social relations. When one becomes a politicized subject, one implicitly affirms the social antagonism, whereas fundamentalist militancy attempts to combat antagonism itself in the name of healing the social order and giving that order an abiding unity.<sup>3</sup> This is a fantasy that subtends not just fundamentalism but all religiously based attempts at politics, inclusive of progressive movements linked to even a vague conception of spirituality.

This is not to say that religiously based attempts at politics cannot effect substantive social change. This type of militancy has the ability to be quite successful in changing aspects of society. But the problem with these victories—even if they happen to appear progressive—is their ultimately nefarious effect on both the subject and the social order. They leave us with the idea that the split in the subject and the split in the social order can be healed—and in this way they play a part in an ultimate depoliticization or in an eventual turn to fascism. In this sense, social change motivated by religion cannot properly be seen as the result of political agitation.<sup>4</sup>

Religious belief doesn’t only affirm the gap in the field of signification; it also, in the manner of the paranoiac, posits an entity that fills this gap. In the gap of social authority, at the real point where society remains irreducibly unauthorized, the believer finds an Other that authorizes and justifies it. As Lacan notes, “Religion is made to cure men, that is to say, in order that they don’t perceive what doesn’t work” (2005: 87, my translation). Where the power of social authority breaks down, religion allows the subject to find an authority authorizing and thereby obscuring this breakdown. The believing subject doesn’t experience the utter groundlessness of social relations—and this means that responsibility for these relations is always external. While sustaining belief, one can never perform the radical gesture of accepting responsibility for one’s desire. The distortion of being that is the result of desire itself remains the responsibility of the hidden (and not fully known) Other, who is the object of the believer’s faith, and not the subject her/himself.

But arguing against belief, a technique practiced since the Enlightenment, has had dubious results. Though Freud’s imaginary dialogue in *The Future of an Illusion* may have convinced a few to abandon their belief, belief endures and even prospers in modernity. The arguments against belief almost inevitably have the effect of securing it rather than shaking its foundation. The centuries-long effort to reveal the irrationality of belief—an effort that continues today in the work of scientists and philosophers like Victor Stenger, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, Michel Onfray, and Christopher Hitchens—has been a monumental failure, despite the importance of the political stakes involved.<sup>5</sup> This failure stems from the way in which these

arguments that adduce reasons for not believing end up providing more libidinal rewards for the believer. We can see the process taking place in one of the more polemical attacks on belief—Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*.

## **II. A Universe of Utility**

Dawkins is admirably open with his readers from the beginning of the book. He states, "If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down" (2006: 5). In order to prompt this transformation, Dawkins engages in a three-pronged strategy. He begins by demolishing the various proofs for God's existence, proceeds to locate the origin of belief through evolutionary biology, and finally demonstrates why the belief in God is unnecessary on every level (morally, socially, and existentially). Every aspect of Dawkins' argument derives from the adherence to the idea of utility that underlies his Darwinian approach, and in fact it is easy to speculate that belief's utter lack of utility motivated him to write the book in the first place. This is a motivation that Dawkins shares with other contemporary critics of religion. Both Sam Harris and Victor Stenger see religion not just as a barrier to social utility but as having unambiguously deleterious effects that demand its elimination. According to Harris, "we should ... recognize what a fathomless sink for human resources (both financial and attentional) organized religion is" (2004: 149). For Stenger, religion is "inimical to human progress" (2007: 248). It is, in the mind of these thinkers, a relic of humanity's barbaric past that must be jettisoned.<sup>6</sup>

Religious belief arose as an unhealthy byproduct of a useful tendency, which, according to Dawkins' speculation, was the proclivity for trusting authorities. Trust in authority had an evolutionary utility because it saved children from danger, but it had the secondary effect of facilitating religious belief (or the acceptance of religiosity when sanctioned by authorities). It is also a byproduct of our tendency to see agency everywhere, which typically keeps us from harm but in the case of religion leads us into a self-destructive behavior. The falsity of belief might be redeemed by its usefulness in creating moral beings or providing comfort in the face of death, but Dawkins shows how it simply doesn't do these things that we tend to give it credit for. It is a behavior without any use at all, and we are better off without it.

Dawkins proceeds in his assault on belief in the precise manner that Noam Chomsky proceeds in his critique of contemporary capitalism. Underlying the arguments of both is the belief that if people simply had all the facts that would abandon either their religious belief or their investment in the capitalist mode of production. But religious belief and ideological

commitment are not reducible to knowledge. Both represent libidinal investments that provide adherents with a reward that no amount of knowledge can replace.

What Dawkins' argument against belief leaves intact—and what every argument against belief leaves intact—is the enjoyment that derives from believing. In fact, arguments that make clear the inutility of belief augment this enjoyment rather than detracting from it. Enjoyment has an inverse relationship to utility: we enjoy in proportion to the uselessness of our actions. If an activity such as belief is useful, we gain something from it. It might, for instance, provide us healing during a time of illness or bring a good harvest during a drought. When an activity is not useful, however, it results in no tangible or even immaterial benefit; pursuing it involves pure expenditure without any return and thus wastes time, energy, resources, and life itself. As Slavoj Žižek puts it in *On Belief*, “God is ... ultimately the name for the purely negative gesture of meaningless sacrifice, of giving up what matters most to us” (2001: 150). Religious belief is essentially waste and pointless sacrifice, which, in the minds of critics, augers for its eventual elimination. But when one examines religion from the perspective of human enjoyment, its wastefulness becomes the chief source of its attraction.

Looked at from one side, the sacrifice that religion demands is not wasteful but productive: the believer gives up something in this life (sensual pleasures, free time on Sundays, and so on) in order to gain a blissful life in the afterworld. Belief, in this sense, operates according to the logic of exchange, and the exchange accrues to the benefit of the believer, since almost everyone would sacrifice some immediate pleasure for the assurance of eternity in heaven. Even religions without a clear conception of the afterlife like Judaism nonetheless offer the believer tangible rewards—a sense of membership in a community, transcendent justification for one's actions, and so on. If this account of belief were sufficient to explain the phenomenon, the arguments against belief would have a cogency that they in fact lack. As Dawkins shows from the perspective of evolutionary biology and as Stenger shows from the perspective of physics, the probability that there is a God and that there is an afterlife is almost zero.<sup>7</sup> Given the odds, belief represents a poor investment and should attract very few adherents. But if the driving force behind belief is not eternal bliss but the act of sacrifice itself—a wasteful rather than a productive act—the arguments against belief would lose all of their force.

Wasteful sacrifice appeals to us because we emerge as subjects through an initial act of ceding something without gaining anything in return. The creative power of the human subject stems from its ability to sacrifice. Through sacrificing some part of ourselves, we create a privileged object that will constitute us as desiring beings, but this object exists only as lost or absent and has no existence prior to the sacrificial act that creates it. There is a fundamental

dissatisfaction written into the very structure of subjectivity that no one can ever escape. But at the same time, the act of sacrifice allows us create anew our privileged object.

Through religious belief, the subject repeats the original act of sacrifice that constitutes its desire. Belief thus provides a foundational enjoyment for the believer, who, through the act of believing, wastes without recompense. The promise of a future reward in the afterlife is nothing but the alibi that religion provides in order to seduce the subject on the conscious level. But this is not where the real libidinal appeal of religion lies. The proliferation of religious belief is inextricable from its failure to deliver on its promises and from its status as a bad investment for the subject. Especially in the contemporary world, religious belief provides respite—an oasis of enjoyment—for the subject caught up in the capitalist drive to render everything useful and banish whatever remains unproductive.<sup>8</sup> Insofar as it fulfills this function, religion is not ideological.

The more that the demands of capitalist relations of production imprint themselves on a social order, the more that subjects—or at least a subset of them—within that order will turn toward religious belief or some other form of pure sacrifice. Capitalism installs a regime of utility that demands productive accumulation and leaves little space for useless expenditure. As Marx points out in the *Grundrisse*,

just as production founded on capital creates universal industriousness on one side—i.e., surplus-labour, value-creating labour—so it does create on the other side a system of general exploitation of the natural and human qualities, a system of general utility, utilising science itself just as much as all the physical and mental qualities, while there appears nothing *higher in itself*, nothing legitimate for itself, outside this circle of social production and exchange. Thus capital creates the bourgeois society, and the universal appropriation of nature as well as of the social bond itself by the members of society. (1993: 409)<sup>9</sup>

The social bond within capitalist society is one that unites all subjects and all objects in a general calculus of utility. In the midst of this system, subjects increasingly carve out the space for useless acts, and religion provides a ready arena for them. Though the Protestant Ethic may have initially paved the way for the development of capitalism, today it is capitalism and its ethos of general utility that provides the ground, albeit negatively, for religious belief.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, displaying the uselessness of religious belief or its wastefulness can only have the effect of highlighting its ultimate value for the believer.

Demonstrating the improbability of God's existence—one of the goals of *The God Delusion* and the other attacks on belief—allows believers who sustain belief in spite of this improbability to experience themselves as radicals and thus to enjoy their belief even more than

they already do. The prevailing ideological mode of subjectivity today is that of the rebel or outsider. Though religious belief involves capitulating to authority, the modern believer also experiences the enjoyment that comes from defiance of earthly authority. In most societies today, there is simply no earthly authority inveighing against faith or even prohibiting it; there is no one to defy. But Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and the other contemporary critics of religion help to erect just such an authority. One might even fancifully imagine that their books were undertaken with the unconscious aim of allowing believers to enjoy their belief.

### **III      No Club To Join**

Though Freud eagerly participated in this failed frontal assault on religion, psychoanalysis also points toward another strategy: rather than insisting on the irrationality or problematic nature of believing, we might instead maintain the impossibility of not believing. This is what Žižek touches on in his many discussions of Christianity. Religious belief has the power that it does over subjects because they are convinced that their belief is the result of an extraordinary act, a leap that places them among the elect and the truly enlightened.<sup>11</sup> This privileged status of the believer is one of the key motivations for belief. But psychoanalytic insights reveal that belief is not exceptional but the de facto attitude of the subject, the result of a structure in which the subject enters in order to become a subject. By exposing the structural nature of belief, we can attack it at its most vulnerable point—at the point of its very ubiquity.

When the subject enters into the signification, it encounters the senseless injunction of a master signifier (what Lacan labels  $S_1$ ). Through the form of this initial signifier, the subject receives the social authority's demand. But this demand never acquires a sense, and the structure of justification remains incomplete because no binary signifier for  $S_1$  exists. The authority's injunction exists on its own, without any subsequent signifier that would provide completion and justification for the master signifier. The parent tells the child to obey, but no parent can ground this demand in an ultimate reason that would allow it to make sense. This is why, at some point, the parent must respond to the child's question "Why?" with the unsatisfying response, "Because I said so." The ultimate justification for parental (and societal) authority is tautological. In the last instance, the child must obey simply because the parent says so, and this absence of a ground for the parental injunction is typically our first experience of the missing binary signifier that would provide a sense for the senseless master signifier.



The absence of a binary signifier, an  $S_2$ , creates an opening within the structure of signification. Signification begins with an  $S_1$ , but there is no binary signifier that would close the signifying utterance definitively. Every stopping point remains a failed stand-in for the missing ultimate stopping point. The absence of a final stopping point or binary signifier unleashes the subject's desire, but it also molds the subject into a believer. Religious belief, in its essence, is not the result of human weakness (as Nietzsche would have it), an outdated evolutionary mechanism (as Richard Dawkins would have it), or ideological manipulation (as Marx would have it). Even Freud's contention that belief is the residue of an infantile relationship to the father and a desire for a non-lacking authority fails to grasp the real cause for the obstinacy of belief. While enlightenment and rationality might topple our belief in God qua  $S_1$  or master signifier, it cannot touch our belief in the God of the gap, the God who occupies the position of the missing  $S_2$  and thus does not appear in the chain of signifiers.

Following Pascal, Lacan distinguishes between the philosopher's God on the one hand and the believer's God on the other, and we can align these two versions of God with  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  respectively. The first version, the philosopher's God, acts as a present authority in the world. It is Aristotle's prime mover or the first cause of the cosmological proof. Such a God acts as the starting point for the signifying system. Kant's demolition of the proofs for the existence of God in the first *Critique* targets precisely this God who functions as a master signifier. What Kant shows, through his refutation of the ontological proof (and, by extension, of the cosmological proof and the argument from design or physico-theological proof), is that the master signifier, the starting point for signification, may be just a name rather than a being. The ontological proof relies on the fallacious idea that the existence of the master signifier requires a referent to which that signifier corresponds, which is why Kant's refutation consists in showing that 100 imaginary dollars have the same signifying status as 100 real dollars but that they do not have the same ontological status (because one cannot buy anything with them!).

The Enlightenment assault on the God of the philosophers or the symbolic God leaves intact the other version of God—the God of the gap. This is the God who acts in mysterious ways, who provides the answers that transcend causal explanations. This God never shows itself but always remains in the position of impossibility. One cannot argue away this God because it occupies a position outside all rationality and argumentation: the more successfully one refutes this God's existence, the more ardently the believer will cling to belief. This insistence is visible not just in backwater fundamentalists but even in a thinker as sophisticated as Kierkegaard, who contends that the strength of the arguments against the existence of God provide incentive for the leap of faith rather than discouraging it. But even Kierkegaard's belief

is not the result of an existential choice made by the believer but is rather imposed on the subject by the nature of the symbolic structure itself.

In the act of speaking, we implicitly invoke the God of the real in the space of what is missing but nonetheless supports the field of the signifier. As Lacan puts it in *Seminar XX*, “the *dire* constitutes *Dieu*. And as long as things are said, the God hypothesis will persist” (1998: 45). He adds, “it is impossible to say anything without immediately making Him subsist in the form of the Other” (1998: 45). What one says includes an appeal to the missing real Other, an appeal for the validation of what one says. This validation, in order to be effective, must emanate from a position beyond the signifier. Every validation that occurs on the level of the signifier simply suggests the need for further validation anchored somewhere beyond it.

Each act of speaking makes us aware of a field of the unsaid that does not exist prior to or outside of the act of speaking. The field of the unsaid, the field of what Lacan calls the real, is irreducible. No matter how many times we attempt to say the last word and to provide an ultimate ground for what we say, our act of speaking will open up this field of the beyond that no words can subsequently contain. The inescapability of the unsaid field is at once the inescapability of the God of the gap, who is nothing but the name for that which we cannot grasp through the signifier, even though the signifier structurally creates a place for it.

Such a claim seems to go too far. Despite the degree of religious belief in contemporary society (even in Western Europe, where organized religion no longer has a hold on the population), almost everyone can name an atheist among her or his acquaintances. Some subjects seem to be able to transcend the structural necessity of belief. The problem with many self-proclaimed atheists is that they can sustain their atheism only by substituting a different real other to replace God. Atheist Marxists appeal to History; evolutionary biologists appeal to Natural Selection; Nietzsche appeals to the fecundity of life itself; and so on. Even though such figures reject the name of the God, they accept God as a structural position by filling in the missing space in the structure of signification with an explanatory guarantee.

The key to fighting against the nefarious effects of belief involves promulgating the recognition that we cannot but believe. Armed with this recognition that God is a structural necessity rather than a being in whom one might opt to believe, we transform the believer's conception of God. Though in one sense widespread acceptance of the necessity of belief wouldn't change much, it would allow this transformation in the nature of what is believed. The subject who grasps belief as a necessity and God as a structural entity recognizes that even God doesn't know—and this is the fundamental recognition inherent in every politicization. If psychoanalysis is atheistic, it is atheistic in the sense that it insists that even though there is God

qua gap in the signifying order, there is no knowledge in this gap. Or, as Lacan puts it in *Seminar XI*, “the true formula of atheism is *God is unconscious*” (1978: 59). To know that the gap in the signifying chain doesn’t contain any knowledge or that God is unconscious is to understand that nothing grounds human existence.

#### **IV      Worshipping Contingency**

One of the most persuasive critiques of the contemporary attacks on faith focuses on the lack of a positive vision of the world offered by these critiques. They tear down belief, but they offer nothing in its stead. As reviewer Daniel Lazare puts it, “Atheism is a purely negative ideology, which is its problem. If one does not believe in God, what should one believe in instead?” (2007: 29). In addition to proclaiming what one is against, one must also proclaim what one is for. In the absence of faith or some new form of equivalent belief (such as communism’s future fully realized society), it is not clear what might offer an underlying coherence for societies and provide an aim for human existence.

Perhaps it could be freedom. Atheism appears to open up the space for human freedom that the idea of God had hitherto closed off. Without God, people could follow their own desires in a way hitherto unimaginable. This is the philosophy of Ivan Karamazov in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. According to Ivan’s way of thinking,

were mankind's belief in its immortality to be destroyed, not only love but also any living power to continue the life of the world would at once dry up in it. Not only that, but then nothing would be immoral any longer, everything would be permitted, even anthropophagy. And even that is not all: ... for every separate person, like ourselves for instance, who believes neither in God nor in his own immortality, the moral law of nature ought to change immediately into the exact opposite of the former religious law, and that egoism, even to the point of evildoing, should not only be permitted to man but should be acknowledged as the necessary, the most reasonable, and all but the noblest result of his situation. (1990: 69)

Though the absence of God seems to lead directly to Ivan’s theory of complete human freedom—where “everything would be permitted”—it actually leads in the opposite direction.

Atheism is the road to unfreedom. The universe of contemporary atheism—and of atheism as such—is a universe in which all events can be explained according to a system of utility and interest. Entities within this universe behave in ways that aim at either their own good or the good of a larger organization to which they belong. In such a universe, there is no place for freedom. Freedom is nothing but the ability of a being to act against its own good or to reject

what is in its self-interest.<sup>12</sup> Through the self-destructive act, the subject frees itself from the dictates of nature and ideology, dictates that almost always manifest themselves through the prism of utility. A universe dominated by the claims of utility has no conceptual space for freedom.

Despite their belief in a universe ruled by the claims of utility, those who write polemics on behalf of atheism presuppose some idea of freedom: to argue against belief implies that believers have the freedom to act on what they read and transform their lives. When proponents of the godless universe allow for freedom, as they must, they locate it within the structure of utility. In *Freedom Evolves*, Daniel Dennett gives this logic its most complete articulation. Human freedom develops, according to Dennett, precisely because it is a useful tool to have. He says, "Free will is real, but it is not a preexisting feature of our existence, like the law of gravity. It is also not what tradition declares it to be: a God-like power to exempt oneself from the causal fabric of the physical world. It is an evolved creation of human activity and beliefs, and it is just as real as such other human creations as music and money" (2003: 13). The freedom that Dennett affirms here is an empirical freedom, a freedom that evolution provides rather than a freedom written into the structure of subjectivity as such. One should not oppose freedom and the determinative laws of the universe but see freedom operating within those laws. In these terms, freedom perseveres but in an attenuated form. Atheism is incompatible with a freedom that violates the laws of nature or that interrupts the claims of utility. In order to arrive at this type of freedom, one must have a place for God.

In his 2003 State of the Union Address, George W. Bush identified the roots of human freedom with the benevolence of God. He famously proclaimed (as part of his justification for the Iraq War), "The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world, it is God's gift to humanity" (2003). Many commentators have attacked the theocratic impulse present in this formulation, but Bush's statement does in fact contain a kernel of truth, if we understand the God to which he refers in the proper way—that is, as unconscious. An unconscious God is the necessary condition for human freedom. Freedom depends on the signifying structure containing a point of non-knowledge. This point is the result of the absence of a binary signifier, an  $S_2$ , that would complete any signifying utterance. The lack of a last word that closes the field of meaning—the position of absence occupied by an unconscious God—produces the free subject because it implies that no other has the ultimate responsibility for this field. In the absence of a binary signifier (a conscious God, a being behind the scenes pulling the strings), ultimate responsibility rests with the subject itself.

The freedom that derives from an unconscious God is not the freedom that

neoconservatives attempted to unleash on Iraq in 2003—and in this sense Bush’s statement is totally misleading. Freedom does not mean lack of restraint. There is no contradiction between doing what one wants and slavishly following a natural or ideological structure. Individual capitalists freely take up the project of the accumulation of capital without disturbing the structure of the ruling relations of production in the slightest. They want to accumulate, and the society leaves them free to do so. But there is no freedom present here in the transcendental sense because the social structure shapes the will to which it grants freedom. The subject of capitalist society is simply free to follow the dictates of the social structure willingly and without direct coercion.

If it is to break from these dictates, the idea of freedom must be dissociated from the usual conception of free will or absence of restraint. One must think freedom in conjunction with restraint. As Jean-Paul Sartre recognizes in *Being and Nothingness*, freedom necessarily encounters limits and would be inconceivable without them, and these limits occur within the sphere of freedom, not outside of it. He claims, “it is therefore our freedom which constitutes the limits which it will subsequently encounter” (1956: 620). Sartre grasps the inextricable relation between freedom and its limit, but even this formulation fails to go far enough in articulating the dialectical nature of the relation between the terms. Freedom does not encounter limits but posits them, and it is in the act of positing a limit that a being affirms itself as free.

Rather than being the liberty to do what one wants, freedom is the capacity to limit oneself. Under theism, freedom appears to manifest itself in the limiting power of law and thus be necessary rather than contingent. By linking freedom to law as its limit, theism disguises freedom’s radicality. Even when one sees law as the product of the subject’s own self-positing and thus as ultimately groundless (as Kant does in the *Critique of Practical Reason*), one remains within the logical bounds of theism and sells freedom short. Law implies necessity and thus carries with it an implicit imbrication with a transcendent order that authorizes it. In other words, there are always legitimating reasons guaranteeing law. It cannot derive purely and simply from freedom itself, which is why Kant ultimately links the moral law back to the idea of God.<sup>13</sup>

If we recognize that contingency rather than God occupies the place of the absent signifier—or, which is to say the same thing, that God is contingent—we at the same time grasp the fundamental contingency of all limits. Limits do not come from God in the form of, say, the Decalogue; they derive from the way in which societies and subjects posit themselves. The limit is the condition of possibility for the society and for the subject. This is the great insight of Fichte’s philosophy of the self. As he puts it, “The self posits an object, or excludes something

from itself, simply because it excludes, and on no higher ground; by means of this exclusion, the higher sphere of *positing in general* (regardless of whether the self or a not-self is posited) now first becomes possible” (1982: 176). The act of exclusion or of self-limiting constitutes the subject, but this act has, as Fichte emphasizes, “no higher ground” on which it is based. This means that the limit through which a subject defines itself and its freedom is, in the last instance, contingent. It might be something else. But what defines every subject and every society is the contingent limit that they establish for themselves.

Both atheism and traditional theology deny the radicality of human freedom by obscuring the fundamental absence that structures all social arrangements. In the space of this absence, one finds an unconscious God—a contingent moment that takes one by surprise and remains fundamentally inexplicable. Slavoj Žižek takes up a contradictory position, calling himself a “fighting atheist” and yet theorizing the radical political importance of Christianity, in order to bring forth this unconscious God. By grasping religious belief as a necessary response to the structural primacy of contingency, we can take up a different relation to it. Rather than reducing contingency to a deeper necessity in the way of the believer or eliminating the space for it in a universe of utility like the atheist, we might avow the contingent as our unsurpassable limit and place it at the center of our conceptual universe. A universe structured around contingency is a universe of freedom.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> While speaking on this idea at a conference, someone in the audience pointed out that this bracketing of the ontological question of God's existence bespeaks the limitation of psychoanalytic thought, the moment at which we must supplement it with some other theoretical approach. But this is to give too much credit to the ameliorative power of God's existence. Neither the existence nor the non-existence of God can alter the trauma of existing—death and eternal life represent equally unattractive alternatives—and this is precisely what psychoanalysis emerges in response to. (Unfortunately, the questioner did not find this line of argument entirely satisfying.)

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rancière, a fellow student of Louis Althusser, also locates the origin of politics in social antagonism. He claims, "There is politics from the moment there exists the sphere of appearance of a subject, the *people*, whose particular attribute is to be different from itself, internally divided" (1999: 87).

<sup>3</sup> In this precise sense, the otherwise misleading (and thoroughly ideological) term applied to Al-Qaeda and other militant Islamic organizations by right-wing commentators, "Islamofascism," is accurate. Like traditional fascism, 21st century Islamic militancy aims at healing the social antagonism by eliminating modernity and bringing about a society fully reconciled with itself. Of course, it aims to do so without the state apparatus that the term "fascism" implies.

<sup>4</sup> Žižek points out that politics must carry with it a disturbance of the ruling frame of reference, a disturbance that renders this frame of reference visible as the background of all current activity. He claims, "The act proper is precisely an intervention which does not merely operate *within* a given background, but disturbs its coordinates and thus renders it visible as background. So, in contemporary politics, a *sine qua non* of an act is that it disturbs the background status of the economy by rendering palpable its political dimension" (2008: 404). Religious based political activity cannot create this type of disturbance.

<sup>5</sup> See Dennett (2006), Harris (2004), Harris (2006), Hitchens (2007), Onfray (2007), and Stenger (2007).

<sup>6</sup> A fundamental belief in human progress animates the thought of all the new atheists. Most of them owe this belief to their conception of Darwinism and its ontological implications.

<sup>7</sup> One might say that it is not that the laws of probability put an end to the question of God's existence but that the question of God's existence challenges the basis for thinking in terms of probability. What calculations of probability necessarily fail to take into account is the power of an event—in this case, a revelation of God—to retroactively change the probabilities. An authentic event is not possible until it happens, and then it appears to have been inevitable because of its power to retroactively change how the past appears. For instance, prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, those who assessed probabilities considered World War III much more likely than this collapse and counted its probability at almost zero. But after it occurred, the fall of the Soviet Union appeared to have been evident for all to see. By the same token, if God's existence was revealed tomorrow, all the signs pointing to it today would immediately become visible, even to Richard Dawkins and Victor Stenger. (I am indebted to Sheila Kunkle for pointing this out to me.)

<sup>8</sup> Blaise Pascal appears to contend that the wager for belief represents a good investment because the possible reward surpasses to an infinite extent what one wagers. One stakes this life, which has the value of a nothing, for eternal life, which is a life without limit, a life of infinite value. Most critics read Pascal's wager as the ultimate in utility-based thinking (and this is why Dawkins claims that God himself, if he exists, would disapprove of the gambit and reward those who wagered for disbelief), but in the act of making his wager, Pascal actually affirms the significance of what cannot be reduced to calculation. He recognizes that there is a point of non-knowledge within the known world that no amount of speculation or scientific discovery can penetrate, and he opts to take the side of this non-knowledge over all the calculable certainties in the world of utility. One cannot, Pascal sees, gain any purchase on this fundamental uncertainty.

<sup>9</sup> Though Marx does point out that capitalism involves a tremendous waste of human material, from the perspective of capital itself this waste is not waste but simply proper business practice that follows from the dictates of the mode of production itself. It is only from a moral perspective that Marx himself imports that capitalism becomes guilty of waste. In the third volume of *Capital*, he says, "it squanders human beings, living labour, more readily than any other mode of production, squandering not only flesh and blood, but nerves and brain as well. In fact it is only through the most tremendous waste of individual development that the development of humanity in general is secured and pursued, in that epoch of history that directly precedes the conscious reconstruction of human society. Since the whole of the economizing we are discussing here arises from the social character of labour, it is in fact this precisely social character of labour that produces this waste of the workers' life and health" (1981: 182).

<sup>10</sup> The hold that religious belief has over America—in stark contrast to its power in European countries such as France and Germany—occurs not in spite of the influence of American pragmatism but because of it. The most pragmatic nation will be the most believing in order to compensate for the elimination of pure wastefulness in everyday life.

<sup>11</sup> Though not every believing subject embraces the necessity of the leap of faith conceptualized by Kierkegaard, there is nevertheless no believer who does not accept a fundamental distinction between belief and disbelief. Without this distinction, the imperative to believe loses its attractiveness.

<sup>12</sup> Because freedom is the ability to act against one's own interest or good, Kant paradoxically sees the existence of law itself as the proof of human freedom. Only free beings could give themselves laws. The law implies that one might act otherwise, whereas beings without laws can only follow their nature, which operates in the direction of the useful. One could not imagine a law for plants not to encroach on the space of other plants.

<sup>13</sup> The attempt to formulate the Kantian ethic as a viable contemporary position requires sidestepping the link between freedom and law. This is apparent in Alenka Zupančič's *Ethics of the Real*, which represents the definitive attempt to preserve the radical disruptiveness of this ethic. Zupančič treats the Kantian ethic as purely formal and thereby empties it of the content that



connects it to law—such as the admonition to treat others never merely as a means. As a result, she can claim (which would seem audacious to a devoted Kantian), “Following Kant—but at the same time going against Kant—we thus propose to assert explicitly that *diabolical evil, the highest evil, is indistinguishable from the highest good, and that they are nothing other than the definitions of an accomplished (ethical) act*. In other words, at the level of the structure of the ethical act, the difference between good and evil does not exist. At this level, evil is formally indistinguishable from good” (2000: 92).

## References

- Badiou, A. (2005) *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker. New York: Verso.
- Bush, G. W. (2003) “State of the Union,” 28 January 2003, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030128-19.html>.
- Daviot, P. (2006) *Jacques Lacan et le sentiment religieux*. Paris: Éditions Érès.
- Dawkins, R. (2006) *The God Delusion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Dennett, D. (2003) *Freedom Evolves*. New York: Penguin.
- Dennett, D. (2006) *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. New York: Penguin.
- Dostoyevsky, F. (1990) *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Fichte, J.G. (1982) *The Science of Knowledge*, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Freud, S. (1961) *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 21. London: Hogarth Press.
- Harris, S. (2004) *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. New York: Norton.
- Harris, S. (2006) *Letter to a Christian Nation*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Hitchens, C. (2007) *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. New York: Twelve Books.
- Lacan, J. (1978) *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton.
- Lacan, J. (1998) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore 1972-1973*, trans. Bruce Fink. New York: Norton.
- Lacan, J. (2005) *Le Triomphe de la religion précédé de Discours aux catholiques*. Paris: Seuil.
- Lazare, D. (2007) “Among the Disbelievers,” *The Nation* 284, no. 21 (28 May): 29.
- Marx, K. (1981) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume Three*, trans. David Fernbach. New York: Penguin.
- Marx, K. (1993) *The Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus. New York: Penguin.
- Onfray, M. (2007) *Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*, trans. Jeremy Leggatt. New York: Arcade Publishing.

- Rancière, J. (1999) *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1956) *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Stenger, V. (2007) *God—the Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist*. New York: Prometheus Books.
- Žižek, S. (2001) *On Belief*. New York: Routledge.
- Žižek, S. (2006) “Defenders of the Faith,” *New York Times* (12 March):  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/12/opinion/12zizek.html>.
- Žižek, S. (2008) *In Defense of Lost Causes*. New York: Verso.
- Zupančič, A. (2000) *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan*. New York: Verso.