
The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology.

Simon Critchley. New York and London: Verso, 2012.

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Simon Critchley's *The Faith of the Faithless* begins, rather fittingly, in a parable. Crafting a self-consciously poetic conception of meaning, he constructs a modern attitude of faithless faith and a deeply personal account of how to live an ethical life in a modern, secular context. The text is a series of meditations on what Wilde's phrase "everything to be true must become a religion" (3) might mean in our contemporary political world. This "experiment" begins after the death of God, and stems from the need to address and to try to remedy the contemporary "dilemma of politics and belief" (3). Overall, Critchley has written an incredibly creative and engaging text, well grounded in both contemporary scholarly debate and canonical philosophical literature. It propounds an infinitely demanding ethics through a call not only to political subjectivity but also to an ontology of love.

The text can only be read as a continuation of Critchley's previous work *Infinitely Demanding*, which attempts to address and remedy a "philosophy [that] begins in disappointment" (ID1). In this earlier text, he identifies "religions and politics" as the two most urgent manifestations of this "taxonomy of disappointment" (ID2), which clearly lays the groundwork for this second text. Indeed, *Faith of the Faithless* itself lacks clearly stated definitions of the terms "ethical" or "infinite demand," which forces the reader to rely heavily upon this earlier text for clarification. Critchley continues this earlier project by responding to this ethical demand with the notion of a faith that "does not give up on truth, but transfigures its meaning" (3) into a "faith for the faithless." Relying largely on Rousseau, his general goal over these texts is not only to "arrest [the] slide" of political life "into demotivated cynicism," but also to create an artificial "motivating and authorizing faith which, while not reducible to a specific context, might be capable of forming solidarity in a locality" (4).

The text also situates itself in the lively contemporary scholarly discussion about secularism and the "return of religion." This debate exists among scholars as diverse as Talal Asad (2003), Judith Butler (2011), Charles Taylor (2007), Jürgen Habermas (2010), Hent de Vries and Laurence Sullivan (2006), and Slavoj Žižek (2000–2012), to name only a few. Critchley also relies heavily upon Heidegger, Rousseau, Kant, and, I shall argue later, implicitly upon Nietzsche. As we shall see, his foray into these debates provides some of the most engaging and creative parts of this text. Furthermore, such a debate is quite timely, for as he explains, "[s]omehow, we seem to have passed from a secular age, which we were ceaselessly told was post-metaphysical, to a new situation in which political action seems to

flow directly from metaphysical conflict” (8). However, Critchley questions whether we must now “either defend a version of secularism or quietly accept the slide into some form of theism? This book refuses such an either/or option” (8). Instead, he attempts to create a third way, creating a political and ethically responsible attitude of faithless faith that is consciously self-chosen, with symbols and meaning purely of “my own creating” (4) without relying on an external God. This, in his argument, is thus more rigorous, and “arguably truer” than traditional belief, as it relies only upon itself to “proclaim itself into being at each instant without [the] guarantees or security” provided by “creedal dogma” or “the institution of the church” (18). Such a faithless faith requires a constant and active self-creation, and thus is far more subjectively ethical than the passive acceptance of an external faith system.

The text is structured in “four historical and philosophical investigations into the dangerous interdependence of politics and religion” (8), which he argues are not necessarily united, but instead are “relatively self-contained” (20). The first, Chapter Two, investigates Rousseau’s argument for a civil religion, in order to “bind together a polity and ensure that its citizens will take an active interest in the process of collective legislation that constitutes a self-determining political life” (9). Of particular interest is his argument that a society of “the festival is just the presence to itself of the people in the process of its enactment” (56). The basis of his argument is a radically individual conception of self-creation, which he explains is both “diagnostic and normative”(10) to create a “supreme fiction.” This “fiction of the absolute...would be a fiction that we know to be a fiction and yet in which we believe nonetheless” (93). This is comparable to Kant’s poetic truth that shows “the radical dependency” of our systems of thought upon “the creative, ultimately imaginative activity of the subject” (91). In addition to a reflection upon subjectivity and the origins of this fiction, Critchley explores questions of sovereignty and the creation and origin of political subjects as a body.

Chapter Three examines the notions of original sin in politics, and is most notable for the dualism he establishes between John Gray’s “political realism” and Carl Schmitt’s “state authoritarianism.” If politics are needed by humans to defend themselves from their own sinful nature, then Schmitt’s concepts of dictatorship are justified. Similarly, Gray’s “passive nihilism” argues that due to our sinful nature, nothing can be done, so we should retreat to mysticism, poetry, pleasure, and the “politics of the least worst.” Any further action only “momentarily stav[es] off the threat of meaninglessness” (114).

Critchley sets up this rigid dualism in order to then argue that there is a third path, that of an “ethical neo-anarchism, in which anarchist practices of political organization are coupled with an infinitely demanding subjective ethics of responsibility” (117). While his conception of this attitude of an “ethics of responsibility” is fascinating and richly rewarding, the text lacks a sustained

examination of what this would look like in practice. His examination of the historical and mystical Movement of the Free Spirit and the evisceration of the self is interesting, but offers little suggestion of relevant or contemporary practice, except pointing vaguely toward an attitude of love. Indeed, it seems that much of Critchley's argument can be summarized as simply that of an ethical attitude of love and responsibility, with the details to be worked out later.

Furthermore, the somewhat simplistic dualism established between Gray and Schmitt not only relies heavily upon and repeats his previous examinations of "active and passive nihilism" in *Infinitely Demanding*, but also seems to neglect its obvious origins in Nietzsche's notion of "active" and "passive" nihilism in *The Will to Power* (22–23). Indeed, his "active nihilism" mirrors what Nietzsche describes as the totalitarian urge of "a violent force of destruction" (*WP* 23), which in Critchley's words seeks "to destroy the world and bring another into being" (*ID* 5). "Passive Nihilism," or "the weary nihilism that no longer attacks; its most famous form, Buddhism" (*WP* 23) parallels Gray's interest in Taoism and Nietzsche's critique of "European Buddhism," which Critchley does cite (115). Indeed, the entire notion of a self-willed supreme fiction, poetic but therefore affirmative, echoes Nietzsche's own solution to these two forms of nihilism. Bernard Reginster's (2006) text *The Affirmation of Life* could have been helpful in this context. Critchley does acknowledge that the "philosophical task set by Nietzsche and followed by many others in the Continental tradition is how to respond to nihilism, or better, how to resist nihilism" (*ID* 2), but then does not explicitly rely on his thought to any extensive degree after that. Instead, Critchley seems to evade using Nietzsche, instead relying on Kant for the aesthetic and poetic notion of creative fiction. He does not justify why such obvious reliance is unmentioned, but perhaps should, in order to explain why his solution is not simply a recapitulation of Nietzsche's proposed revaluation of values.

Perhaps, however, Critchley is tiptoeing around Nietzsche because his next meditation begins a dense but provocative reading of Heidegger and Paul, which roots authenticity in an "affirmation of weakness and impotence" (14). Critchley might be avoiding tackling the jarring discord between Nietzsche's affirmative strength and this Heideggerian emphasis on weakness. In his examination of Heidegger's use of Paul, he explores how the human being is "defined by an experience of enactment" (14), and the self must "proclaim itself into existence in a situation of crisis where what is called for is a decisive political intervention" (13). Emphasizing Heidegger's "affirmation of weakness" (181) and the "orientation of the self towards something that exceeds oneself" (182), Critchley continues his explorations of original sin, locating the self in a sense of debt. While this emphasis on weakness and debt make sense as the foundation of an ethics of radical responsibility, unfortunately, the lingering residue of original sin can leave a bad taste in readers' mouths.

Furthermore, a reader is left to wonder why the only possible conception of faith must necessarily be Christian, and cannot escape this sense of original sin. Even though Rousseau's appeal to Voltaire stated that "there should be a catechism of the citizen, analogous to the articles of Christian faith"(9), Critchley's solution could have been greatly enhanced by considering other notions of religion as a way of life, especially the poststructuralist Judaism of Jacques Derrida or Judith Butler. An engagement with literature such as Caputo's (1997) *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* could have provided an excellent avenue for investigation that does not have to re-create a baggage-ridden neo-Christian faith.

As compensation for these frustrations, Chapter Five begins the most lively and engaging part of the text, as Critchley enters the debate around Benjamin's notion of violence. With a nod to Judith Butler, he examines Levinas and the inherent fragility of the notion of ethical and divine violence. Particularly interesting is his engagement with "the neighbour" as a threat to and violence toward the "autonomy of the self" (223). This is especially fascinating when read alongside Reinhard, Santner, and Žižek's (2006) debates on the subject. Critchley turns the absolute command "thou shall not kill" into a "plumb line" or "rule of thumb"—a model but no longer a blanket command to be followed blindly (221-227). Indeed, he explains, ethical "action is guided by taking a decision in a situation that is strictly undecidable, and where responsibility consists in the acceptance of an ineluctable double bind" (221). This critique of "simple-minded, blanket denunciations" (18) leads back to his long-standing debate with Žižek. In a brilliant retort, Critchley the patient parent places the angry teenager Žižek on a couch and calmly explains that totalizing demands are the demands of an immature, perfectionist quietism. This naïve stance demands "all or nothing" solutions, fantasizes about glorious violence, and refuses to acknowledge the intricate nuances of a political reality that does not always adhere exactly to an obsessive, black and white and perfectly tidy theoretical stance. Instead, Critchley advocates a more mature attitude of ethics, which would allow varied, situation-specific, and effective responses that actually contribute to the "concrete struggles in which we are engaged" (18). Such a short summary cannot do justice to what is an incredibly witty, fascinating, and timely chapter, and which allows the reader to really enter the debate with Žižek in a balanced manner. Critchley's text is worth reading for this chapter alone.

The text ends with love as the motivating force for this ethical politics. Critchley presents a parable to neatly return to his poignant introductory note that "when it comes to the political question of what might motivate a subject to act in concert with others, rationality alone is insufficient" (19). Instead, in a world that seems to have wholeheartedly returned to religion, it only seems fair that an ethic of resistance also utilize the tools of passion, emotion, and belief—an argument that also resonates with Critchley's critique of Žižek. To adopt this loving attitude willingly

is, in Critchley's argument, a stronger, more rigorous, and more ethically demanding action. This affirmative stance unites his deeply personal, highly engaging, and compelling account of a post-Christian ethics and a faith for the faithless.

Works Cited

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The Early Text of the New Testament.

Charles E. Hill and Michael J. Kruger (eds.). Oxford: OUP, 2012.
 ISBN: 9780199566365. Pp. xiv + 483.
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According to the introduction ("In Search of the Earliest Text of the New Testament"), the editors state that the main goal of this volume is "to provide an inventory and some analysis of the evidence available for understanding the pre-fourth-century period of the transmission of the NT materials" (2). The book is divided into three main sections: (1) "The Textual and Scribal Culture of Early Christianity"; (2) "The Manuscript Tradition"; and (3) "Early Citation and Use of New Testament Writings."

The essays in the first section are devoted to various topics concerning the literary culture of early Christianity, with essays on "The Book Trade in the Roman Empire" (Harry Y. Gamble), "Indicators of 'Catholicity' in Early Gospel Manuscripts" (Scott Charlesworth), "Manuscripts and the Sociology of Early Christian Reading" (Larry Hurtado), and "Early Christian Attitudes toward the Reproduction of Texts" (Michael J. Kruger). The second section is comprised of essays that are more specifically focused on the evaluation of individual manuscripts of the early papyri (and a few early parchments) of the Gospels (Tommy Wasserman, Peter M. Head, Juan Hernández Jr., Juan Chapa), Acts (Christopher Tuckett), Paul (James R. Roysse), the Catholic Epistles (J. K. Elliott), and Revelation (Tobias