



LJMU Research Online

Spargo, TEM

Agape and Ecstasy: considering post-secular orientations

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/631/>

Article

Citation (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

Spargo, TEM (2013) Agape and Ecstasy: considering post-secular orientations. Argument & Critique (1).

LJMU has developed [LJMU Research Online](#) for users to access the research output of the University more effectively. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LJMU Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain.

The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of the record. Please see the repository URL above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information please contact researchonline@ljmu.ac.uk

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/>

‘Agape and Ecstasy: considering post-secular orientations.’

Dr Tamsin Spargo

Reader in Cultural History, Liverpool John Moores University t.spargo@ljmu.ac.uk

Keywords:

Post-secular, queer, identity, sexuality, foundationalism, fundamentalism, post-structuralism, orientation.

Biographical Note:

Tamsin Spargo is Reader in Cultural History at Liverpool John Moores University. Her books include *The Writing of John Bunyan* (1997), *Foucault and Queer Theory* (1999), *Reading the Past: Literature and History* (2000), and *Wanted Man: The Forgotten Story of an American Outlaw* (2004). She was Director of the School of Media, Critical and Creative Arts from 2002 to 2010, has taught literature, cultural history, and creative writing and is a Visiting Professor at the University of Malaya.

‘Agape and Ecstasy: considering post-secular orientations.’

Abstract:

This paper addresses issues of contemporary sexual and religious identity and orientation through an exploration of the unexpected compatibility of post-secular and queer theories. It brings together work by theologians and queer theorists including Ahmed, Althaus-Reid, Butler, and Žižek to suggest that the two concepts of agape and ecstasy may signal ways of thinking beyond the resurgent foundationalisms, both religious and scientific, that have distinguished the early twenty-first century.

‘We found this fellow perverting the nation.’

(Luke 23.2)

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:

Praise him.

(Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘Pied Beauty’)

I am writing this essay in my study. This space of writing has, in all the houses where I have patiently reconstructed it, been one of the places where I have felt most at home, but it has recently been making me feel uneasy. It is, I think, a matter of disorientation. My study contains, among other things: a large fading lithograph of the ascension of the Virgin Mary; several bibles, and more nineteenth-century editions of the works of John Bunyan; a rather sticky devotional candle depicting Christ’s head crowned with thorns; twin ceramic puppets from New Mexico—a devil and a skeleton—with legs on springs; and a cross carved from bone containing a peep-show transparency of the battles of the Great War. These objects frame and inform my work and my identity. I have transported them time and again, recreated

this scene, with its props, in moves from apartment to house to bigger house, for more than half my life. It has always made me feel at home, reflected facets of my identity. So why does this bricolage of the possibly kitsch, once-devotional, and sentimentally-significant objects that have acted as drag anchors for my sense of self now make me feel anxious?

The answer is, in part, that I am experiencing a nostalgia for a stage of my own life that coincided with, and was shaped by, a postmodernity that has, if not passed (for how, to be precise, could it?) then changed. These objects must now be viewed in a global context where their meanings have shifted in a dramatic fashion.

When I consider my study, I think of Sara Ahmed's words (2006:9) as she feels her way to an understanding of orientation: '[H]omes are effects of the histories of arrival'. Like Ahmed, I have always disliked the packing but loved the unpacking, the reassembling of my 'things', the objects and their effects as they spark my recognition, my understanding of what is familiar. In my case, in my space, this includes the symbols and texts of Christianity with which, and to which, I have an uneasy relationship.

My study is indeed the effect of my own history of arrival in the twenty-first century, but is it also a point of departure, of thinking differently? What does it mean when academics across the world re-engage with the religious, with new ways of thinking about faith and love in dangerous times? Ahmed's exploration of orientation focuses mainly, although not exclusively, on the sexual, and I note the interplay of sexuality and religion in my study. It is not unusual in its juxtaposition of the sacred and the sexual. In the cultural production of postmodernism and the political activities that marked postmodernity in the 1980s and 90s, the combination of sex and religion figured repeatedly even as the influence and impact of the latter on the lives of Western subjects was declared, in mainstream sociological studies and more widely in the media, to be waning or marginal (Hunt, 2005, McLennan, 2010:3-20 and Philpott, 2002:66-95.)

In the late twentieth century popular culture was suffused with references to the religious and the sexual, often together, ranging from kitsch objects, like those in my study, to art and action whose apparent desecration of religious symbols tested the limits of public and legal toleration, from Madonna's 'can't keep away' play with Catholicism to the equally playful, but politically motivated, activities of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. While religion seemed to occupy an ever-diminishing space among the academic disciplines, and its combination with the sexual was apparently a collision of remote, if not antithetical, themes, postmodern play with the religious and the sexual was a marker of the continuing influence of religious culture on our desires, pleasures, and identities. In the cycle of economic boom and bust that formed part of the postmodern context, we consumed images and hosts that promised the transubstantiation of a presence we had ostensibly disavowed.

But why? If we had disavowed the idea of the transcendent when we rejected the metaphysics of presence, then why the need for this transgressive play? And now, when the playtime seems to be over, is the renewed analytical return to the religious something that may be worth taking seriously in the new(ish) millennium?

One popular interpretation of the fashion for religion in the postmodern age was that it was another form of consumerism, a pick-and-mix choice of analgesic or tonic for the melancholia or ennui attendant on the loss of grand narratives to guide and shape our lives. It is certainly not hard to see my objects as coming from what the sociologists Stark and Bainbridge called the ‘supermarket of faiths: received, jazzed-up, home spun, restored, imported and exotic’ (Stark, Sims & Bainbridge, 1985: 437).

But, unlike the seekers of spiritual value or meaning whose syncretic and selective mixes—a shot of Shinto, a twist of Tao to enliven a Baptist base—seemed to mirror the eclectic and fusion modes of global capitalism, I had retained an uneasy interest in the Christianity of my childhood; not as a saving faith, but as a discourse and set of practices, many associated with an ethical orientation towards others, individually and collectively, that had been part of my construction. Having dismissed it in my adolescence in favour of explicitly political commitments, I later returned to religious texts as the material of cultural history, but I found myself intrigued by the persistence of liberation theology in its battles with the regimes of right and left alike and by a discourse that challenged the apparently inexorable domination of global market forces. My changing and ever-more conscious interest in religion could be seen, if a little reductively, to mirror the wider development of a more focused critical analysis of religions, religiosity, and the religious in the academy that, in turn, says a great deal about the changed priorities and modalities of our current intellectual, cultural and social condition and the need for a renegotiated ethics in our relationships one with another.

This essay considers two types of anti-foundationalist thinking about the challenges of being different in the world as we move past the postmodern. Although post-secular and queer theory are portmanteau terms to describe a diversity of work, both are conditional on, and have the potential to test to their limits, some of the post-structuralist understandings and theories of identity, meaning, and being that distinguished late-twentieth-century critical thinking. Both fields share a commitment, varying from practitioner to practitioner, to address both what we might call the philosophical dimensions of their subjects and the quotidian, or historical, realities of being. As such, and in dialogue together, I think the post-secular and queer theory offer some of the most compelling ways of thinking about our current condition. Neither depends on the other, but, I would argue, each can be productively tested, and stretched, by such an encounter.

Back to the postmodern

One strand of postmodern play with religion was clearly parodic, playing up the camp, the kitsch, to its limit. Sometimes the effect was comic, to be sure, but the parodic, as we know, is often serious. As Georges Bataille commented, ‘the world is purely parodic,[...]each thing seen is a parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form’ (Bataille, 1985:5) and applied to Balthazar in Loughlin (1999:143-162). Much of the parodic play with the religious was not only serious in intent, but pointed to the fragility or even illusory nature of the foundations on which the prohibitions and injunctions of religious culture had been built. But was this twisting and turning of religion against itself a rejection?

In fact, while religion was largely ignored by mainstream academics in the humanities outside theology and religious studies departments, believers kept on believing: across the globe fundamentalist movements in the main Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Islam and Judaism offered new, or revived, certainties to counter the anxieties, losses, and traumas of the political and social context. These versions of each religion tended to be ever more exclusive and restrictive in their definitions of what and who was, and could be, acceptable, faithful, or saved. Those excluded or marginalised by virtue of, say, sexuality, within some interpretations of the founding texts of their religion, found no place within the new movements. In the era of the born-again, the jihadist, and the ultra-orthodox, was the relationship between religion's improper subjects and faith over or was it just entering a new phase?

Religion was still a matter of vital importance to many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (hereafter LGBT) people. There has always been a queer take on religion. In part this has been through critique of the places allotted within or by a particular discursive or institutional version of a given religion to adherents on the basis of their sexuality but not always by rejection of the religion, or faith, itself. Some of the art and discourse of queer religion undoubtedly influenced the postmodern bricolage in my study, and offered ways of sustaining, with a difference, those who wanted, or needed, to hold onto a faith that did not always seem to want them. Queer theorists have also, as I will suggest at the end of this study, moved beyond creative transgression and parody and offered a revision of a queered inclusive religion that may offer a way past the impasse of conventional religious and political foundationalism.

9/11

If the events of 9/11 were not the sole catalyst for renewed attention in the academy to the religious, they were certainly a cue to regard such work as of greater significance and urgency. In the third millennium, as Rosi Braidotti notes, 'religion is back with a vengeance,' and, within a broadly defined Western humanist tradition, fear of and nostalgia for the theistic have swept through quiet studies in a time of perpetual war. (Rosi, 2008:2).

One immediate impact of the reminder in 2001 that for some at least religious faith could provide a foundation, a ground, for violent activism, was a reconsideration of the assertions of the end of grand, or meta-, narratives as legitimating forces that, as articulated by Jean-François Lyotard (1987) in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, had constituted one of the most influential epistemological stances of postmodernity. It would, of course, be a crude reduction of Lyotard's analysis to assert that it is invalidated by evidence of the continued hold of metanarratives, but the events of 9/11 sharply focused attention on the continued meaningfulness of religious orientation for some subjects, and exploded the idea that the world was progressing steadily, albeit at varying paces, towards secularism.

This changed global condition was given a name: the 'postsecular,' a term coined by Jürgen Habermas (2001) in a speech given in acceptance of the 2001 Peace Prize at the Frankfurter Book Fair. The term has since been adopted to name a field or mode of analysis and theory that, like the postmodern, both appeals to a disciplinarily diverse range of thinker and writers and divides them, as well as their readers,

according to their understanding of its status. It also marks a new set of priorities in the social and cultural critique of contemporary life.

New Foundations for Old?

After the wave of condemnations of fundamentalism, within both Islam and the other Abrahamic religions, Christianity and Judaism, a different form of foundationalism was given a new lease of life in the media, one based on critiques of the partial or distorted textual interpretations by religious adherents and analysis of the political imperatives driving them. Since 9/11, a number of commentators and scientists, including Richard Dawkins (2006), Daniel C. Dennett (2006), Sam Harris (2004), and Christopher Hitchens (2007), espousing a model of progressive, scientific rationalism, have launched scathing attacks on religion itself. While what has been described as the New Atheism is not a conscious movement or alliance, those identified with the label share a rejection of the hitherto dominant model of secular toleration of the religious, presenting religion as a dangerous delusion or an irrational, emotional attachment we need, as a species, to get over. (Wolf, 2007) Rigorous critique of religion and cogent argument for secular thinking have not been supplanted by the New Atheism, but in the decade since 9/11 popular discourse has been dominated by those who, as Greg Epstein (in McGrath, 2011), the secularist, humanist chaplain of Harvard University, commented, seek 'to shame and embarrass people away from religion, browbeating them about the stupidity of belief in a bellicose god'.

The reactions to this reassertion of a rather possessive model of rationalism have been mixed. The attractions of a position that could denounce both the apparent barbarities of aggressive religion and the absurdities of postmodern faith in a nebulously defined metaphysics are obvious. Public fear and anger, underpinned by anxiety at the loss of the familiar grand narratives of the West, provided a ready audience for a particular scientific discourse that had hitherto been subject to its own postmodern, self-reflexive scrutiny within the scientific community as well as from others. The challenge posed by aggressive secularism has also, paradoxically, encouraged renewed dialogue between different faiths and among those suspicious of an apparent return to a discredited Enlightenment understanding of being and society. Others have been drawn back to other foundations in pre-postmodern thought. The critic Terry Eagleton (2009: 2-3) has written a vehement critique of what he calls the 'Ditchkins' approach to religion. Yet Eagleton captures, in its reductive, syncretic quality, what he sees as similar shortcomings in his subjects' style of argument, himself seems to be attracted by a partly nostalgic idea of the pre-postmodern, even pre-modern, in which Christianity, understood in radical political terms, stands in the place of the lost Marxist grand narrative. His version of Christianity can be seen as offering a foundation for political action and belief.

Some contemporary work on the religious may, then, be read, against the grain or not, as calling on a pre-postmodern way of thinking and viewing human being, but there are other approaches that continue the more open ways of thinking that characterised postmodernity, including the theorist who has, arguably, become the most celebrated, and sometimes controversial, European critic of the contemporary era, Slavoj Žižek. Žižek, who combines psychoanalytic theory, film analysis, and exploration of both philosophical and political contexts and traditions, had addressed religious themes before, but in the third millennium he has published a number of

texts, alone and with others, that have made him one of the best-known contributors to the resurgence of the religious in critical and cultural theory. Žižek's position bears some similarities to Eagleton's in its political ambitions and in their mutual opposition to the vague spiritualism of postmodernity and to aggressive atheism, but while the latter seems more interested in the possibility of recovering a lost revolutionary potential in a historically-situated Christianity, Žižek's psychoanalytic perspective brings him into closer dialogue with late-postmodern and third-millennial philosophy and theology.

Žižek could be seen as continuing, and modifying, a post-structuralist or post-liberal tradition that had turned its attention, before 2001, to matters of religion, following, although not always in temporal succession, the intriguing 'religious turn' ascribed to Jacques Derrida and other philosophers in the 1990s (Janicaud & Courtine, 2001). Derrida's (2002) influential essay 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundations of Authority' had countered accusations that deconstruction was unconcerned with morality, justice and law and, in holding justice to be an ungrounded promise in some respects infinite, he had surprised at least some of his readers by addressing issues of religion.

There is not enough space here to explore the opposed readings of Derrida's stance on religion. The strong reading offered within the dominant strand of continental philosophy of religion is that Derrida engages with the religious not from a position of faith or to promote faith, but from a political and philosophical perspective (Crockett, 2010:299-315). The writers and thinkers who are exploring religion within the continental 'tradition' and who both critique and contribute to postmodern and post-liberal analysis and comment can be seen as exploring the religious from a standpoint that is, like Derrida's, political but not foundationalist. Writers from Žižek (2001) to Alain Badiou (2003), Giorgio Agamben (1998), Gianni Vattimo (1996) and Rorty & Vattimo (2005), among others, search for ways of countering some of the effects of the postmodern economy, financially and culturally, including the apparent hegemony of the global market, dominated by multi-national commercial interests. But, unlike those whose turn to religion or insistence on atheism constitutes a return, or dream of return, to the pre-postmodern, they maintain and develop the speculative and anti-foundationalist modes of the philosophical enquiry and analysis that characterised the postmodern.

These thinkers, working in an academy largely defined as secular, have been in dialogue and sometimes worked in collaboration with theologians, identified as members of faith groups, as believers, albeit understood in a post-postmodern sense. In 2009 Žižek collaborated with one of the leading figures of what is known as 'Radical Orthodoxy', John Milbank, in *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (2009), which presents a debate between their understandings of and approaches to the theological within a global capitalist economy. Radical Orthodoxy is a Christian theological movement that opposes dominant secularism and renewed atheism through adopting and developing post-liberal and post-structural philosophy and theory rather than rejecting them in the name of a re-presented foundationalism. (Shakespeare, 1999). As its oxymoronic name suggests, it is a movement that defies easy categorisation in conventional political taxonomies.

One of the most accessible representatives of Radical Orthodoxy, from a non-theological perspective, is Graham Ward. Ward (2003) is a Christian theologian whose dialogues, direct and implicit, with some of the non-Christian explorers of the religious, from Agamben to Žižek, have helped to bring their interrogative force to bear on his faith even as his theological perspective has enabled him to bring their philosophical questions to different audiences.¹ Ward is among those theologians who argue that, if the renewed attention to faith is not to collapse back into acceptance of the discursive hierarchies of theologies and practices in organised religion, it must keep them in the foreground. A renewed theology has to be, in Sara Maitland's words, 'a theology that leads to and sustains an anthropology and an ethics which affirm difference as something desirable', and, if, more radically still, as Ward himself has noted, '[t]he truth of a religion is a claim constituted in its very impossibility', belief, and acting in the name of belief, must be understood as defined by its unfounded condition (2005:5).

It is this double emphasis on orientation towards difference or alterity and on the radical impossibility of grounded or founded truth claims, both strong features of postsecular thinking, that I will connect later with the priorities and approaches of queer theory.

Changing the World in the Name(s) of God

While not all contemporary theological work is left-of-centre in its political affiliation, much new Christian theology is, like the liberation theology of late modernity, explicitly opposed to the global capitalist market and its effects on individuals and communities. In this it shares common ground with at least some contemporary Islamic critiques of the combination of market and imperialist forces that have contributed to the growth of both defensive and aggressive forms of fundamentalist Islamism. I do not claim any expert knowledge of current thinking beyond the Judeo-Christian strands of post-secular thinking, but it is clear that some work by Islamic scholars, such as Hamid Dabashi, is engaged both in presenting a critique of the economic, political, and cultural forces that have produced the restrictive, and deathly, oppositions of the West and its Others, and in developing new anti-foundationalist ways of understanding the potential roles of religions and their believers that move beyond the pluralism and relativism of postmodernity. (Dabashi, 2008 in contrast to the more conventional model offered by Tariq Ramadan 2010).

Parallel explorations within different religious movements, and associated philosophical traditions, seem to be reaching towards something more than the pluralism and relativism whose limitations frustrated many who wanted change at the end of the second millennium. I believe, using that word advisedly with all its speculative and unfounded force, that postsecular thinking, by drawing our attention to the risks of premature foreclosure, may enable us to return, refreshed, to the possibilities of post-structuralist thinking and analysis and to their relevance in matters political and ethical as well as epistemological. It seems to me that both philosophically and politically it would be a mistake to allow disillusionment with the socio-economic dimensions of the postmodern condition to encourage us to adopt a version of atheism, as opposed to agnosticism, that rejects the religious as a mode of orientation.

While the model of spirituality that seemed to thrive in the postmodern era appears to have fitted all too well with the processes, drives and urges of a consumption-based global market economy, openness to the religious, understood differently from the way in which many of us have been brought up to understand it, may offer new ways of exploring our relationships with the world and with each other. If we see a certain form of desire as the manufactured, self-centred, yet never fulfilled lack created by market forces that sustain the inequalities that fuel the threats to all our safety, then perhaps it is time to look at two different forces. Wearied of, and by, desire, is it time to consider instead what I think of as the companion contingent orientations, rather than forces or foundations, of being differently in the post-postmodern condition: agape and ecstasy?

Agape

In Žižek's most provocatively titled work *The Fragile Absolute, or Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* he explores the concept of agape. Agape is one of several ancient Greek words translated as "love," and the one traditionally used in Christian writing to describe love of others, from the love of God for humankind to that of an individual for others. This is not the place to explore the nuances of the term's use in early-Christian and later writings, but it would not be misleading to consider the term as often bearing traces of self-sacrifice and, in its sense of willed and unconditional giving, as connected with the term 'charity' often used in English translations before that word was delimited to its modern commonplace meaning.

Žižek takes the term and considers its currency in an attempt to challenge a literal and libidinal economy which has, in the words of one of his chapter headings in *The Fragile Absolute*, 'Coke as objet petit a' (2001:37). Žižek's opposition to 'global capitalist machinery' is evident (2001:56), as is his rejection of 'New Age neo-paganism', as he describes postmodern spirituality (2001:91). He writes of the radical potential of this model of love to break the dialectic of the Law and its transgression, as manifest in the multiple dimensions (economic, political, libidinal) of the contemporary economy:

As every true Christian knows, love is the work of love – the hard and arduous work of repeated 'uncoupling' in which, again and again, we have to disengage ourselves from the inertia that constrains us to identify with the particular order we were born into. Through the Christian work of compassionate love, we discern in what was hitherto a disturbing foreign body, tolerated and even modestly supported by us so that we were not too bothered by it, a subject, with its crushed dreams and desires – it is this Christian heritage of 'uncoupling' that is threatened by today's 'fundamentalisms', especially when they proclaim themselves Christian. (Žižek, 2001:119-120).

Theoretically, the notion of agape offers a way of formulating an attitude to others, and the Other, worth exploring. And it may be that in Christianity, as in other faiths, this potential attitude is encoded and ready to be acted on. But in the world of organised and practised religion, across the globe, things are different. Post-secular thinking may helpfully re-open questions about fundamental difference that had been prematurely answered by resurgent rationalism, but the practices and discourses of religion continue to maintain distinctions and hierarchies that deny and damage. In the context of these realities, can agape survive? If post-secular thinking, or the

religious turn, is to offer more than the intellectual ‘salvation’ of a philosophical tradition, it has to address the lives of men and women. It is, I think, in this dimension that queer theory has much to offer in the re-evaluation and reconfiguration of the religious in the third millennium.

The philosophical strand of post-secular thinking is open to the criticism that it elides or effaces historical difference, the contextual contingencies of timed place, but some historicist studies have produced insights that have contributed to provocative reviewing of the religious. In his study *Queer Fish: Christian Unreason from Darwin to Derrida* John Schad argued that, historically, in those societies that became, at least apparently, predominantly secular, a faith, displaced from a central position, might find a different aspect of its ‘disposition’ thrown into relief:

As unbelief became the norm among not only the intellectuals but ‘the masses’, so Christianity became, in some senses and in some instances, marginal and othered. Christianity’s ancient, inherent disposition to unreason was redoubled by a new, cultural positioning as the other of secular modernity. It was now—or rather, now and again—something eccentric, odd, even queer (Schad:2004:2-3).

This queerness, or oddness, or otherness, if seen as central to the mode of religious thinking or being, interests me. It connects, for me at least, with the notion of ecstasy, of standing outside, whether outside of social norms, or of one’s self; it also connects with the development of new ethical models in queer theory in the third millennium.

It is in the ethical domain that the fiercest battles are being fought within the Christian church across the world, and the status and place of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians is the subject of the most heated, and frequently vituperative, exchanges in formal and informal debates. In the United Kingdom the established Church of England, led by a scholarly liberal, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, is trapped in what one Anglican thinker, Giles Fraser, has described as a Hegelian dialectic whose accommodating inclusivity means ‘it can’t resist the bigotry, sexism and homophobia that is currently making a nasty comeback in the Anglican pulpit’ (2007:49). Apparent advances towards full acceptance of gay and lesbian Christians in the ministry or in the church have, when sections of the worldwide church threaten to break away in protest, turned to limited toleration, encapsulated in the church’s 1991 paper *Issues in Human Sexuality* which, as Fraser notes, insists that Bishops sign up to a ‘love the sinner hate the sin’ line, regardless of the fact that many Christians ‘don’t think it’s a sin’ (2007:117).

Failure to meet the challenge of sustaining an ethics without recourse to the establishment and policing of norms and the normal, of hierarchies of more and less virtuous or sinful subjects, limits the potential of any religion to include all members, and respond to the needs, of a diverse society. Here, I think, queer theory has much to offer. In the understanding of power and resistance, taken from the work of Michel Foucault, as adapted by, among others, Judith Butler (1990, 2004, 2005) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990, 1999), queer theory has the tools for exploring the instantiation of normative identities and practices and, in its performative operations, can challenge and unsettle the accepted and expected (Spargo, 1999). It is from the performative that the, for me, provocative and helpful idea of the ecstatic

has been developed. Initially, the notion of the queerness of faith and of subjectivity may seem a mere provocation, but if so, it may be one that is needed.

Ecstasy

The early phase of queer theorising, commentary and critique, which swiftly turned its attention to the subjects and objects of a multiplicity of academic disciplines, paid limited attention to religion. This seems strange, given the role played by religious discourse as one of the earliest contexts for the production of sexualized subjectivities, however proscribed, and, in the Christian church at least, given its paradoxically rich structures of same-sex communities. To be sure, the focus of queer activism may have been on addressing the impact and reach of later medical and juridical discourses and their construction of norms, but from the mid-twentieth century the rise of Christian fundamentalism in the USA re-energised the negative discourses of unacceptable and supposedly scripturally proscribed sexual activities and identities (Jordan, 2007:563-575). Jordan identified a combination of the 'lingering disdain for religious topics in English-speaking, secular universities' and 'antireligious models that have governed so many strategies of queer activism from the late 1960s on', adding that 'neglect can even act out the theorist's need to forget a religious upbringing or to reverse an embarrassing conversion during adolescence' (Jordan, 2007:563). There are exceptions and LGBT critical engagement with religion is greater now than in the past but this is not the place for a survey of such work, (though one is provided by Wilcox, 2006).

What I want to signal is the contribution that queer theory, in its most philosophically radical sense, can make to the challenge of developing new ethical orientations that do not rest on foundations that exclude or marginalize. Thinking and writing from the position of a fractured or ecstatic identity that lies beneath and behind and before the illusion of completeness only fully available to the few in white, heteronormative societies, the queer subject is well (dis)placed to respond differently to the Other, and to others, and to provide a model for the possible positioning of the religious subject, for the believer with unfounded faith.

Judith Butler's work on performativity was key to the early development of queer theory, in its exploration of gender not as a given but as a performed (in a non-voluntarist sense) and unstable characteristic. In the third millennium, as we face the challenge of relating to those of different faith, her work, I believe, combines well with the notion of agape, outlined by Žižek, to offer a glimpse of a new ethical orientation or attitude. In more recent work, returning to analysis of Hegelian and post-Hegelian exploration of self and Other, Butler (2005) has explored the 'ecstatic' as applying to the limited self-understanding of the subject rather than of the Other and as being the condition of an ethical responsibility. Butler, having established the impossibility of a self, or subject, that is fully transparent to itself, because of the relationality that is constitutive of its being, considers this a resource not a limitation: 'I find that my very formation implicates the other in me, that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others' (Butler, 2005:84).

Butler's work, like Žižek's, is theoretically rigorous; we need the work of some other queer-identified academics to show the possibilities of applied ecstatic exploration. Jeffrey Q. McCune Jr' (2004:152), in 'Transformance: Reading the

Gospel in Drag,' recalls attending a drag performance in a Chicago bar where the diva Sapphire Blue performed a traditional gospel tune: 'In that moment I felt suspended in a liminal place, caught between my lifetime journey as a Christian and my experiences as a member of the Black gay community' (McCune, 2004:152). The essay explores McCune's 'internal dissonance', occasioned by the complex and contradictory context of the unexpected coincidence of sacred and secular, staging the reality of multiple, potentially incompatible, identities lived as one subjectivity (McCune, 2004:152).

Marcella Althaus-Reid, one of the foremost queer theologians, developed her 'theology from other contexts' precisely in order to address what she calls 'the cry' in the lives of sexual dissenters who 'go to gay bars with rosaries in their pockets' or 'make camp chapels of their living rooms' (or studies?) (2003:3). Althaus-Reid argues that 'it is necessary to facilitate the coming out of the closet of God by a process of theological queering', through the deliberate questioning of heterosexual and heterosexist thinking that has shaped our understanding of Christian theology and hermeneutics (2003:2). In her exploration of what she calls the 'Other side of God', she takes the divine into the territory of the excluded and marginalised, develops queer theological and hermeneutical strategies, and explores a notion of 'Queer holiness' that encompasses the lives of those in bisexual communities in South America as well as, with deliberate provocation, a God 'who has come out' (2003:4).

In the context-specific work of McCune (2004) and of Althaus-Reid (2003), both foundationalist understandings of identity and belief, and hierarchical structures of religious organisation are challenged, suggesting the possibilities of nuanced analysis within, as well as of, the religious. While queer-theoretical explorations of the religious offer no global manifesto for living ethically with the Other in religious or sexual terms, they do re-open questions about how we live differently, questions that resurgent rationalism and foundationalism have been closing down.

If current philosophical and theological extensions of post-structuralist and post-liberal philosophy can help to prevent post-secular thinking and argument from sinking back onto foundations, either religious or secular, then queer theory can test the limits of religious discourses that have sustained repressions and persecutions and help to develop contingent, ecstatic positions of resistance. Together, like *agape* and *ecstasy*, they have the potential to help us develop ways of thinking about, living with, and orienting ourselves towards faith and believers in our post-post-modern condition.

References

Agamben, G. 1998 *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press.

Ahmed, S. 2006 *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Althaus-Reid, M. 2003 *The Queer God*. London: Routledge.

- Badiou, A. 2003 *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier, Stanford University Press.
- Bataille, G. 1985 *Vision of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-39*, trans. Allan Stokel et al. University of Minnesota Press.
- Braidotti, R, 2008 *In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism*, *Theory Culture Society* 25:1.
- Butler, J. 1990 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. 2004 *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.
- Butler, J. 2005 *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press.
- Crockett, C. 2010 'The Plasticity of Continental Philosophy of Religion' in Smith, A. P. & Whistler, D. 2010 eds., *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars.
- Dabashi 2008 *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror*, New York, Transaction Publishers.
- Dawkins, R. 2006 *The God Delusion*. London: Black Swan.
- Dennett, D. C. 2006 *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. New York: Viking.
- Derrida, 'J. 2002 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority', in Anidjar, G. ed., *Acts of Religion*. London: Routledge.
- Derrida, J. & Vattimo, G. eds 1996 *Religion*. Stanford University Press.
- Eagleton, T. 2009 *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Fraser, G. 2007 *Christianity with Attitude*. Norwich: Canterbury Press.
- Habermas, J. 2011 'Faith and Knowledge', Frankfurter Book Fair, 15 October 2001. http://www.ucc.ie/social_policy/Habermas_Faith_and_knowledge_ev07-4_en.htm
- Harris, S. 2004 *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. New York: Norton.
- Hitchens, C. 2007 *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. London: Atlantic Books.

Hunt, S. 2005

Janicaud, D. & Courtine, J. F. 2001 *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Jordan, M. D. 2007 *Religion Trouble*, *GLQ*, 13;4;563-575.

Loughlin, G. 1999 *Erotics: God's Sex*, in Millbank, Pickstock, C & Ward, G. eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*. London: Routledge.

Lyotard, J. 1987 *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans., Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester University Press.

Maitland, S. 1995 *A Big-Enough God: Artful Theology*. London: Mowbray.

McCune, J. Q. Jr 2004 'Transformance: Reading the Gospel in Drag', *Journal of Homosexuality*. 46;3/4.

McGrath, A. 2011 *Sound and Fury of the New Atheists*' in 'Christians: Faith in the 21st Century', *The Times*, London, 29.4.

McLennan, G. 2010 *The Postsecular Turn*, *Theory Culture Society*, 27;3;3-20.

Milbank, J. Pickstock, C. & Ward, G. eds 1999 *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, London: Routledge.

Philpott, D. 2002 *The Challenge of September 11 to Secularism in International Relations*', *World Politics*, Oct. 55.

Ramadan, T. 2010 *The Quest for Meaning: Developing a Theory of Pluralism* London: Allen Lane.

Rorty, R. & Vattimo, G. 2005 *The Future of Religion*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Schad, J. 2004 *Queer Fish: Christian Unreason from Darwin to Derrida*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press.

Sedgwick, E. K. 1990 *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press.

Shakespeare, S. *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction*. London: SPCK.

Spargo, T. 1999 *Foucault and Queer Theory*. Cambridge: Icon Press.

Stark, R. & Bainbridge, W. S. 1985 *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ward, G. 2003 *True Religion*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wilcox, M. 2006 Outlaws or In-Laws? Queer Theory, LGBT Studies, and Religious Studies', *Journal of Homosexuality* 52.1/2.

Wolf, G. 2006 The Church of Non Believers, *Wired* 14.1.
<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/atheism/html>

Žižek, S. & Milbank, J. 2009 *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* London: MIT.

Žižek, S. 2001 *The Fragile Absolute, or Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* London: Verso.

Žižek, S. 2001 *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity.* Cambridge: MIT.