

*On What Could Quite Rightly Pass for a Fetish: Some Thoughts on Whether “Every Christian Should ‘Quite Rightly Pass for an Atheist’”*

by  
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Jon Stanley’s provocative piece “Why every Christian Should ‘Quite Rightly Pass for an Atheist’”<sup>1</sup> is notable for the way it facilitates a move beyond the reductionistic tendencies of rigid categorization as well as for the ways it begins to identify and resist the gods of our age. In these pursuits Stanley also seeks to spell out a Christianity that moves beyond the vulgar terms of dogmatic atheisms and theisms alike. In the first part of his essay, Stanley draws heavily upon Derridean insights, especially surrounding Derrida’s own claim that he could “quite rightly pass for an atheist.” Stanley appeals to Derrida’s phrase because of the ambivalence of its adverbial modifying clause, “quite rightly,” which supposedly resists any hard and fast classification. He emphasizes this phrase to suggest that Christians, along with Derrida, cannot be categorically pinned down because they quite rightly pass for atheists while also not quite passing for atheists. This exploration of Derrida’s thought serves as a propaedeutic for launching into cultural criticism where we attempt to break with “classification fever.” For Stanley, “classification fever” denotes an obsessive drive to categorize and reduce everything to rigidly set terms, and this fever has become a massive contagion within our culture as a means of domination through naming the other.

Stanley, then in the second part of his essay, implicitly extends the Derridean motif more deeply into the realm of cultural criticism by drawing on the example of early Christians who were deemed atheists in a certain sense within the Roman Empire because they did not bow to Caesar. He insightfully illustrates some of the subversive modes of practice of early Christians against the imperial logic of Rome, practices that won them the charge of atheism. Moreover, he suggests that we, as contemporary Christians, should also “authentically confess” to quite rightly passing for atheists in the qualified sense of the early Christians as we pursue similar ways of identifying and resisting the gods of our age. Stanley passionately urges us in this undertaking, writing: “What are the analogies to Roman emperor worship in our own historical moment? We must begin to analyze the reigning ‘gods of our age,’ those ideologies demanding our ultimate allegiance, and denounce them in sacrilegious fashion (indeed, in atheistic fashion) as the ‘idols of our time.’”<sup>2</sup>

Reclaiming something of the subversive core of Christianity in order to more radically challenge and transform our dominant social ideologies is of utmost importance for Christians today. Indeed, Stanley has done us a great favor in passionately articulating this urgent need, and I therefore stand with him in pursuing these concerns.

Yet I believe that such concerns could be more fruitfully pursued without an appeal to atheism or Derrida. I believe that, at times, Stanley obscures some of his best insights about the radicality of Christianity by placing too much emphasis on how it “quite rightly passes for atheism” and not enough emphasis on how it more significantly does “not quite” pass.

I concur with Stanley with regard to the basic thrust of his piece, but I want to claim that here

and now, in our historical moment, it is not really appropriate to pass for an atheist, not even with Derrida and the application of his ambivalent modifying clause. Such an appeal seems to confuse and muddle the urgent matter of determining how Christians should best identify classificatory fever and transform the gods of our age. For what if our current analogies to the Roman imperial logic and its pantheon reside in a deeply problematic form of modern atheism in which even Derrida remains complicit? If this proves to be true, then there is no usefulness in appealing to atheism or quite rightly passing for an atheist in our historical situation.

There is a common reading of the history of atheism as a progressive movement of sober negation, as a way of entering more nakedly and freely into the cold hard reality of life without illusions and myths. Such a reading tends to hold an inflated sense of the critical value of modern atheism, as if at its base it were the dangerously subversive yet honest and helpful suspicion of stilted conventions and their idols. However, this popular valorization chooses to ignore how a predominant form of modern atheism is deeply dependant upon and perpetuates an ideological, and therein idolatrous, construction—one that is itself not a progressive coming-of-age or sobering up but is instead a regressive maintaining of a rapacious pagan trajectory in the service of power.

I believe that this common reading of modern atheism needs to be more acutely challenged and overturned as we seek to identify and transform the ruling ideologies of our age. That is to say that I am taking up and moving forward with the critical task that Stanley has set forth of “analyzing the reigning ‘gods of our age,’ those ideologies demanding our ultimate allegiance, and denouncing them in sacrilegious fashion.”<sup>3</sup> But I will not suggest that this task is done in a qualified “atheistic fashion” because it will be a form of atheism itself that will be analyzed and highlighted as reigning over and preserving the gods of our age. In other words, I will argue that in denouncing contemporary ideologies and idolatries, a Christian should not pass for an atheist, just as the early Christians did not in any real sense pass for atheists. This is because an alternative reading, other than the commonly assumed one, of the main form of modern atheism can show that it runs more deeply at the base of an embedded, conservative ontology—carrying an ontological thread similar to the assumptions behind the Roman imperial logic—which legitimates the gods of the new imperial logic of the liberal nation-state and its late-capitalist market system. Thus, in resisting the pantheon of power that surrounds this imperial logic, as a Christian one must instead quite rightly pass for a Christian in this situation by emphasizing the difference of Christianity all the way down to its ontological core.

I am emphasizing this ontological<sup>4</sup> analysis of modern atheism because one must search out the ontological foundations of the position or worldview that one is engaging if one is to deepen its analysis and begin any process of possible contextualization. Here I will work in complement with, while deepening, the analysis that Stanley has begun, as such an analysis of ontologies was beyond the limited scope of his introductory endeavor. An analysis of Derrida’s ontology will also reveal that he is complicit with the entrenched atheistic ontology of the modern imperial logic to such a degree that even his ambivalent modifying clause is unable to salvage any radical or subversive value to passing for an atheist. Indeed, Derrida’s continuation of this ontological trajectory could be said to quite rightly pass for a fetish, as I will show. I do not seek to feverishly demonize Derrida but to substantially demonstrate his inherently conservative and pedestrian position and to thereby make room for other more radical voices that have been

overshadowed by Derrida's extended time in the sun—radical voices that might provide more fruitful opportunities for better facilitating Stanley's concerns.

### **Foundational Atheistic Assumptions and the Imperial Logic of Rome**

To begin, I will consider the atheistic core of Rome and how early Christians were by no means atheists. Although early Christians rejected the immanent gods of the Roman pantheon, gods who were attached to causal forces and caught up in the contest of blood and soil and violence, the early Christians only did so by way of their allegiance to a peculiar God—something of which the Romans were well aware.<sup>5</sup> The Christian God was peculiar because this God transcended the violent agon of deities (in antiquity “agon” designated a contest or struggle) by being utterly beyond, while at the same time taking on blood and soil in order to endure all violence in the Incarnation. Such a transcendence by incarnation showed another way of being that participates in the plenitude of an eternal love, a plenitude of eternal love that exceeds this order of violence, revealing it as false and temporary. This is not to say that early Christians viewed the violence of their world as unreal, for although they believed it to be ultimately false in a metaphysical sense, they nevertheless understood this agon to be a present and historical reality that was entrenched deep within the structure of human life thus making it appear to be the undeniable way things are.<sup>6</sup>

For the Romans, however, this order of power and violent competition was indeed the way that things were, even down to their metaphysical base. They held a view of reality that understood the being of the world as a disordered melee of conflicting forces that necessitated the use of counter violence through appeals to more powerful deities in order to stay this chaos and impose order upon it. Here we have the very pagan idea that order is won through the continual conquest or domination within the agon of chaotic forces—order could not be had without some measure of violence over another. Hence, the gods were continually at war. And here the imperial logic operates by way of an appeal to metaphysical violence as the way things are, even at the highest level of existence, in order to legitimate the sovereignty of state power as that sole counterforce that is able to maintain divine favor so as to control and regulate the conflictual arena. Supposedly justified coercion was then touted as the only way to prevent pandemonium and maintain imperial self-possession.<sup>7</sup>

The Roman metaphysical assumption about reality therefore included a divine realm beyond physical forces, but this assumption is more appropriately understood as a divine realm working in extension with competing physical forces. That is, competing physical forces were the result of competing deities, and therefore, violent competition was just as prevalent at the physical level as at the metaphysical level. Thus, while the Roman assumption about metaphysical reality ostensibly inscribed the physical order within a divine order, everything was nevertheless inscribed within a greater agonistic whole of what could only be the totalized sphere of immanent power and violence. At base, then, their understanding of reality ultimately assumed an immanent enclosure with no reference to something transcendently other than the violent competition between order and disorder, which implicated everything from the gods to basic elements. As I will illustrate later, modern ontology carries forth this assumption about reality as a totally enclosed arena of force, yet it carries this forward in a more blatantly reductionistic direction that makes no apparent attempt to inscribe reality within a divine, metaphysical order

beyond physics.

Deities within the Roman pantheon therefore corresponded merely to valorized immanent forces of conquest and order, and they were organized in such a way so as to buttress the legitimacy and divinity of Caesar's absolute power. Christians, by virtue of their unique God, were thus an absolute befuddlement to the Romans and their crude nationalistic theology of power. How could a god not be another power broker? How could this sect of people known as Christians deny the existence of what was commonly accepted as the battle of gods in their violent agon?

All would have been well in the Roman Empire had the Christians resigned to this metaphysics of the violent agon, an agon in which Caesar was sovereign, and lowered the status of their peculiar god to that of just another private household deity in subjection to the state religion. But this allegiance was not possible because the eternal love shown in Christ provided a radically different understanding of metaphysical reality. Following Christ meant believing that the being of the world was and is a free gift flowing from God's goodness where the plenitude of eternal love remains prior to any competition between order and disorder. And this different understanding of reality brought forth a different vision of communal flourishing by way of practicing the open, gratuitous sharing of this gift of love with others rather than the exclusionary pursuit of power over others. This difference in metaphysics and its social outworking, therefore, inevitably exposed any attempt to absolutize the realm of violence and conflict, as nothing more than the arbitrary tale told by the *libido dominandi* in order to justify the use of excessive force in the pursuit of dominium for its own sake.<sup>8</sup>

Here Stanley is right to point out, along with N. T. Wright, that the Christian way of being cuts straight to the heart of this ancient view of the world, challenging the very foundations of pagan society and the entire symbolic universe of the Roman imperial project. Yet this is only because the radical difference in practices assumes something vastly different about reality at its metaphysical and, therein, ontological depth. Furthermore, to reiterate Stanley's analysis but with more emphasis on the metaphysical differences, it is because this challenge was directed all the way down to the very core of what underwrote the legitimacy of the imperial logic and its state apparatuses of control that we can make sense of why it provoked such an intense persecution of Christians, who were often charged as "atheists," a grave indictment at the time.

As Stanley elaborates in his essay, a notable example of this Christian indictment on charges of atheism is found in the legend of Polycarp's martyrdom. It must be emphasized, however, that the charge of "atheism" did not mean that the Romans believed the Christians to be without a God. Rather, the charge implied that Christians were without loyalty to the divinity of Caesar and the state-sponsored religion, as Stanley has duly noted. The Romans knew Christians worshipped a God that was inassimilable to and incommensurable with their imperial project. This burgeoning little sect, which inhibited the pursuit of power by not cooperating with the imperial cult, began to pose a national security threat that required the harshest treatment. And the charge of atheism was ultimately a trumped-up one in order to vilify and scapegoat this sect, framing it as an uncivilized and treacherous alien within, a dangerous threat that required an exceptional use of violence in order to purge it and reinforce imperial identity.<sup>9</sup>

More importantly, what needs to be stressed is that this charge of atheism was trumped-up not

only to vilify a perceived threat and justify exceptional violence but also, in bolstering the hallowed aura of imperial sovereignty, to further conceal its own debased core of atheistic power-lust behind the allegedly sacred veil of its judicial authority. A full account of Polycarp's trial that gives not merely the accusations leveled against him but also, more significantly, his response to these accusations (an episode Stanley leaves out) shows that Polycarp was fully aware of this subterfuge; he not only rejected the charge of atheism, but he also rejected the judicial authority issuing such an indictment by throwing the charge back upon the Roman audience, shaking his fist at them and proclaiming, "Away with the atheists."<sup>10</sup> The story, therefore, does not stop with Polycarp quite rightly passing for an atheist in any meaningful sense, for by maintaining his allegiance to Christ, he saw through the pseudosacred imperial spectacle, charging that it was this Roman order instead that quite rightly passed for a fundamentally atheistic ideology. In fact, many of the early Christians such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Tertullian refuted the charge of atheism by seeking to explicitly expose the real atheistic core of their pagan accusers.<sup>11</sup>

Resisting the gods of the age, then, meant rightly passing for a Christian. I seek to emphasize that a radically different source of the very being of things, which in no significant way was atheistic, made possible the cultivation of new modes of practice, which were also in no significant way atheistic, and that allowed one to see through the supposedly sacred, imperial veil to its truly atheistic core. And although this fundamental atheistic aspect was only implicit in the Roman order, obliquely translated and expressed in cultural-religious codes surrounding the state pantheon, it was nevertheless an essential element in reducing reality to agonistic power so as to maintain the legitimacy and aura of imperial sovereignty. To reiterate, then, what rightly passed for atheism was the limiting of metaphysical reality, in the interest of state power, to an immanent arena of conflict. Thus, the point here is that, in this context, atheism was not a subversive way of calling into question the pantheon supporting the imperial project but was itself a hidden foundational assumption that made imperial power possible.

### **Atheistic Ontology and the Imperial Logic of the Modern West**

Modern atheism, in its various forms, should be seen as more in line with this implicitly atheistic, pagan metaphysic of violent force and its outworkings in imperial apparatuses of control rather than as any kind of continuation of the spirit within the radically subversive metaphysic and ethos of the Christian movement.<sup>12</sup> Whereas Christianity, in a creational and incarnational register, increasingly formed new ways of seeing the nature of reality as fundamentally a gift participating in the infinite love of God, the modern world opened by, *inter alia*, bracketing out and soon ridding itself entirely of this theological and metaphysical assumption in order to focus exclusively on a bare ontology of being in its supposed nakedness. That is, the predominant ontologies of modernity reduced reality to a bare given of efficient causality rather than a gift given always anew from an exceeding source—a move which in effect unhooked ontology from any more substantive metaphysic, especially in any theological form. Although various forms of this ontological trajectory were influenced by and remained within certain Christian contexts (of nominalist and voluntarist tendencies), these modernist ontologies were nevertheless implicitly atheistic, as the being of the world was understood to be an indifferent field of brute force that was able to be grasped without any reference to a divine order. Atheism in its predominant modern form is the continuation of this reductionistic

trajectory in a more explicitly immanent manner. This reductionistic direction more thoroughly seals off the realm of causal forces from communicating anything other than their measurable, objectifiable surface play of force in order to make this realm readily available for the imperious survey of autonomous thought. And this atheistic move toward a tightly sealed enclosure is the underpinning for the more thoroughgoing escalation of “classification fever” of which Stanley speaks.<sup>13</sup>

Although modern atheism may show itself to be ostensibly a break from the more overtly mythical language of the pagan universe (and indeed there are many significant differences between the supposedly enchanted universe of antiquity and the now supposedly disenchanted world of modernity), it is nevertheless in continuity in a certain important sense. For while modern atheism claims to be denuding nature of its sacral allure, ridding reality of any anthropomorphic projections, it still, at its base, is conditioned by and continues to hold to an ontological assumption that is similar to what was prevalent at the base of Roman metaphysical assumptions: all that is, is bound to an immanent conflict of violent forces. And as the modern thinker no longer gives these forces divine names, it is the sealed-off sphere of nature itself, within its own immanent power, that is often given the divine attributes of being ultimate, absolute, law-like, and all-powerful. Thus, modern atheism continues to preach a core ontological thread of immanent power and conflict as total, though in a more reduced, bald form; but it must be noted that this reduced form is not the inevitable result of discovering an unadorned, naked world of force after peeling back the mythical coverings. Instead, modern atheism is just another construct that privileges a certain assignment of exalted attributes within the immanent realm, though in more preferably austere, minimalist terms of a supposedly disenchanted natural order.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, this atheistic ontology of blind power has become increasingly accepted and internalized in our modern world, as if it were the natural, unquestioned view of reality at its base. As this atheistic ontological assumption is taken for granted, it entrenches itself deep within the collective imagination, shaping the structural assumptions of modern Western society, politics, and economics. For with no higher causes or substantive ends, there remain only agonistic power relations and the elevation of means to ends. And this atheistic ontology is the predominant animating ground behind the gods of our age; it is the founding ism that conditions all of the other isms that should be emphasized along with Stanley’s description of the pantheon of nationalism, militarism, technologism, scientism, and economism. For here this atheistic ontology ensures that nothing other than the pursuit of abstract power, efficiency, utility, profit, and wealth are allowed to stand as ends guiding the organization of social reality in the modern West. Most notably, with the excising of any metaphysical reality that would make relative the realm of agonistic power, the flood gates have been opened for the pursuit of power to be regulated only by more power, thus legitimating the modern nation-state-building project in its unquestioned sovereignty.<sup>15</sup>

Yet because the efficient accumulation of power through competition is ever more held as the most basic and highest pursuit—above more cumbersome national and ethnic interests—the capitalist market, with its formal mechanisms that indifferently organize, refine, and expand the competition, is apotheosized as the ultimate arena around which to structure social reality. Accordingly, the imperial logic of the modern Western state-building project is now more fully

oriented around a neoliberal allegiance to establishing and securing the “free” market.<sup>16</sup> By using its vast networks of bureaucratic mechanisms and military-technological apparatuses, the state polices any threat to the functioning of these market systems, making sure the market regulates and expands itself efficiently in order to provide more opportunities for accumulation.

Organizing social structures around the market arena also requires the state to set in place techniques of discipline and control that shape its own collective body toward this highest goal of market utility. This requires that all beings are comprehensively surveyed and classified primarily as “resources”—that is, as potential forces to be managed for the accumulation and storing of power. This sense of being is then internalized deep within our collective and individual self-understanding through inculcation by a diverse array of social scripts, whether directly through entertainment or media discourses, current business models, public policies, or more subtly through the likes of civil engineering and educational structures.<sup>17</sup> Here it is important to realize that the ethos of modern capitalism is not some sort of hedonistic greed or bacchanalian consumption, but the single-minded, joyless, disciplined pursuit of the accumulation of abstract wealth and dominium for its own sake.<sup>18</sup> This pursuit is serious business and demands stringent codes of discipline for the shaping of desire to fit a certain ascetic form of unconditional obedience and ultimate allegiance to the market.

Consequently, what we find is that a world of mere power without God (a-theos) is not one where desire is jovially liberated into heightened possibilities, nor is it a celebration of life where everything is permitted, as it is often advertised. Rather, it is a world set loose only to simultaneously enclose itself within an iron cage of cold instrumental rationality; it is a prison where life is not celebrated with joy and freedom but is effectively and fretfully drained of intrinsic worth and then subsequently commodified (its parody of re-enchantment<sup>19</sup>)—everything breaks down to being either a potential threat to or investment for market exchange and, therefore, kept under constant surveillance.<sup>20</sup>

One of the most important techniques of discipline and surveillance in the modern imperial project of market hegemony is the policing of religion by redefining it as merely a private, inward affair. Here, substantive religious ends are eliminated from obtaining any political purchase for socioeconomic interests. Rather, religious ends are relegated to the realm of private household matters, and even there they are only meant to help one personally cope with the rigors of secular, market competition. And this means that religion is to subordinate itself to state regulations and market operations without questioning the assumption that these structures are naturally the best means to negotiate social order and peace in the “real world” of strife. Yet this subordinate position is the same as accepting the fundamentally atheistic ontology of power. The effect is to eliminate both political and ontological significance from religion, stripping it down to a bourgeois matter of mere intentions or a pragmatic opiate to console market losers. In either case, religion is thus cordoned off to some ethereal inward sphere, while the body and all materiality are appropriated and disciplined according to the business proper within modern politics and economics: religion comforts the soul while sociopolitical structures convert the body into an exchangeable commodity available for market utility. Of course, in this scheme religion is indeed an opiate, but it is an opiate that is packaged and sold by a deeper atheistic ideology, an ideology that is dead set on protecting the status quo.

So far, in sum, I have highlighted what rightly passes for the atheistic core that runs from the imperial logic of Rome to that of the modern West. At its base it is a metaphysic or more minimal ontology that reduces the being of the world, and indeed all of reality, to agonistic power relations, thereby alleging that the highest pursuit is an ordered control and accumulation of power as an end in itself. Moreover, the apparently inescapable character of this ontology of power and violence is appealed to in order to make necessary and hence to justify the use of counterforce by way of absolute state sovereignty and its formal mechanisms of regulation and discipline.<sup>21</sup> The Roman and modern construal of reality as agonistic can also be seen in the founding political myths of each age, myths that portray primal violence as the most basic reality in order to justify further violence: there is the fratricidal story of Romulus and Remus, and there is Hobbes' *Leviathan* with its assumed "war of all against all" as the primal state of nature. The purpose of tracing these threads is to underline the fact that atheism has by and large not grown as a subversive element in the modern world, as if progressing away from the foundational assumptions of pagan society, but rather, atheism can be understood as a profoundly conservative element that refines and conserves more purely and ascetically, through greater apparatuses of control, the core of the *libido dominandi*.

Thus, in speaking of resisting the gods of our age, which are the gods of power, a power that is itself primarily shaped and authorized by this atheistic ontology, the phrase "to quite rightly pass for an atheist" can only maintain minimal rhetorical significance. Indeed, the phrase's only potential for rhetorical significance may be in cases where it is employed in a highly ironic tone. But even then, the phrase would require too many qualifications for it to be helpful because, in effect, it is asking one to pass for using the status quo to critique the status quo.

### **Atheistic Ontology and Derrida**

Moreover, an appeal to Derrida moves one no closer to understanding how to usefully pass for an atheist, especially as it relates to how a Christian might challenge and transform this order. This is because Derrida remains complicit with the standing modern order at the level of both ontology and practice. Although Derrida's work, at times, incisively calls into question some of the most privileged modern mechanisms for imposing order upon the agon of power,<sup>22</sup> he ultimately avoids questioning the agon itself.<sup>23</sup> For Derrida, being is the oppositional conflict between binaries, but what is more real than even this duel of forces is the difference between them. That is, the binary oppositions (such as order and disorder, rational and irrational, presence and absence, identity and difference, and so on) vie for position and importance, yet what is more important is the differing space and temporal deferment—or *différance*, as Derrida coins it—in between: a "khora" that is not one of the oppositions but that allows them to distinctively stand out against one another in the first place. That is to say, in the conflict of binaries one term usually masquerades as being more real, as beyond contamination by these differential relations, and thereby conquers the other; but Derrida shows through his elaboration of *différance* that neither term in the binary truly conquers the other because both need the other in order to stand out and that both are, in fact, constituted at their foundation by this continual supplementation of difference.<sup>24</sup> Thus, no term is beyond the other but both are equally inscribed within the more primordial differential space between, that "bottomless chessboard upon which being is put into play."<sup>25</sup> Therefore, whereas the pagan and modern ontologies of power accept the agon of conflicting dualities yet privilege an allegedly justified violent order over disorder, Derrida



privileges the bottomlessness of the chessboard duel in order to call out the essential arbitrariness of privileging any one term over the other.

Derrida's philosophy of *différance* aims to liberate beings from their domination within the sovereign order. His work argues that in light of the bottomlessness of the chessboard, a bottomlessness that is impervious to imperial logic, beings are no longer ontologically positioned as pawns because there are no hierarchically set power schemes. Yet in several fundamental ways, things only get worse with Derrida's philosophy in the picture.

The idea of bottomlessness might expose any stable order or victory as a forgery, but it also therein enthrones the endlessness of the conflict as absolute—assuming a veritably endless “war of all against all.” What we have in the bottomless chessboard of *différance* is nothing more than an absolutization of the infinite regress involved in the endless spacing between finite oppositions implying that the opposition itself will always be in play—again, a more thorough reduction to immanence and another perpetuation of the myth, now in even more austere terms, that the immanent sphere of conflicting power is all there is. So what is most real, then, is the abyss of *différance*, or the bottomless aspect of the chessboard, which is to say that it is an ultimate transcendental emptiness out of which everything impossibly, endlessly, and agonistically emerges and in relation to which nothing has a more or less significant relationship.<sup>26</sup>

Consequently, and contrary to what Derrida would have us believe, this perspective operates within the market ontology; it levels reality down to a play of fungible things and by no means honors the unique singularity of beings. For in relation to an ultimate indifferent emptiness, everything is classified at its base by an essential equivalence, with no thing expressing a greater degree of goodness or beauty or truth than the next thing, thereby ensuring that it is only through subjective imposition—that is, by way now of a thing's commodified form and exchange value—that any worth whatsoever can be attributed to it. The market all too happily accepts this ontological construal as in line with its own justification and continued sprawl and thus renders the critical liberative value of Derrida's deconstruction largely bankrupt. In this register all we can hope for is that somehow a universal realization of this bottomless abyss will help in chastening our imperial ambitions, mitigating the still inevitable conflict of power. Yet, all the while, the new imperial logic of the market spreads increasingly uninhibited over this newfound bottomless frontier, aided by having the last remaining vestiges of any other obstructive metaphysic removed from the sociopolitical chessboard.

The enthroning of Derrida's abyss is therefore not only in line with the atheistic ontological assumptions we have been highlighting as part of an imperial logic, but it also quite rightly passes over from a possible mode of critical thinking to what could be considered a fetish. With the absolute determined as an ineffable emptiness, entailing also that the agon of violence is total, there is a more thorough acceptance of this ontological scheme as the most basic, unavoidable reality behind all other realities, as if this were an eternal necessity that was off-limits to thought. For as the empty void is held as the transcendental condition of being, somehow conditioning the construction and deconstruction of every reality and yet believed to be itself indeconstructible, it remains itself the last unquestioned and enchanted absolute while hiding its own contingent character. We have, then, the more severely entrenched myth of an

absolute emptiness fantastically attributing to itself a sovereign value beyond its real worthlessness and contingent nature, and with this false attribution lies the problematic character of the fetish in its self-absorption.

This can be seen especially in Derrida's later ethical and religious writings, where he esteems this sovereign emptiness as somehow, perhaps magically, the grounds for ethical earnestness.<sup>27</sup> If there is an absolute ideal of justice, or the gift, or forgiveness for Derrida, it is because these ideals exist completely outside the agonistic economy of power. Yet outside this sphere of conflict, which is supposedly total, they are nothing. For Derrida, however, that they are ineffably empty and impossible is also, paradoxically, the condition of their possibility, for in pursuing such vacuous ideals we are impassioned always for more, and we are thereby kept from falling into the theoretical presumption and practical complacency that are characteristic of believing we have somehow arrived or accomplished something. The point, apparently, is that our desire is here kept in continual striving as it pursues what will never be attained, and more importantly this purifies the inner intentions and movements of desire toward an unconditional allegiance to the ideal. The real point, however, is that there is no real, full, plenitudinous ideal of justice, goodness, or love that gives itself to be known and that could draw desire out of itself (what for a Christian would be the real transcendentals, which are supremely revealed in the incarnation of Christ). Rather, there is only the absence of these ideals, a barren condition that aids desire in ascetically refining itself toward an unconditional desire of desire itself, so that ultimately it is the desiring, and not the thing desired, that counts.

In other words, the fetishizing of emptiness comes to the fore in that the emptiness of the ideal is taken as more absolute than the ideal itself, as if this was the only thing meaningful or of objective value about the ideal, and this privileging of the ideal's absence entails that the ideal itself could not be real. But how then could these ideals be sensibly known and pursued? Hence, this belief in emptiness, as if the most real thing to be valued about the ideal is ultimately the case only because what matters most is not that there is something real that could compel desire, but rather, that desire is constantly driven by its own lack, its own bottomless character—but nonetheless by itself. Thus, the mysterious source of ethics here is really the ineluctable emptiness that is found at the base of the modern subject when it is brought to the confounding breakdown of its own desire for itself and not the fullness of an exceeding source beyond.

Furthermore, this is the debased form of mystery that seems to linger within the Derridean reading of Augustine, a reading that often omits Augustine's references to God in elaborating the fact that he is a mystery to himself. Augustine's mystery of self occurs because he is put into question by an infinite fullness beyond himself—that is, he knows the God of Christ to be closer to him than he is to himself. But this Augustinian mystery is certainly not due to some prosaically modern “epistemological insight” about how we have limited knowledge, if any, of ourselves—an insight which is oddly expected, somehow on its own, to inspire a respect for the other without any revealed and manifested idea of how love for this other could even take place. With such a vacuous notion of mystery, then, emptiness and absence remain the fetishized occasion by which desire continually and impossibly seeks to engage and purify itself within the endless inner conflict of its own desiring. This is really what Derrida seems to mean, a very important point that Stanley does not always fully clarify when he exhorts us to remain a question to ourselves so as to be open to others. For in this Derridean framework, remaining a

question to oneself can only mean living a life that looks more like a “knight of infinite resignation,” to use a Kierkegaardian idiom. Such a knight only is ascetically concerned with the limitations and incapacities of his or her own intentions, knowledge, and desiring rather than a “knight of faith” who continually seeks to trust possible answers that can question and pull us beyond ourselves and toward others.<sup>28</sup>

Ultimately, then, this fetishizing of an absolute emptiness passes for a species of that modern fixation with “erotic perplexity,” as William Desmond terms it. Erotic perplexity names the tendency of desire to become exclusively preoccupied, indeed obsessed, with its own lack and yearning rather than with the compelling reality beyond itself that it yearns after as is characteristic of, on the other hand, what Desmond calls “agapeic astonishment.”<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, this fetishizing of emptiness is also a deeply modern bourgeois move toward the privatization and interiorization of religion. This is continually evidenced in Derrida’s later writings on ethics and religion where he uses an unoriginal, modern approach in searching out the abstracted, universal logic behind religious traditions, emptying integral themes of their particular content and assimilating them into a mysticism of empty ideals, in a “religion without religion.”<sup>30</sup> Derrida even classifies himself as privately holding to what could quite rightly pass for a conventionally personalized religion of inwardness, what he calls “my religion about which nobody understands anything [. . .] in my absolved absolutely private language.”<sup>31</sup> But an inward religion of which nobody understands anything, where there is neither “an eyewitness” nor a “voice doing anything [other] than talking to me without saying anything,” as Derrida states, is nothing other than a more thorough submission of “religion” to the policed and tamed private sphere that is in service to the sovereign market. And when Derrida utters the quip about “quite rightly passing for an atheist” in the same breath that he speaks about his “religion,” we then find that the clause’s essential ambivalence is born out of and hence deconstructable to a private, endlessly agonistic bout around a fetishized emptiness rather than being inspired by and open to a transcendent, intense reality that calls one beyond the endless war of oppositional terms.<sup>32</sup>

Such a position, then, is in line with the status quo and those who are in power. It is therefore a serious oversight to think that Derrida’s philosophy could somehow, even as merely a qualified propaedeutic, move us beyond the classificatory gaze and its vulgar understanding of atheism/theism or aid us in giving voice to the voiceless masses who are dispossessed and marginalized by this system. Here, then, we find that Derrida is neither a saint nor a heretic nor a devilish radical, but rather a very pedestrian modern whose ontology and practice remain caught within the ideological assumptions that uphold the imperial logic of the late-capitalist market.

Thus, Derrida’s ambivalent modifying clause lacks even minimal subversive rhetorical value because its meaning has already been dictated by a fetishized ontological thread that also runs throughout the market hegemony. And if it were to remain within this Derridean register, the question of whether every Christian should also quite rightly pass for an atheist should only be answered with a decisive “not quite.”

## **Conclusion**

I have sought to claim that both the predominant modern form of atheism and Derrida’s variation

of atheism have lost their radically subversive value, if ever they had it to begin with. This claim was argued by identifying these forms of atheism as primarily self-enclosing, conservative movements, which thus renders the term *atheism* deeply problematic. This is not to say, however, that the phenomenon of atheism is a single uniform thing that is forever set in stone. But it is to claim that this one dominant trajectory of atheism, this new insidious imperial logic that runs parallel to the ancient pagan trajectory, is so deeply problematic at the level of ontology and so deeply entrenched within the systems of our modern world that it renders any use of or comparison with atheism for Christians much more difficult in our current historical moment. I do not intend to suggest that Stanley would endorse this problematic ontology and its outcome, as indeed his piece recognizes that any use of atheism and Derrida must be limited and restrained. Yet I am trying to push and pull on some of Stanley's best insights, moving them in a different direction by posing an assessment of the predominant form of atheism and Derrida at the ontological level as a question to his piece—why appeal, even in a limited sense, to a position or a trope, no matter how ambivalent or ironical it may be, that now, in this historical moment, is hard-pressed to pass for something other than a contrived radicalization that is still complicit with its vulgar and conventional counterpart? Why not reemphasize with greater development and nuance how a Christian, in resisting classification fever and the reductionistic gods of our age, should rightly continue to pass for a Christian through a way of being that is radically beyond both atheism and theism alike?

This is not to say that we, as Christians, are a priori closed to finding any common ground with atheism or learning anything from atheists. I will grant, along with Stanley, that there might be some form of common ground with atheism that cannot be denied. However, this common ground should not be valorized, and such a common ground should be emphasized from within a different trajectory than the predominant atheistic one that is highlighted in this essay. Christians should recognize that insofar as we confess that God is the transcendent fullness of all that is, which entails that God is not just another being, it is not really proper to say God exists in any manner, especially in the usual theistic reductions such as deism that Stanley rightly critiques.<sup>33</sup> A Christian then can indeed concur with an atheist in a highly qualified manner by also claiming that God cannot be said to quite rightly exist. But here a Christian has a different trajectory to draw from in the various traditions of negative theology that are more appropriately characterized as “not quite” passing for atheism. Within these registers an ontological difference comes to the fore that distinguishes negative theology from Derrida's deconstruction. This is evident in the fact that with negative theology it is the unfathomable transcendence of God that pulls one into the ambiguous language of the ineffable beyond and therein chastens any rigid application of theistic (or atheistic) terms rather than merely the indefinite, agonistic play of finite terms (not to mention that there is also a commitment to the impenetrable and confounding mystery of the Incarnation where that which is perfect infinite existence itself, of which no greater perfection could be conceived, somehow also becomes just another existent).

Moreover, I agree with Stanley that when we seek to engage our world and provide a transformative critique we have much to learn from other professing atheists. Yet because of Derrida's overvaluation within certain Christian communities many richer and more radical atheistic thinkers have been overlooked. As I have argued, I believe there are far better partners for Christians, and especially for Stanley's passionate concerns, than Derrida. My suggestion is that we discerningly seek out engagement and cooperation with those atheists who also want to

challenge the predominant atheistic ontology of empty agonistic power which has become so fetishized. There are indeed atheistic thinkers who want to move beyond any ontology of violence and conflict by emphasizing, unlike Derrida, an affirmation of matter as born out ontologically through a non-oppositional play. Take, for example, Gilles Deleuze and his emphasis on joyful “lines of flight,” his attempts to draw out the best of Nietzsche’s yea-saying philosophy of immanence, or Alain Badiou’s event of grace, or Theodor Adorno’s materialist desire for the resurrection of the flesh, to name only a few.<sup>34</sup>

The difference between Derrida and these other atheistic philosophers, one could say, is that they first affirm matter and its positive excess and they only secondarily understand this in an atheistic way as without God—and this secondary atheistic element is only because immanence is still held as total but not necessarily agonistic. Therefore, this position could be first and foremost characterized ontologically as an affirmative materialism, as a more ambiguous, yet also more insightful atheism because it is more essentially and appropriately deemed a materialism that seeks to subvert the very agonistic ontological script behind both the classificatory gaze and its imperial logic of surveillance and control. Christians could then agree fundamentally and decisively about the positive thrust of this primary materialism, though not its atheism, as it overlaps significantly with a creational perspective that Stanley seeks to bring to the forefront.

Indeed, in these other forms, Christians could be said in some measure to “quite rightly pass” for materialists because of their joint affirmation of the ontological significance of matter in its non-agonistic play, and yet, “not quite” because for Christians materiality is considered excessively playful and good by way of its reference as a gift to something that is also beyond itself. And finally, the modifying clause “quite rightly” applied here would hold together a more fruitful, suggestive tension, a tension that would better assist Stanley’s desire for facilitating a dialogue where both Christians and non-Christians could more robustly explore our provocative commonalities and differences.<sup>35</sup>

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## Notes

1. John Stanley, “Why Every Christian Should ‘Quite Rightly Pass for an Atheist,’” *The Other Journal* 11 (April 2008): <http://theotherjournal.com/article.php?id=341>. Stanley’s piece serves as a well-written, accessible conversation-starter. We should be very grateful that he has risked the dialogue. Moreover, my own piece has benefited greatly from extensive conversations with Stanley about the issues covered in these essays. Any criticisms of his piece are here offered only in light of our profound agreements and are also offered as a colleague and friend. If it were not for Stanley’s open and gracious spirit, this piece would not have been possible. I am also indebted to another colleague and friend at *The Other Journal*: Dan Rhodes, one of our other theology editors, has helped immensely by reading through this piece and offering pertinent criticisms and suggestions. His insights have helped to make this convoluted essay a little clearer and more accessible.

2. Ibid, in the second section of the essay under the heading, “On Passing for Atheists Along

With the Early Christians.”

3. Ibid.

4. I am referring to *ontology* in this essay as primarily that modern branch of metaphysics that discourses on the ultimate reality beyond physics; more specifically, ontology studies being, the very ground and nature of reality, and designates those basic assumptions about reality that make a position or project intelligible and legitimate.

5. Of course, the precedent for resisting the Roman pantheon was already set by the Jews and their faith in God as the fullness of being, the transcendent I AM beyond the immanent competition of power. Thus, Christians were not reacting against Roman deities but were already following the Jewish lead and allowing their primary pursuit of God’s fullness to secondarily allow all other realities to unravel in light of this devotion. I am thankful to Steve Long for emphasizing this in our various conversations.

6. That is, more precisely, evil was false because it was not metaphysically real as it was an inexplicable privation of the good. And yet it is a very present historical reality in our postlapsarian times. So evil is a pervasive historical reality and is therefore not an illusion, but at the same time, it has no inherent purchase on ultimate reality (no metaphysical reality).

7. For an elaboration and juxtaposition of the two different ontological frameworks here between pagan Rome and Christianity see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), chapter 12. Also, see this same work, of which I broadly draw upon, to learn more about the hidden continuity between the pagan and modern worldviews, worldviews that valorize heroic conquest and violence.

8. See Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. and ed. Marcus Dods (New York: Hafner Publishing Co, 1948), Book I, preface.

9. Leonard L. Thompson, “The Martyrdom of Polycarp: Death in the Roman Games,” *The Journal of Religion* 82 (January 2002), 27-52.

10. “The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp” in *Ancient Christian Writers*, trans. James A. Kleist (New York: Newman Press, 1948), 94.

11. See Jan Bremmer’s “Atheism in Antiquity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

12. Granted, modern atheism can be attributed to a complex milieu of influences, and indeed, aspects of the Judeo-Christian movement can be seen, to a certain degree, as contributing to its specific rise and form. But where this is the case, it can also be argued that such occurred when radical aspects of Christianity were forgotten and perversely forged into an ontology that was complicit with an understanding of reality as mere conflicting forces.

13. I am merely highlighting a few of the essential aspects of the dominant ontological

assumptions of modernity and by no means claiming that modernity is only this. Moreover, in tracing a certain atheistic trajectory, I am not claiming that atheism is only expressed in this form—again, we are only looking at one of its main ontological characteristics, which has deeply influenced the rise of the secular West and therein allows the more popular current atheistic expressions. Nor am I saying that modernity is all bad, but I am rather emphasizing some of its egregious parts that have exerted a massive influence in the world. Nor am I claiming that there is no longer any religious aspect to the structuring of modern society, rather that although this aspect still lingers in various forms, it has increasingly been pushed out of the picture at the ontological level.

14. This contingent, constructed character is becoming more evident in recent scholarship, which is also pointing to the deeply held quasi-spiritual motives and practices surrounding this trajectory. For instance see Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987) and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

15. For an account of how the nation-state project was legitimated through promoting the myth of necessary violence and power, and thereby usurping authority from other spheres of social reality, see William Cavanaugh, “Killing for the Telephone Company: Why the Nation State is not the Keeper of the Common Good,” *Modern Theology* 20 (April 2004), 243-74. See especially 249-51: “The claim that emerging states offered their citizens protection against violence ignores the fact that the state itself created the threat and then charged its citizens for its reduction. What separated state violence from other kinds of violence was the concept of legitimacy, but legitimacy was based on the ability of state-makers to approximate a monopoly on violence within a given geographical territory. In order to pursue that monopoly, it was necessary for elites to secure access to capital from the local population, which was accomplished in turn either by the direct threat of violence or the guarantee of protection from other kinds of violence. The variations in the states produced are explicable in terms of variations in the difficulty of collecting taxes, the cost of military technology employed, the force available to competitors, and so on. In sum, Tilly suggests that ‘a portrait of war makers and state makers as coercive and self-seeking entrepreneurs bears a far greater resemblance to the facts than do its chief alternatives: the idea of a social contract, the idea of an open market in which operators of armies and states offer services to willing customers, the idea of a society whose shared norms and expectations call forth a certain kind of government.’” Here he draws on Charles Tilly’s important essay, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

16. The term *neoliberal* designates a world-view that believes that the autonomous self-regulation of the market should organize all other social reality. In other words, pursuing the freedom of the market is the best way to maintain individual freedom, which implies, as David Harvey claims, that market exchange is held as “an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs.” This leads to a “state apparatus whose fundamental mission [is] to facilitate conditions for profitable capital accumulation.” David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7. But this is not to say that the neoliberal globalization of late capitalism has

completely triumphed over the nation-state ideal but rather that the two have come into a more mutual dependence and complicity in accumulating and storing power: “An active state is still required to maintain the juridical, regulatory and infrastructural framework through which [organization of production and appropriation of surplus] operate, as well as to police capital-labour relations, manage the macro-economy and act as lender of last resort. Capitalism could not exist unless states did these things; and states are impelled to do them, by virtue of their dependence on private accumulation for their own revenues and for the material foundations of their legitimacy.” Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, “Superintending Global Capital,” *New Left Review* 35 (September-October 2005), 101-23.

17. With our current issue on the crises of education, it should be mentioned that the increasing reduction and division of education away from a holistic contemplation of substantive ends that would creatively transmit thicker social virtues and into primarily job training and a sharpening of the competitive spirit for vocational success is one important example of the subtle way these techniques of discipline filter into all levels of society in order to instill this sense of being and capture our allegiance. For starters in this area see Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (London: Marion Boyars, 1996) and Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1995).

18. This is to suggest a more Weberian reading of the ethos of capitalism, especially as explicated in John Hughes, *The End of Work: Theological Critiques of Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007). Also, I agree with Eugene McCarragher in that critiques of capitalism from the angle of consumption are not very interesting or helpful; critiques that focus on the immoderate consumption in our late-capitalist society seem to be only moralistic critiques levied by the ascetic spirit of capital itself—as if we all need to be a little more moderate, prudent, and calculating in our expenditures and investments by buying fair trade, going green, finding alternative banking, using only what we need, et cetera. Not that these practices inherently have no value, but rather, to focus exclusively on consumption as the only means to critique the market is really to buy into a ruse thrown up by the forces of production in order to deflect from their own illicit operations by suggesting that the immorality of the market is merely a private problem on the side of consumer motives and behavior. This would be to imply that all we can do is accept the ontological reality of the market and commodification and settle for adjusting our own comportment within this game. It thus conceals the real problems concerning the all-pervasive mechanisms of production and how they shape and produce both this rapacious consumer and also its “alternative” consciousness, creating and then capitalizing on these other modes of consciousness by providing more markets that appeal to these modes as the only way forward. Hence, McCarragher, drawing from Marx’s own insights about commodity culture and the relations of production, says, “Talking about consumerism has become a way of not talking about capitalism.” Eugene McCarragher, “The Enchantments of Mammon,” *Modern Theology* 21 (July 2005), 438.

19. For an elaboration on commodification as reenchantment see McCarragher, “The Enchantments of Mammon.”

20. That this modern world of mere power has caged itself within its own mechanisms of control is not by any means a novel insight but is readily exposed, in different ways, by various thinkers



from Max Weber to Theodor Adorno and from Jacques Ellul to Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault, to name only a few.

21. Though, of course, not without also very real differences between Rome and the modern West in how this is socially, politically, and economically manifested. But the point is that both epochs tend to accept the ultimacy of the violent agon in order to bolster a certain imperial logic.

22. For some of his best work in deconstructing the modern god of transcendental subjectivity see Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

23. For other elaborations on how Derrida reifies violence see John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* and Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1987).

24. For *différance* and "supplementarity" see Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) but also Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) and Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). For "khora" see Derrida's essay "Khora," in Thomas Dutoit, ed., *On the Name*, trans. David Wood (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995) where he calls *différance* the khora, that empty receptacle in Plato's *Timaeus*, which describes again a sense of indescribable emptiness or bottomlessness at base.

25. Derrida, *Margins*, 22.

26. It is transcendental in the sense that it is considered a transcendent condition of possibility for reality. In other words, it is that which allows and conditions things to be at all, but is not a thing itself. That Derrida does consider this bottomless *différance* or khora as a transcendental necessity, despite his qualifications about it being only a "quasi-transcendental," is especially seen, among other places, in his handling of khora as that "preoriginary, before and outside all generation," which is a "necessity" that "precedes" and "carries" philosophy. "Khora," in *On the Name*, 125-6.

27. For Derrida's treatment of justice, see "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" *Acts of Religion*, trans. and ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 228-98. For hospitality, see "Hospitality," in *Acts of Religion*, 356-420. For forgiveness, see "To Forgive: The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible," in *Questioning God*, ed. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 21-51. For the gift, see *Given Time, I: Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) and *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

28. We are indeed always in a state of becoming as Kierkegaard emphasizes, but the point for Kierkegaard is that as a Christian, one is to become more and more a "knight of faith" that can continually trust God and receive his love as manifested through the gift of creation over and

over again. Surely this entails wrestling with doubt (digressing here to discuss what Stanley brought up as the dialectic of belief/unbelief). But that does not mean that one is an atheist. Instead, one hopes to grow ever more into trust while confronting doubt. And this growing into trust and confronting doubt does not mean running from doubt as if it were inevitably a sign of sin or weakness, or what is the same, plainly accepting it as inevitable and therefore good—as if it were the dialectical opportunity to strengthen ourselves or keep us open, as if remaining an open question were better than being open to trust in certain answers. And to be a “knight of infinite resignation” is to resign oneself to the idea that God’s gifts are too pure for this world and that our attempts and knowledge are too finite to ever obtain the purity of the truth in this world; therefore, we remain only a question and despair of any answers, which means to ultimately refuse revelation in creation and the Incarnation—that is, to refuse grace. For Kierkegaard’s use of “knight of infinite resignation” and “knight of faith” see *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983). Derrida would be more of a knight of infinite resignation than, say, an “aesthete,” as he is typically charged by those applying Kierkegaard’s categories, but only because of his rigidly pure and empty mystical idealism. But as the argument has proceeded thus far, I am suggesting that this enthroning of emptiness is the occasion for a desire preoccupied with refining its own desire for desire itself, and therefore, in this case, Derrida necessarily oscillates between the knight of infinite resignation and the aesthete. But he is not, of course, an aesthete in the sense of the domineering aesthete of don Juan but more in the paradoxical sense of don Juan’s puritanical flipside. Thus, despite all of John Caputo’s many apologies about the salient character of Derrida’s hyper-ethics of impossibility being beyond that of an aesthete or a knight of despair, the purity of Derrida’s hyper-idealism nevertheless does not allow such ideals to exist in any way, and therefore, it has the effect of ultimately throwing the subject back upon itself in its endless disciplining and refining of its own intentions. So Derrida’s position, then, shares a certain central trait with both the aesthete and the one in despair in that they are all fundamentally preoccupied with themselves rather than the other.

29. William Desmond, *Being and the Between* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995)

30. See especially, *Gift of Death* and “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” in *Acts of Religion*, where Derrida claims that his discourse on religion is established by a “desert abstraction” that “in uprooting the tradition that bears it, in atheologizing it, this abstraction, without denying faith, liberates a universal rationality.” “Faith and Knowledge,” 56, 57. And for a good analysis of the more rational, Kantian aspect of Derrida’s modern handling of religion, see James K. A. Smith “Re-Kanting Postmodernism?: Derrida’s Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone,” *Faith and Philosophy* 17 (October 2000) and “Determined Violence: Derrida’s Structural Religion,” *Journal of Religion* 78 (1998).

31. Jacques Derrida, “Circumfession,” in *Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 154-55.

32. Caputo aptly spells out the ground upon which Derrida’s ambivalence is here based, as he claims that it is due to the insight that “what we call the ‘I’ is implicated in a kind of conflict of competing voices that give each other no rest.” *Philosophy and Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 63. Derrida’s phrase comes out of this ontology and its fetishized war of

desire and unknowing where nothing moves beyond atheism and theism but rather both continually antagonize one another.

33. See Stanley's "Why Every Christians Should 'Quite Rightly Pass for an Atheist,'" especially his conclusion and footnote 30.

34. For Deleuze's elaboration of lines of flight see *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), and for his engagement with Nietzsche see *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Janis Tomlinson (Irrington, NY: Columbia University Press, 1983). For Alain Badiou see especially, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2007) and also *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). For Adorno see *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Routledge, 1973).

35. However, whether or not any atheistic ontology of immanent power can truly be displaced and transformed (and for that matter produce more just social relations) without referring to a transcendence that is ontologically different remains to be seen. But this is, I believe, one of the central fronts in which Christians should lovingly and critically engage their atheist friends on the issue of atheism—while, of course, still maintaining their Christian distinctiveness, if there is to be any real engagement at all.