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The rebirth of religion and enchanting materialism

Europe is the exception to the global de-secularization of politics; at the same time, theoretical interest in theological issues has been rising in Europe over the past fifteen years. Placing Habermas's "soft naturalism" against the "militant atheism" of Michel Onfray and Richard Dawkins, and borrowing Diderot's concept of *matérialisme enchanté*, Sven-Eric Liedman warns against trivializing life's wonders, be they of a technical nature or beyond our present conception.

A while ago, I was talking to a friend about religion. We agreed that we both were atheists. But he added: "I am a Jewish atheist". I myself would have to specify my own position in a corresponding manner: I am a Lutheran atheist.

Such is the immediate limitation of atheism. The word "atheism" is in itself a negation: not God. Moreover, the atheist has freed him or herself from a fixed belief; normally the one that is dominant in the culture that has permeated his or her childhood and youth. Atheism is at first like the negative of the photo which, according to the believer, depicts the world.

Naturally, the non-believer is also a non-believer in relation to other faiths. I do not believe more in Allah or Vishnu than I do the Christian God. Still, I have never been posed with the alternative of seeking my faith in the Koran or the Vedic scriptures.

It is atheism's constant challenge to appear singularly as a negation. It states what it does not believe but not what it positively represents. This is what makes atheism seem grey and dull. Where religion paints our existence in bold colours, where it seeks its significance in wonderful tales, and where the difference between right and wrong is anchored outside of the world of humans, the atheist claims that the truth of the world is rather trivial and considers the holy scriptures as fine literature amongst other fine literature and morals an altogether human affair.

Finally, I will try to outline an atheism that does not appear bleak and does not have an antagonistic atheism's lack of tolerance and blindness to the religions' aesthetic and cultural values. In recent years, some spirited atheist confessions have come to light, chiefly the

English biologist Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*¹ and the French philosopher Michel Onfray's *Traité d'athéologie*². I will, in concluding, consider my position on them. The immediate reason for Dawkins's and Onfray's books is the rebirth of the religion, which has been so apparent throughout virtually the entire world these past decades. Politics is today permeated by religious sentiments and beliefs in a way that my generation at

least has not seen the likes of. US president George W. Bush is a Born Again Christian and does not pass up a chance to justify his political decisions with reference to God. Islam has become a political power on the world stage. Even for the Chinese state, religion is becoming a growing problem, impossible to fit into the official ideological alloy of capitalism and communism.

Religion's increasingly obvious presence in politics corresponds to a great popular commitment to different religious movements. Principally two religions are conquering new souls: Islam and Christianity. Different branches of Islam are winning ground in several places around the world; here, the emphasis is mainly on the Sunni branch of Salafism. However, riding the greatest wave of success is the branch of Christianity called Pentecostalism. It is gaining strength not only in the United States, but yet more in Latin America and Africa. If the current pentecostal wave of success were to continue, three quarters of mankind would be included in some form of Christianity by the year of 2050.³ And it is expressly Pentecostalism that constitutes the dynamic power in this development, while the Catholic church for example, ostensibly so firm, is losing ground.

The past decades' successful movements within Christianity and Islam have many common denominators. The principal among them is an unflinching conviction of what indispensable essence their own religion has, but also a certain anti-intellectualism, manifested in a shared aversion to Christian or Islamic theology (*kalam*) and to academic endeavour in general. Moreover, both are highly dependent upon new media such as TV and Internet for their own dissemination. Both also correspond to a tendency within modern secularization: religion is freeing itself more and more from the culture in which it was previously rooted and is gaining new followers who live under entirely different cultural conditions than those prevalent in the previous ambits of these faiths.

In view of the triumphs of certain religious movements during the past decades, it has been proposed that the tendency towards an increasing secularization in modern development is being broken; the most well known example of this notion is found in the volume published by the American sociologist and theologian Peter L. Berger, fittingly called *The Desecularization of the World*.⁴ But there is also an opposite interpretation according to which, on the contrary, we have entered a new and even stronger phase of secularization; institutions like school and politics, during modernity still secure, are losing their privileged position, whereby religion becomes an individual resort in a reality without touchstone. A key proponent of this theory is the French expert on Islam, Olivier Roy in, for example, his book *La laïcité face à l'Islam*.⁵

Evidently, Berger and Roy place different meanings into the difficult word "secularization". It is not my intention to go deeper into how to best define that word; on the other hand, I will touch on the perspectives Berger and Roy apply to the current situation, which, in my view, greatly complement each other. But I focus my attention upon another word here which is equally central when discussing modernity, namely "disenchantment", as well as its opposite, "re-enchantment".⁶ The former was initially coined as the German *Entzauberung*, by Max Weber and, in a slightly different way, by Franz Rosenzweig, and ever since the Second World War has played an important part in the discussion on the development of modern society. The idea that there was an enchantment, at least in Weber's use of the word, in modernity itself, surfaced early on, and I will argue here that there is great justification for

that theory. But I will also contend with equal assertion that its applied relevance is more limited today, and for that reason less in conflict with the type of enchantment evidently felt by followers of a newborn Pentecostalism or Islam.

The image of the world heading into an ever deepening religious enchantment exhibits one big and important exception: Europe. In most European countries, particularly those within the EU-region, de-Christianization seems to progress unchanged. Pentecostalism's advances are merely marginal in most areas and while Islam is indeed advancing, it is mainly due to immigration from countries where Islam is a dominant religion. The spread of both certainly display the same patterns as on other continents; however, in a global perspective, the most noteworthy is nevertheless the confinement of these progressions. The major international surveys on people's religious attitudes and practices, in Europe the *European Values Survey* and globally the *World Values Survey*, give an unequivocal picture: Europe is far more de-Christianized than other parts of the world, where Christianity has gained wide distribution, and other religions do not fill the gap that de-Christianization has left behind.

At the same time, Europe has over the past ten or fifteen years experienced an odd, renewed interest in traditional theological questions amongst many prominent intellectuals otherwise associated to irreligious, or at the least non-religious currents. It is not the aforementioned Onfray and Dawkins who with their atheist tracts appear typical. It is rather Jacques Derrida, Alain Badiou, Jürgen Habermas, Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben and numerous others who have written important works on religion in general, and Christianity in particular. Several of the aforementioned have openly declared that they are atheists, or at least agnostics; Habermas has by Max Weber's example stated that he is "unmusical" when it comes to religion.⁷ But they all display a noticeably positive interest in the many religious expressions of our age and of the past. Their intention is not to fight religious faith, but rather understand it and its inherent power. To a great extent, their attention is caught by the political potential in religious faith. Though that attention is not set primarily on Pentecostalism or Salafism, but rather on a more moderate, intellectually, and ethically well-balanced faith. Slavoj Žižek takes at once an extreme and customarily ideal position when he suggests that Christianity and Marxism are the only serious challengers to the dominating militant neoliberalism of our age.⁸

It would be an exaggeration to claim that European intellectuals are subject to the same enchantment with religion as the most successful religious movements of the day so openly prove to be. But one can, just the same, acknowledge a fascination that belongs in the same historic situation. The situation is normally characterized by an array of terms containing the attributive "post-", as in post-modern, post-secular, post-Christian, and so on.

It is also, of course, within this situation that I am trying to suggest what a positive atheism, borne by a wonderment for the riches of our world and existence, could look like.

Enchantment lost and re-found

The word *Entzauberung* was used by writers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in poetic fairy tales about people who had been released

from a curse or a spell. One might say that Cinderella, when awakened from her millennial sleep by the prince's kiss, has thereby become *entzaubert*. This is the word that Max Weber remodels into a technical term, referring to the change in society and thought experienced in modern times. The implication he gives it is, in fact, more precise even than that. It includes the legitimacy of social actions. According to Weber, there are principally two ways to justify one's behaviour. The one is a magical justification, the other a rational. The magical implies avoiding certain types of measures because, according to a public fancy, they lead to misfortune or damnation, and choosing other actions that instead suggest fortune and divine favours. A rational justification does not take any superhuman or otherworldly powers into account whatsoever. It points solely to detectable consequences any act might cause, advantages it involves and disadvantages its alternatives might entail. According to Weber, the magical and rational incentives in fact constitute the endpoints on a consecutive scale along which actual justifications could be plotted. His theory is that Europe, over the last centuries, has experienced a constant shift towards the rational end.⁹

Weber's conception has been widely acknowledged and is now part of the standard repertoire when it comes to clarifying how modern reality differs from one more burdened by tradition. It is linked to the Weberian theses of rationalization and implies more specifically that those processes which previously were assumed to be subject to the gamble of uncountable forces are now mastered with the aid of rational knowledge. On a positive end, this shift amounts to a diminished fear of the unknown; on a negative, that the fantastic and alluring succumbs to dry calculation and soul-destroying routine.

One glance at the present age betrays that its lost rapture is not absolute, even ostensibly. There is still a market for horoscope, crystals, and tarot. Even prominent politicians can entertain superstitious notions on fortune and bad luck. But one can easily deduce that almost everyone, in the end, lets themselves be guided by modern rationality. People may be calmed by the thought that there is no row thirteen in passenger aeroplanes. Yet it is finally the cold, rational technology that they confide in as they set out into the skies.

It isn't necessarily so, either, that technology and natural sciences, or modern life on the whole, must be characterized by words like "dry" or "cold". On the contrary, they can instil both their users and observers with bliss and rapture and stir an insatiable appetite for knowledge. In a broader sense, they can immerse people in a sentiment of comfort, facing constant advances that will make their lives better.

As early as in the 1930s, Martin Heidegger talked about the enchantment of modern times. Contemporary human beings are bewitched by technology and its constant advancements. Yes, they are obsessed with the conviction that everything must surely be calculable, usable and made manageable.¹⁰

Yet Heidegger's line of thought appears to be unfulfilled, seeing as it is sprung from a, for him, typical reluctance towards exact science and technical calculation. The concept may, however, be valuable even without this programmatically negative stance. The enchantment of modernity lies in the actual concept of progress as such.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, innumerable people, not least those in position of power, were compelled by the conviction that our existence is improving. The most assured optimism, expressed consummately

by the mathematician and politician Jean Antoine Condorcet at the end of the eighteenth century, proclaimed improvement in virtually all areas, including morals and the arts, and that there was a close connection between the improvements to different areas of life.

The actual enchantment in such a notion lies in one's conviction that today's unsolved problems will be solved tomorrow, thanks to developments. That attitude led to a remarkable nonchalance, not least regarding technological development, but also different forms of experiments with society. Hoping that the course of progress will solve our problems at some point, we have taken out a mortgage on future.

The past decades have in that respect implied a shift. Fewer let themselves believe in promises of an in every respect improved future. On the contrary, dark clouds are accumulating. Doomsday prophets have always been around. But not only have they increased in numbers: their gloomy predictions are now based on solid knowledge with regard to, for example, environmental ruination.

The untarnished optimism for progress has demanded, as we have witnessed, that all of life's and society's integral components be ingested into the same process. In effect, that construction proved early on to not hold water. Nazi Germany and The Soviet Union managed to combine stern dictatorship with economic, technological, and scientific progress. The People's Republic of China embodies a ready example of the same thing today.

Thus, the great development project that the Enlightenment philosophers once launched does not appear to be cast in a single slab. One might say that contains a hard component — the hard enlightenment — consisting of science (at least the exact one), technology, the economy, and modern rational administration; these elements are indeed closely connected. In these fields, the development process has persisted. For us, it goes without saying that today's computers are better than yesterday's, but that they will be surpassed by tomorrow's. Each research grant is more or less expected to render a significant scientific breakthrough. Economists take for granted that a country's GNP will grow each year. If it does not, something must be wrong.

Within this hard enlightenment, when considered singularly, the enchantment of modernity remains; that which cannot be solved today can be solved tomorrow.

But there are also the soft parts to development, where no advances can be taken for granted or considered natural. The classic development optimists now seem naive in their belief in humanity as morally ascending. And stranger yet, the notion that art should consistently be winning new conquests — who surpasses Dante or Shakespeare? Politics still has its development optimists who believe it to be natural that democracy triumphs. But, at the same time, signs are beginning to pile up that indicate that democracy, even where it is long since established, is facing new, difficult challenges, leading to a growing uncertainty about the future.

Strangest of all, is the changed view on religion. The dominating figure of thought was, for a long time, that modernity and religion were incompatible. Religious beliefs were to perish, as society grew more modern. Its perspectives were to be entirely replaced by those of science, while art was to satisfy people's need for reverence and meaning.

Today, that notion occurs as outmoded. Religion has a stronger hold now than for a long time in many parts of the world. Often, it is paired with hard modernity — it is successfully distributed in the new media, many of its enthusiastic followers themselves, are educated within technology or natural sciences, and its connection to the global economy is evident.

It is warranted here to speak of a renewed enchantment with the modern world. It doesn't at all collide with the rapture in hard modernity itself. On the contrary, both can coalesce in a seemingly harmonious way. George W. Bush could be considered a case in point of the highest level of this synthesis. The president's faith that economy and technology have the ability to overcome current and future challenges is not lesser than his faith in God.

Obviously, religion satisfies important needs in the world that are often referred to as postmodern, but also late modern; for my own part, I prefer the latter denotation. But which are these needs? The ones normally mentioned are the need for context and meaning, and — firmly linked thereto — the need to find or encounter something that is greater than man.

It is also reasonable to view the fascination for religion among European intellectuals in that light. Religion has become a challenge also to them. Even though they do not submit themselves and their belief to it, they recognize it as something to consider with profound sincerity.

Religious anti-intellectualism

The political consequences of a newly aroused religiousness has become subject to an unceasing current of books; perhaps the most voluminous of which is the nearly 800 page *Political Theologies*, including a long list of studies dealing with both historical and contemporary problems.¹¹ But I do not intend here to focus so much on its political as its intellectual challenges, within which one can discern two somewhat contradictory tendencies. The one concerns a more or less extensive anti-intellectualism, the other, a serious, intellectually responsible discussion on how religion and secular philosophy, religion and modern science, and religion and late modern society relate to each other.

Jürgen Habermas, who has come to occupy a central position in the more philosophically applied debate on religion, has in his voluminous essay collection *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion* distinguished two opposing tendencies in the present age: on the one hand a wave of success for religious orthodoxies, on the other hand a strong tendency towards an unabashed naturalism, according to which humankind's psychological life is reduced to physiology of the brain, and its behaviour simply an emanation of its genetic make up.¹² The latter tendency, which we will get back to in concluding, is adopted by a significantly thinner strata of society than the religious orthodoxies, but it plays an important social roll. Moreover, practically all people come into contact with it when they are subject to medical and care services. In that area, naturalism can appear to be an ideal sidekick to economic rationalization. The human being becomes nothing more than an object to both.

One might question whether or not the term "orthodoxy", which Habermas uses, is the most suitable for the movements that currently challenge faith in science. Naturally, they are not related to the different churches, mainly in eastern Europe, referred to as Orthodox, nor are they reminiscent of

seventeenth century orthodoxy in western Europe. They do indeed strive for piousness, but they do it with entirely different tools than the Aristotelianism which Jesuits, Calvinists, and Lutherans developed a couple hundred years ago. An alternative term, which has gained significantly greater popularity, is fundamentalism. But even its suitability may be contended. It is often used in a wide and rather indeterminate sense, and has thereby acquired an altogether demeaning, polemic tone.¹³

Theologically speaking, the term "fundamentalism" originally indicates an unabridged literalism, and is therefore appropriate for neither Salafism nor Pentecostalism. The Salafi's guiding principle is primordial Islam, for Pentecostals, the initial pentecostal Whitsun. It is not the literal, but rather the steadier foundation that is sought in both branches. In English, the term "foundationalism" has been suggested.¹⁴ It is often used to describe philosophical endeavours to find a steady foundation for human knowledge, and could in this case be extended to cover the field of religion, however not entirely admissibly.

The term "fundamentalism", with its enormous currency, will surely remain the customary one to encompass a substantial portion of the religious developments of our times. But persons who use it should keep its insufficiency in mind.

The Salafi's apply themselves back to the initial stages of Islam. Backed up by a *Hadith* from Mohammed, they assert that Islam, as a teaching and principle, reached its perfection during the faith's first three generations (where Mohammed and his contemporaries constituted the first). All later additions must be regarded as distortions and digressions. That is one of the reasons why the Islamic theology, *kalam*, is rejected, seeing as it introduces foreign, Platonic, and Aristotelean elements into the Islamic teachings. Another, broader reason, is the repugnance towards everything that can be seen as intellectual hairsplitting. Islam is to be simple, resolute and not open to dialectic ambiguities.

One needs hardly to add, that contemporary Salafism plays an important political role both within most traditionally Islamic countries and around the world. That role is not unambiguous — Salafism encompasses many more variations than that represented by Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda — but it is substantial. Salafis are, ideologically speaking, anti-modernists, but utilize modern technology to spread their message. TV and Internet are as proverbial facilities to them as to the Pentecostals. It is by means of these media that both have achieved global reach.

In one considerable respect, however, the Muslim line differs from the Christian, namely in its position on capitalism. While the Salafi's regard capitalism as an expression of Western spiritual poverty and sinfulness, the Pentecostal global movement is permeated through and through with capitalist thought. Its many churches are normally run as corporations, with maximization of profit as principle, and individual, pecuniary success regarded in the same spirit as a sign of being favoured by God. He who, despite wholehearted faith, still remains poor is faced with two alternatives: either his faith is not strong enough, or something is wrong with the particular church he belongs to. Pentecostal churches in Africa primarily procreate by dividing; there is a constant pursuit for an even greater devotion and still more ecstatic sermon activity.¹⁵

To the shallow observer, Pentecostalism may appear to be a branch tailored for the rich and successful. It is, true enough, the faith to which George W. Bush and many of his counterparts adhere. But its successes are mainly owing to its immense appeal among society's lower classes. The growing slums in the world metropolises constitute the best breeding grounds for evangelical Christianity, as well as for Salafism. Industrialism, with its fierce urbanization, once brought about a rapid secularization. Socialism partially filled the void left after religion. But today, it is, as Mike Davis points out, "populist Islam and Pentecostal Christianity (and in Bombay, the cult of Shivay)" that fills the same space filled by Socialism and Anarchism a hundred years ago.¹⁶

Thus, in the United States, under the latest Bush administration, the new evangelical idea has reached the highest summits of power and worldly prosperity. Fundamentalist thought is allowed to justify not only the bloody war in Iraq, but also legislation concerning, for example, stem-cell research.

The name "Darwin" has gained a special significance in American debate. President Bush has himself, in interviews, expressed the sentiment that schools in USA should let students be exposed not only to the theory of evolution, but also the Christian Right's own version of biblical creation theory, the one going by the name "Intelligent Design".¹⁷ The theory of "Intelligent Design" acknowledges evolutionary theory to the extent that it presupposes that life on earth accumulated over a considerably much longer period of time than one week. On the other hand, its advocates claim that the processes of life are so complex that it is inherently logical to trace an intelligent creator.

From an intellectual perspective, the argumentation for "intelligent design" is utterly weak. Those supporters who have some form of background in natural sciences do not get their articles published in scientific periodicals for the reason that their contributions are far too full of dubious conclusions or abstruse mathematical reasoning. It is also evident that these advocates are not primarily interested in influencing the scientific, but rather the wider, public debate. They are aware that the great layer of American society, categorized in political terms as rightwing, are greatly influential, not least in regards to important institutions such as schools, libraries, and to some extent also the mass media. Thus, "Intelligent Design" has no scientific nor any general intellectual credibility.¹⁸ It is in an entirely other respect that the rebirth of Christianity, symbolized mainly by the new wave of Pentecostalism, poses a challenge for both scientific thought in a more limited sense and for a reality which asserts itself on what human reasoning can conjecture on its own and nothing else. Pentecostalism's harrowing criticism is not on the intellectual content, but for what risk of dehydrating the actual spirit of life intellectualism can lead to. It puts the tales of The Bible up against a world that can seem grey and rationally cold, a world that does not naturally make room for a *joie de vivre*, far less the ecstasy so important within the Pentecostal movement. It is unclear if this intellectual world can offer any moral guidance, and it certainly entails making the questions of what is good and evil, right and wrong, subject to discussions where one never can hope for any final outcome. Anyone who wishes to come to a simple and seemingly definitive understanding is not comfortable with such ambivalence. And what good is it in regards to suffering, mourning, and death?

Salafism does not pose quite the same sort of challenge — it does not hold ecstasy as an ideal — but its criticism of a strict intellectual attitude is similar. Instead of endless reasoning, it offers solid guidelines and a resolute belief.

The Egyptian writer Sayyid Qutb is for Salafism by now a classic source of inspiration. Qutb, who was executed in 1966 under the rule of Gamal Abdels Nasser, was a thoughtful opponent of both capitalism and communism. The world is only superficially divided into an Eastern Bloc and a Western Bloc, he wrote in 1949. Both Blocs are only fighting over worldly influence and market advantages, not about ideas and convictions. The real border has both these heavyweights on the one side, both impregnated with the same materialistic disposition, and Islam on the other.

Qutb did nevertheless imply that Islam is compatible with modern technology. Solely western values pose a deadly threat. The goal of life may never be material profits without fidelity to Islam's original commandments. To these, he also counts caring for other people's wellbeing; there is a social program in the Muslim brotherhood which Qutb belonged to and to which he still must be the most important thinker.¹⁹

Qutb's thoughts reverberate throughout Salafism but often in a more militant form. The belief that the power of human reasoning in itself can come to lasting conclusions is rejected with the same degree of certainty as within fundamental Christianity.

The capacity of reasoning, and its limits

The wave of fundamentalism aggregates an immediate background to the renewed interest in theological questions so considerable among the western, and particularly European thinkers over the past decades. But critique of the secular rationale comes also from different religious adherents who in no way discredit the guiding power of human rationale as such. Their point is rather that this rationale is not sufficient, but must hence be enriched with a religious perspective.

The leading theological traditions within both Islam and Christianity — as within Judaism — are pervaded by that the religious decree is to be interpreted with help of philosophical tools with origins in Greek philosophy. A secular rationale has come to serve as a guide, but has also always been described as insufficient. In order to arrive at the complete truth about the world and life one needs revelation or in a broader sense, those guidelines given by the holy scriptures.

This position was recently, with a next to paradigmatic clarity, assumed by the German theologian Joseph Ratzinger — the current pope Benedictus XVI — in his dialogue with Jürgen Habermas in January 2004.²⁰ Ratzinger, who is a typical exponent of the learned Catholic, in particular of the Thomist tradition, brings up the question of whether or not natural law, by custom important in both Catholic and secular thought, has lost its appeal in present day. The word "nature" no longer represents something unquestionably reasonable — evolutionary biology renders such a notion impossible. That which remains of the original thought applies only to human rights, which according to Ratzinger must be complemented by a corresponding set of "human duties". But rationale alone cannot in the long run guarantee that either rights or duties are defended. Rationale, if left by itself, can be abused in many different ways. Ratzinger's conclusion is that rationale needs religion in order to not go astray. But, correspondingly, religion also proves to rely on rationale, without which it is prone to degenerate into unruly fanaticism.²¹

Habermas, for his part, places his trust in the idea that both rights and obligations will arise out of actual human interaction, that is to say: the activity of communication. But at the same time, he admits that what he calls "post–metaphysic thought" is clearly at a loss when it comes to notions of the good or exemplary life. Such notions must be discernible in order to give people tangible guidelines for their conduct and their dreams.

This philosophy has something to learn from religion, under the premise that it is freed from dogmatism and coercive guilt. Secular thought still has insufficient expressive potentiality and lacking sensitivity in dealing with unsuccessful lives, unreasonable life plans, or polluted societal conditions. Religion stands as better equipped. When Christianity once was united with the Greek philosophical tradition, the latter was enriched with crucial concepts by the former; Habermas mentions as an example "embodiment", "disposal", and "fulfilment". Post–metaphysical thought has renounced all claims, and Habermas anticipates the need for translations from religious language. He mentions one example, namely how the Jewish–Christian notion that mankind is the effigy of God is translated to a secular notion of human value. Of course, this is no new translation, but Habermas feels that its power must be renewed, perhaps in such a way that a human being must be treated as if they were the image God, even if there doesn't happen to be any God.²²

This is not so enlightening; tangibility is not the German philosopher's strong point. He does, however, refer to an earlier master of precisely this tradition, namely Walter Benjamin. Benjamin could endow secular notions with the entire power of the religious imaginary world. In another text, Habermas mentions Benjamin's "anamnestic solidarity". This anamnestic solidarity becomes the equivalence of the notion of the final judgement. At the final judgement, all wrongdoings shall come to light and be punished. But when the notion of such a definitive jurisdiction is set aside, a void emerges. That is when the collective memory must come into effect: people must feel the deepest solidarity with those who in the past have been victims of wrongdoings and suffering.²³

In a more general sense, one can assume that Habermas has Benjamin's so called messianism in mind. This messianism, which grew strong during Benjamin's final years, when his confidence in the Communist utopia had been ruptured and Nazism directly threatened his life, can be seen as a belief or a hope despite everything or contrary to all reasoning.

When Habermas gives examples of Benjamin's secularizing of the religious use of language, he is in a rather more relaxed state of mind. It is not unreasonable to here compare his connection to Benjamin with that which his former opponent, Jacques Derrida, made in some of his later writings. Thereto, one thinks not least of *Spectres de Marx* (1993) — Derrida's book on Karl Marx, or rather, on different ways in which Marx, according to Derrida, still proves to be indispensable, even since the failure of his great program. In it, the messianist motif appears as some sort of utopia in a world full of injustice. But the strange thing here is that Marx's theses on mankind's emancipation is given what one might call a post–Marxist signification: it is not that a new world shall arise, but that the old world shall light up in hope of justice.²⁴

Both Benjamin, Habermas, and Derrida are here situated close to a tradition which can be traced to Marx himself, and even further back, to an emphasis on giving religious tales, symbols, and affirmations an altogether inner–worldly meaning. This is central to Marx' entire ideology project, with its ambition to

translate the "heavenly" content to solid reality. The modern master of the tradition is Ernst Bloch, who Habermas also mentions.²⁵ Bloch uses central elements of the Jewish–Christian conceptual field in his thought, but he does so solely to thereby clarify mankind's conditions in the visible, material world. That is an example of how he gives hope, so central to Jewish Messianism as well as Christian faith, a vital secular importance in his great work *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*.

When Habermas mentions Bloch, he mentions both Benjamin and Adorno in the same breath. But I would like to concede that there lies an important difference between Bloch and the others (as between Bloch and Derrida). The difference can be expressed in terms of modernity's enchantment. Bloch is still totally in awe at modernity and is convinced that development will imply not only scientific, technological, and economical improvements, but also a world without injustice and without exploitation. Benjamin and Adorno are in that respect disillusioned. The world will always be an arena for overwhelming problems and actual or impending injustices, to be combated as best one can. In this fight, religious symbols and stories can play an important and guiding roll, even though they ultimately are human creations.

Among those philosophers who have over the past years been fascinated by religion's, and more specifically Christianity's, ability to arouse people's enthusiasm and make them devoted to a great assignment, is Slavoj Žižek. He portrays himself as a convinced atheist and even claims that atheism is pronounced in the actual key moment of Christianity, on the cross where Jesus cries: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" God has abandoned mankind, however the notion of God lives on. It fills them with *Geist* — and Žižek uses the word *Geist* here, in its rich and ambiguous, Hegelian sense, which includes both imaginable transcendental perspectives, but which also — and in Žižek's case, undoubtedly — can be interpreted entirely inner-worldly sense, namely as the *spirit* which fills a group of people, a parish or a collective project. This is how he seems to read Christianity's principal immediate significance. Christianity is able, in an era of inordinate capitalism, to gather devoted multitudes with sights set on something other than consumption and exploitation. Christianity, parallel to Marxism (or Marxism–Leninism, which Žižek still adheres to) can for this reason be seen as the only effective counter-force to capitalism.²⁶

A chapter on its own deals with the fascination exerted by one of Christianity's key figures, Paul, on numerous European philosophers in recent years, among them Žižek.²⁷ This interest takes on many expressions: from Giorgio Agamben's meticulous close reading of the Roman in *Il tempo che resta* (2000)²⁸ to Alain Badiou's considerably freer account on Saint Paul (1997).²⁹ Common to all of them, however, is the fascination with Paul as the creator of something entirely new; a Church, a community across borders, a project with the whole charge of eschatology. Badiou is above all captivated by the idea that Paul, who never met Jesus but who, among those who stood close to him, managed to enforce his conviction that the Messiah also was also the Messiah to the pagans and not only to the Jews. In Badiou's view, Paul thereby becomes the first universalist. Agamben, for his part, is mainly occupied by Paul's messianism, and poses the question in relation to our own times: what type of Messianism would there be today? He places messianism against the apocalyptic attitude. The apocalyptic is certain about the future: the final days are nigh. Paul, with his messianist attitude speaks of an uncertain future, the time that remains. Agamben draws a parallel to the insurgent on the one hand, and the revolutionary on the other. The revolutionary knows what shall come

after the revolution. The insurgent sees only that the current condition must be vanquished.

The interest in Paul emerges as a sort of focal point of the renewed interest among secularized European intellectuals for religion's, and in particular Christianity's purely inner-worldly potential.

Devotion, distance, and the enchantment of reality

The attitude which Zizek, Agamben, Badiou and others hold is miles away from Michel Onfray's and Richard Dawkins' militant atheism. Simplified, one might say that while the former write in light of the secularized European society, the latter rather have our times' religious mass-movements, with their fundamentalist intolerance in view. Dawkins, the biologist, feels the threat of the anti-Darwinist plots from various self-proclaimed specialists on the origins of life. Onfray, the philosopher, turns with rage against the anti-intellectualism he finds within the three monotheist religions.

For my part, I feel a great apprehension towards antagonistic atheism. Is it really a productive disposition: doesn't it just cause more pain? It is easy to understand Dawkins's agitation over the attacks on evolutionary biology. This grand theory, which over the past decades has gained further informational force and internal beauty, is threatened not by any scientific competitor but by what would appear to be pure ignorance. But isn't the British biologist's tone of voice much too overwrought? Onfray, for his part, engages in a type of malevolent interpretation of the Bible and the Koran which hardly contributes to any deeper understanding of the importance of religion today.

Jürgen Habermas's attitude seems considerably more productive. He confesses to what he calls a "soft naturalism".³⁰ By that he implies a belief that the human world has its origins in nature but that everything within it cannot be reduced to natural courses of events. Consciousness is not just an insignificant by-product of different mental processes, as a "hard" naturalism would maintain. It does indeed originate from a biological evolution, but well used constitutes a precondition for the entire human civilization. Within this civilization, religion also plays an important part, and thereto not only by way of thought-disorder and intolerance, as Onfray and Dawkins would have it, but also as creator of indispensable cultural values.

For my own part, I am also apprehensive about the term "naturalism" and prefer to use the older term "materialism", even if it also is ambiguous. The synthesis "non-reductive materialism" is on the other hand unambiguous: it is the conception that reality is comprised of a number of levels where each one has its origin in the closest, lower level, but where each higher level implies new qualities and conditions which cannot be explained with reference to lower levels. What levels one wants to distinguish relies, in the end, upon the human knowledge. For now, it seems reasonable to differ between inorganic and living material; and to a majority, it is self-evident that the human world is regarded as its own level. But the number of levels, also depends on how closely we observe an object of study. The development of a particular biological species or humanity itself can be seen as a great number of levels where new constellations are constantly created. Non-reductive materialism is, in the end, a theory of development, according to which it life manifests a time-based continuity back to a comparably simple beginning (today, it is "big bang"), but where constantly new conditions can arise.³¹ One normally speaks of emergent qualities.

It is also possible to equip this world view with a greater emotional force than that which the dry term "non-reductive materialism" can provide. Denis Diderot, the great French Enlightenment thinker, can speak of "le matérialisme enchanté".³² It is a suitable alternative name for the same notion. The attribute "enchanted" adds a suggestion of the bewildering and the wonderful in this great process of reality.

We may interject that Diderot lived in an age when the conclusions of research really could invoke awe. Are we not inevitably more blasé today? We know that the universe is so infinitely great. We know that its smallest known elements are so staggeringly small. We know that biological evolution has proceeded over billions of years; our genealogical tables lose their way off across the savannah, down into the water, all the way off to the warm, primordial soup of life. We can easily find information on all of this on the web, as surely as my neighbour's blog. We can see programs about it on TV when we want. It has become trivial.

But it is precisely this trivialization we must overcome. All knowledge begins with wonder, Aristotle says in his *Metaphysics*. One might add that it is also kept alive by wonder. A Swedish biologist and writer, Stefan Edman, has recently published a book called just that — "Wonder" (Förundran)³³— within which he tries to awaken in us a renewed fascination for the strange affinity of the universal and everything living. Stefan Edman is a Christian and ultimately regards the wonderments of the world as a sign of a creative hand.

I can be smitten by his fascination but not by his belief. To imagine a creator behind all of this is to set up a simple explanation to something much greater. To say that someone has in one or another way made the world, in remote analogy to what people can achieve with their tools and machines —doesn't that render the world shrunken and too humanized?

When we say that the universe arouses wonder, we have nothing else to compare it to other than its parts, and particularly to those that humans can create. The entirety is greater than the parts. Does that lead to the conclusion that there must be an other entirety which is even greater than the entirety, and which we call God?

One of the most important functions of religious faith is to face human beings with something that is greater than the human being itself. Self-overestimation is otherwise one of the greatest risks human beings face, imprisoned as they are in themselves, their times, and their civilization.

But the notion of God's greatness can only be exposed through the greatness of the universe. Do we then need God?

The great challenge lies on another level: what guiding principles might there be for mankind in a world without God? Thereby, we are back to the debate between Habermas and Ratzinger. Ratzinger believes in a divinely sanctioned moral. Habermas regards moral, at best, as a result of free communicational activity.

But, if we don't believe in God why would we then believe in a divinely sanctioned moral? Furthermore, we see that moral which is built on religious grounds, proves to give far from unequivocal answers.

We have to comply with that the human society is an enterprise free from guarantees. Singular human life is also devoid of guarantees. We are adults and not children in this world, and as adults we are, in a sense, at the mercy of ourselves, both as individuals and as a collective, in an existence which holds both cruelty and love, suffering and enjoyment, happiness and grief.

There is an image of God in which God is not manifest as the ruler of the world, but as a God who, together with the humans, fights evils. It is an image I have a great weakness for; it is very beautiful. But what reason do we have to believe in such a God? Is he (or she) more than an idealized human?

Mankind emerged late as a species — on a geological scale, it was just recently. During this short period, it has achieved a lot. At first perhaps we think of the negative: all the suffering that people have caused people through war and oppression. But mankind's historical development is also an enchanting tale of ever new accomplishments, from the rock-paintings, agriculture, the potter's wheel and the written word to the Internet and biotechnology. It has created a culture where she through the arts and religion and science established for herself a universe of symbols, which is as remarkable as the visible universe.

All of this also deserves our wonderment. So much has been able to evolve from so little.

This wonderment is constantly being balanced with a fear: that all of this can be destroyed. Mankind is as much a destroyer as a creator.

To express our wonderment and our fear, culture, distinctly, presents an inexhaustible repertoire. A great deal of it is clad in the robes of religion. That does not make it less usable. In the same way as a religious content could be extracted out of the entirely inner-worldly love poem *Song of Songs*, in the same way, can the *Book of Revelations*, Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, or the great Sufi poets, express thoughts, feelings and atmospheres which to us are devoid of the religious correlate, God, and still lose nothing in value or intensity.

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

² Michel Onfray, *Traité d'athéologie* (Paris: Editions Grasset, 2006).

³ Blandine Chelini-Pont, "le réenchantement discret des mondialisations religieuses", *Esprit* 3–4, Mars–Avril 2007, p. 163.

⁴ Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the world: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999). — Another, more recent book on the same topic is Hans Joas and Klaus Wiegand (red.), *Säkularisierung und die Weltreligionen* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2007).

⁵ Olivier Roy, *La laïcité face à l'Islam* (Paris: Stock, 2005), in particular p. 14. Jean-Paul Willaime regards this wave of secularization as typical for what he calls ultramodernity; see his article "Reconfigurations ultramodernes", *Esprit* 3–4, Mars–Avril 2007, p. 149 and pass. See also Olivier Roy's own article, "Le découplage de la religion et de la culture: une exception musulmane?", *ibid.* p. 242–52.

⁶ Interestingly enough, the French translation of Berger is called *Le réenchantement du monde* (Paris: Bayard, 2002).

⁷ See:

http://www.uni-bonn.de/www/Evangelische_Theologie/Dekanat/Dekanatsrede_WS_2004_2005.html

⁸ Slavoj Zizek in Creston Davis, John Milbank and Slavoj Zizek (ed.) *Theology and the Political* (Durham & London: Duke University Press 2005).

⁹ Weber brings up the term *Entzauberung* in, among other places, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (1920, 4th edition, Tübingen 1956), p. 735ff. W. M. Sprondel gives a brief overview of the

- term in the article "Entzauberung" in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Bd 2, Darmstadt 1972) column 564f.
- 10 Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie* (in *Gesamtausgabe*, Bd 65, Frankfurt a.M. 1989) p. 124f.
 - 11 Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (ed.), *Political Theologies. Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).
 - 12 Jürgen Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion. Philosophische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt a.M.; Suhrkamp, 2005), p. 7 and pass.
 - 13 Contemporary literature on the topic fundamentalism is growing at an explosive rate. The foundation was laid by the Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby led *The Fundamentalism Project*, which was presented in a number of volumes with the same title; among them see particularly the first, *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Ed. Martin E. Marty och R. Scott Appleby, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). — Peter Berger criticises the use of the word "fundamentalism" which he finds demeaning and not fully apposite; a.a. p.6f. This opinion, which has been presented also by many other authors, is important. "Fundamentalism" easily becomes an insult.
 - 14 Niels Henrik Gregersen did so when he commented on this article, when I presented it as key-note at the conference *Religion in the 21st Century* 9.22.2007.
 - 15 An influential presentation of this development is André Corten and Ruth Fratani (eds.), *Between Babel and Pentecost: Pentecostalism transnational in Africa and Latin America* (London: Hurst, 2001). See also the excellent and rich section "La vague évangélique et pentecôtiste", in *Esprit* 3-4 (Mars-Avril, 2007) p. 156-230 with articles by both Corten and Marshall(-Fratani). Well worth reading is also David Martin, "The Evangelical Upsurge and Its Political Implications", in Berger, a.a. p. 37-49.
 - 16 Mike Davis, "Planet of Slums: Urban Involution and the Informal Proletariat", in *New Left Review* nr 26/2004, p. 5-34; the quotation from p. 30.
 - 17 About the interview, and reactions on it, see for example Peter Baker and Peter Slevin, "Bush Remarks on 'Intelligent Design' Theory Fuel Debate", *Washington Post* 3.8.2005. — The Bush administration's careless way of dealing with science is depicted in Chris Mooney, *The Republican War on Science* (New York: Basic Books, 2005, revised ed. 2007).
 - 18 There are a few extinguishing settlements with the matters of the theses on "Intelligent Design". An excellent example of such is Matt Young and Taner Edis (eds.), *Why Intelligent Design Fails: A Scientific Critique of the New Creationism* (New Brunswick, N.J., and London: Rutgers University Press, 2004)
 - 19 A meticulous, close to near-sighted examination of Sayyid Qatb's political thinking and relationship to Islam is given by Sayed Khatab, in *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb: The Theory of jahiliyyah* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006) — His take on the world situation from 1949 is represented there as a motto for the entire book. It hails from the period when Qutb was situated in USA; see thereof p. 138-46.
 - 20 Habermas's and Ratzinger's introductory contribution is reproduced in Jürgen Habermas – Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung. Über Vernunft und Religion* (Mit einem Vorwort herausgegeben von Florian Schuller, Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 2005).
 - 21 Ibid. p. 50-57.
 - 22 Ibid. p. 31ff.
 - 23 Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, p. 250. — Habermas's introduction to the discussion with Ratzinger is by the way also inserted in *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*; the reference to Benjamin and the need for translation, p. 116.
 - 24 See first and foremost Derrida's list over unjust conditions which must be contravened, *Spectres de Marx. L'État de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1993), p. 124-55.
 - 25 Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, p. 240.
 - 26 Zizek has written several articles on religion and held innumerable lectures on the same topic. The most important among his writings on the topic is "The 'Thrilling Romance of Orthodoxy'", in Davis – Milbank — Zizek (eds.) *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 25-71 and "Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence", in Zizek — Santner — Reinhard (eds.), *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 2006), p. 134-190, as well as the part on Christianity as a "lost case" in *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2007).
 - 27 An excellent summary of this interest is found in the periodical *Ésprit* theme issue "L'événement saint Paul: juif, grec, romain, chrétien" (Février 2003) with articles by, among others Stanislas Breton, Paul Ricoeur and Jean-Claude Monod.

- 28 Giorgio Agamben, *Il tempo che resta: Un commento alla lettera ai romani* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000).
- 29 Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul. La fondation de l'universalisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997).
- 30 Habermas, a.a. p. 157ff, p. 171f and p. 215.
- 31 I refer to my own *Motsatsernas Spel: Fredrich Engels filosofi och 1800-talets vetenskaper* (Staffanstorps: Cavefors, 1977) Bd II, p. 112–17 and p. 236ff or *Das Spiel der Gegensätze: Friedrich Engels Philosophie und die Wissenschaften des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt, Campus, 1986), esp. p. 162–66.
- 32 Élisabeth de Fontenay, *Diderot ou le matérialisme enchanté* (Paris: Grasset, 1981).
- 33 Stefan Edman, *Förundran. Tankar om vår stund på jorden* (Örebro: Cordia, 2006).

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