

Gods and Monsters

A British philosopher seeks political redemption in the spiritual realm

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THE FAITH OF THE FAITHLESS: EXPERIMENTS IN POLITICAL THEOLOGY BY SIMON CRITCHLEY BROOKLYN, NY: VERSO. 288 PAGES. \$25.

When the center cannot hold, public attention turns to the passionate intensity of those who are destroying it or amusing themselves with its destruction. But what becomes of the public itself in this process—and of citizens' dignity and prospects?

Aristotle considered humans beastly without the sphere of "the political," through which we envision and bind ourselves to common undertakings. Political "speech acts" are imaginative, almost fictive, projections into an unknowable future, but our choices of some fictions over others have consequences. If politics falters, words and deeds soon part company, as Hannah Arendt warned; the words become empty, the deeds brutal, and citizens the subjects of accident and force.

Simon Critchley, a British philosopher at the New School for Social Research, has scant faith in what he considers the exhausted fictions of liberal democracy, human goodness, and progress, and he's inclined to view the liberal rule of law as a routinization of injustices that, "in an age of bio-politics, taps deeper and deeper into the reservoir of life."

Acceding to a darker conservative "realist" view, he invites us on an odyssey—or, more aptly, a pilgrimage—through classical, early Christian, early modern, and post-modern realms in search of a faith deep enough to sustain "foci of desertion . . . of rallying points . . . of places to take shelter from the control of a civilization that is headed for the abyss."

He calls his four chapters "experiments in political theology" because they resist choosing between secularism and theism. Still, Critchley's explorations strike me as intensely personal soundings in a murky sea of faith, quite unlike some other academics' clamberings onto the "religion" bandwagon in search of relevance or curatorial discretion.

Critchley contemplates the failure of Rousseau and his philosophical successors to identify the elusive roots of the motivation for liberal-democratic speech acts that distinguish us from animals. He likewise finds himself exploring prepolitical, prelinguistic human experiences of faith that distinguish us in a less flattering fashion—as "killer apes with metaphysical longing."

The book becomes even stranger on its tour through Pauline Christianity, long a wellspring of reformist resistance to ecclesiastical hierarchies but also a vortex of annihilation of the worldly self, and therefore of politics: In Saint Paul's metaphysical vision, we're all cast into Creation helpless, indeterminate, hurtling toward our equally helpless and opaque deaths. Following Paul, medieval Christian mystics, and, in a secular vein, Martin Heidegger, Critchley sees the brevity and inherent futility of our lives as a humbling debt or a puzzle we can't hope to resolve through our willful, grandiose failings on earth.

Critchley entertains but stops short of embracing the Christian response, a life lived in love through Christ the Redeemer. He quotes Paul: "I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in Me" (Galatians 2:20). He renders the grim consequences of losing such faith by discussing the fourteenth-century Christian mystic and heretic Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple and Annihilated Souls and Who Remain Only in Wanting and Desire of Love*.

Waving aside Norman Cohn's Freudian characterization of such intimations as psychic introversions of "gigantic parental images," Critchley suggests that Porete's mysticism doesn't promote immoralism by rejecting church and state. Rather, he contends this antinomian faith points toward the life-giving truth "that morality has to flow from freedom by being consistent with a principle that is located not in the individual but in its divine source: the Free Spirit that is held in common."

Arguably, this vision anticipated that of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and other practitioners of the non-violent, cooperative power described wonderfully in Jonathan Schell's 2003 study *The Unconquerable World*. But Critchley mentions such modern, bottom-up renewals of morality only

briefly, perhaps because they're more disciplined politically than the mystical anarchism that attracts him.

Nor is mystical anarchism reconcilable with the republican constitutional patriotism favored among secular humanists. Anticipating our own republic's collapse, Critchley notes that Paul foreshadowed Rome's downfall by avowing, apropos its powerless Christian faithful, that "the things that are not" have come among us "to bring to nought those things that are" (1 Corinthians 1:28).

Critchley keeps returning to Porete's assertion, secularized by Heidegger, that the real abyss in human experience, "deep beyond all depths," as Porete put it, is the gap between us willfully errant individuals and the overwhelming sublimity of Creation. Because that abyss is widened by our very willfulness, it yawns not only at our feet but also in our hearts.



Andrei Rublev, *Apostle Paul*, ca. 1410.

Willfulness is our original sin, and never mind how we came by it; every legal order posits it and curbs it, Critchley notes, and, with Søren Kierkegaard, he suggests that only something like Christian love can temper it, even in unbelievers' loving enactments of faith.

At times this tour de force becomes a tour de farce: Critchley's academic work among would-be anarchists and postcolonialists at the University of Essex and the New School responds to a *gauchiste* Left consumed with a resentment toward liberal democracy that he partly shares. His entanglements in that preoccupation and idiom mar this rich if loopy survey of efforts to bridge the abysses separating Western religion from philosophy, and both from politics.

Thus a subsection touting sublimation over sexual libertinism is titled "Mysticism Is Not About the Business of Fucking." Another illustrates satirically, as follows, his nemesis Slavoj Žižek's contention that having an ideology needn't mean succumbing to deception because we *know* that our lives are structured by fantasies: "The punter knows that the dominatrix who is trampling his balls is doing it for the money," Critchley writes, "yet he believes in the fantasy nonetheless. We are fetishists in practice, not in theory. . . . This is Žižek's compelling diagnostic insight."

"What consequences for action follow?" Critchley asks. "Are we not eternally doomed to an unending plague of more fantasies?" He doesn't answer his own question, call-

ing faith a "supreme fiction" but also "a lived subjective commitment to . . . an infinite demand." Subjective, that is, and not fictional: Weaving interpretations of Saint Paul, the mystic Porete, and Heidegger's study of early Christianity, he makes the "infinite demand" compelling enough to give a nonbeliever pause.

But Critchley runs into trouble, I think, when he imagines religious and secular faiths erupting into politics to rescue us from today's routinized, soulless injustice. Certainly that has happened in Gandhi's politics, the American civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, Poland's resistance to Soviet domination, and Iranian demonstrations against the mullahcracy, and Critchley wants his tensely wrought "faith of the faithless" to continue disrupting liberalism's febrile misunderstanding of the self as an autonomous political subject. Yet he acknowledges that "the politicization of theological concepts leads ineluctably to the attempt to purify virtue through violence." A mystical anarchism may be indispensable in insurgencies but odious in governing.

Ultimately, he can't quite shake the conservative philosopher John Gray's judgment that the secular-humanist alternative to faith in politics is really only a delusive "chapter in the history of religion." He shares Gray's disdain for neoconservatives' secular millenarianism and rejects the illiberal fictions of leftists, such as Louis Althusser, Alain Badiou, and Žižek, who celebrate violence: He finds "compelling" Badiou's endorsements of radical speech acts that rupture established political structures and law, but sensibly adds that Badiou's "taste for dictatorship" is in fact "distasteful."

But Critchley also despairs of liberalism's capacity to withstand the political philosopher (and Nazi "crown jurist") Carl Schmitt's authoritarian judgment that states can realize true sovereignty only in exercising the power to suspend all law and parliamentary deliberation. Only then, Schmitt argued, could civil institutions confirm a self-enacting political will in a cold-eyed recognition of human depravity.

Critchley rejects that judgment—yet he repeatedly acknowledges the allure of other variations of authoritarianism and mysticism that vie openly now for our embrace, and for our submission, in a time of liberal demoralization. And he makes the unsettling confession that "although talk of authenticity and 'precious inner being' leaves me somewhat cold . . . I find significant . . . the connection between the idea of self-annihilation and anarchism . . . a subjective transformation, a self-killing that renounces the killing of others." He ends by imagining, as Paul and Gandhi did, an invisible empire based on transformations of the self.

Ultimately, Critchley's contribution isn't Christic, mystical, anarchist, or Heideggerian; it's a kind of spiritual fellow-traveling that abandons the humanist political faith of Aristotle and Arendt for . . . what? Critchley decides that, "despite our occasional and transient enthusiasms and Obamaisms, we are all political realists; indeed, most of us are passive nihilists and cynics. This is why we still require a belief in something like original sin, namely, that there is something ontologically defective about what it means to be human."

This leaves little hope for the deliberative democratic faith shared among the ordinary people who service centers for apostles of doubt such as the New School. For most of us, Truth emerges not from religious revelation, radical pronouncements of the General Will, or even mystical self-enactment, but from the ongoing, trust-building processes of deliberative democracy and the constitutive fictions we weave around those processes. A real faith of the faithless surprises us time and again—as it has indeed recently in the Occupy Wall Street protests—by finding magic and mystery enough in democratic fictions that we can live by and redevelop against the darker ones that would lure us into submission. □

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