

## A Germ of Tranquil Atheism

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Paper for Lund Conference, 19-20 October 2017

### Introduction:

The posters that announced the theme of this conference – the death of Jesus and the birth of Christianity – prominently displayed the following quote from Gilles Deleuze's *Francis Bacon – The Logic of Sensation*: “For Christianity subjected the form, or rather the Figure, to a fundamental deformation. Insofar as God was incarnated, crucified, ascended to heaven, and so on, the form or the Figure was no longer rigorously linked to essence, but to what, in principle, is its opposite: the event, or even the changeable, the accident” (Deleuze 2005, 124).

I begin my reflections by widening the frame and observing the context within which this quote occurs. This reframing, I will argue, provides a new perspective on the theme, a perspective that encourages us to playfully invert (or, Deleuze might say, to pervert) it: the birth of “Christ” and the death of “Christianity.” I borrowed my title for this talk from the sentence that immediately follows the one cited in the quotation from Deleuze above: “Christianity contains a *germ of tranquil atheism* that will nurture painting; the painter can easily be indifferent to the religious subject he is asked to represent.” Deleuze begins the paragraph that follows these lines by emphasizing that he

“only took Christianity as a first point of reference that it would be necessary to look beyond” (Deleuze 2005, 125).

Looking beyond. This, for Deleuze, is the only point in referring to Christianity. Instead of remaining transfixed by the image of a crucified (or resurrected) Jesus, or any other religious Figure for that matter, constantly trying to reinterpret the privileged Icons of one’s in-group in light of the latest scientific findings and philosophical fashions, as liberal theologians are so often wont to do, we can follow Deleuze in taking Christian traditions and other monotheistic molarities seriously enough to extract the atheist machine they contain (and constrain) and then look beyond them, extending the lines of flight opened up by their molecularization.

This paper takes three steps. First, I highlight the significance of the event of Christianity for Deleuze, which has almost nothing to do with Jesus’ death (or life, or message, or resurrection), and almost everything to do with the secretion of atheism. Second, I explain how Deleuze’s critique of the repressive and oppressive mechanisms of Christianity (the poster child for the Despotic machine) and of the symbol of Christ (the poster child for the White Face) can be complemented and strengthened by insights from the bio-cultural sciences of religion. The notion of “Christ” was *born* in human minds and *borne* in human groups in the same basic way that every other supernatural agent ritually engaged by a religious in-group has been conceived and nurtured throughout history.

Third, like all such assemblages held together by shared belief in imagined punitive gods, Christianity, along with its obsession with the religious Figure of Christ, will eventually die – either sooner (if we take demographic

projections seriously) or later (if we take astronomical projections seriously). The question, then, is whether we can be worthy of *that* event: the death of Christianity, whose timely demise, ironically, is hurried along by that “germ of tranquil atheism” that it could not help but secrete.

## **Part I. Deleuze and the secretion of atheism**

Some of you may already be familiar with my presentation of some of these issues in other works (Shults 2014a, 2014b, 2015, 2016), so I will set out the main points here briefly. When I was a Christian theologian, all those many years ago, and first encountered the work of Gilles Deleuze, I tried to do what (relatively liberal) Christian theologians have always done with non-Christian philosophers whom they find fascinating: borrow insights from his corpus that could be adopted and adapted to fit into – or “reform” – the version of Christianity maintained in the social networks within which I found myself (American evangelicalism).

The more I read Deleuze, however, the more I realized that the atheist force of his philosophy cannot be so easily tamed. It resists the domestication of sacerdotal theology. It breaks transcendent Images that shackle thought. It escapes the priestly curse on desire. Or, at least, it motivated me to do so. I became or, better, I am becoming-atheist. After decades of experience as a Christian theologian, I am not so naïve as to think that my erstwhile colleagues will (soon) stop borrowing from Deleuze as they try to find ways to postpone the death of Christianity. My goal in this section is far less ambitious. I simply want

to point out that this sort of attempt at the apologetic absorption of Deleuzian concepts into Christianity is self-defeating: those concepts were created in order to release the germs of tranquil atheism contained within religion. Some of the most interesting inventions in the Deleuzian corpus are explicitly linked to atheism. Here I offer just a few examples to support this contention.

In the *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* project with Guattari, Deleuze made it clear that the goal of schizoanalysis is to challenge the striations and segmentations of the socius effected by priestly figures, whether psychoanalytic or religious (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 171). Escaping Oedipus involves attaining “those regions of an auto-production of the unconscious where the unconscious is no less atheist than orphan – immediately atheist, immediately orphan” (1983, 65-66). For the schizoanalyst, the unconscious is not mediated by Oedipus or Christ (or any other religious Figure): it is *immediately* orphan *and* atheist. Atheism and schizoanalysis cannot be separated. “For the unconscious of schizoanalysis is unaware of persons, aggregates, and laws, and of images, structures, and symbols. It is an orphan, just as it is an anarchist and an *atheist*” (1983, 342). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze observes that “nomads do not provide a favorable terrain for religion; the man of war is always committing an offense against the priest or the god... The nomads have a sense of the absolute, but a singularly *atheistic* one” (1987, 422).

In *What is Philosophy?*, his last co-authored book with Guattari, Deleuze argued that “there is always an atheism to be extracted from religion.” In fact, Deleuze singles out Christianity as that religion that *secretes atheism* “more than any other religion” (Deleuze and Guattari 1996, 92). Christianity may secrete *more* than other religions, but it is not qualitatively special: Deleuze explicitly

separates *all* religion from philosophy, art, and science. The latter three “cast planes over the chaos... (they) want us to tear open the firmament and plunge into the chaos. We defeat it only at this price” (1996, 202). Each of these struggles with chaos in its own way, “bringing back” varieties (art), variables (science) or variations (philosophy). Efforts within all three disciplines are always and already bound up in the struggle against *opinion* – especially opinions woven into sacred canopies defended by religious hierarchies. “Wherever there is transcendence, vertical Being, imperial State in the sky or on earth, there is *religion*; and there is Philosophy only where there is immanence ...only friends can set out a plane of immanence as *a ground from which idols have been cleared*” (1996, 43).

Deleuze expresses astonishment that so many philosophers still find the death of God tragic. “Atheism,” he insists, “is not a drama but the philosopher’s *serenity* and philosophy’s *achievement*.” The dissolution of God is not a problem. “Problems begin only afterward, when the *atheism* of the concept has been attained” (1996, 92). Why, then, would the Deleuzian Friend continue to devote attention to religious ideas, such as concepts of God that hold up monotheistic molarities? First of all, chipping away at such repressive representations is valuable in and of itself. But Deleuze suggests another motivation for poking around religious and theological edifices. “Religions,” he argues, “are worth much less than the nobility and the courage of the *atheisms that they inspire*” (Deleuze 2007, 364).

Already in *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze encouraged us not to judge the atheist from the point of view of the belief that supposedly drives him, but to judge the believer “by the *violent atheist* by which he is inhabited, the *Antichrist*

eternally given 'once and for all' within grace" (1994, 96). In *Logic of Sense*, Deleuze insists that there has only ever been one ethics, the *amor fati* of the humor-actor who is "an anti-God (*contradieu*)" – the Stoic sage who "belongs to the Aion" and opposes the "divine present of Chronos" (2004, 170-71). This link between atheism and schizoanalysis will come as no surprise to those familiar with Deleuze's earlier single-authored works of philosophical portraiture, in which he consistently hammers away at religious resentment and traditional notions of God, and celebrates the atheistic effects of Nietzsche, Spinoza, Hume, and even Kant.

Atheism is in fact being secreted and spreading throughout the globe, especially in the West, where the intellectual plausibility and political dominance of Christianity continues to be undermined as naturalistic explanations of the world and secular inscriptions of society grow in popularity. Demographic projections, mathematical modeling, and computer simulations all consistently predict that this slow death will continue (Pew Research Center 2015; Twenge et al. 2015; Kosmin and Keysar 2013; Stinespring and Cragun 2015; Shults et al. in press), at least in contexts where people have access to education and governments provide a basic sense of existential security. But what does any of this have to do with Jesus? This brings us to the next stage of the argument.

## **Part II. How Christ was born(e)**

The main focus of this conference has been on the death of Jesus and the role it may have played in the emergence of the Christian religion. To be more precise:

how did reflection on the trauma of this event shape the formation of the early followers of Jesus into a recognizable religious sect? To be frank, even if I were convinced that a man called Jesus of Nazareth was crucified in a way that remotely resembles one of the (contradictory) Gospel narratives (excluding the parts about dead people wandering around Jerusalem, etc.), I would have no reason to think this had any more significance than the death of other members of our species. I leave it to scholars of the late second Temple period and the New Testament to debate how (or whether) the death of Jesus per se had much impact on the earliest (Pauline) followers of Christ as “the Way.”

My focus here is on the conception of “Christ,” which arguably played a far more dominant role in the construction of Christianity. The key, in my view, is understanding how this notion was *born* in the minds of these early followers and how *borne* in the rituals and devotional behaviors that came to characterize this religious sect. “Christ” was born(e) in the same basic way that all other supernatural agent conceptions are engendered and sustained, as a result of the natural deliverances of cognitive and coalitional biases that once provided a survival advantage to (some) hominids in the early human ancestral environment, biases that have been passed on to us. For a fuller exposition of the scientific research that supports the following claims see (Shults forthcoming).

From the point of view of scholars who study religion using empirical data and theoretical developments in fields like cognitive science, evolutionary biology, archaeology, experimental psychology, and cultural anthropology, the conception of “Christ” is just the sort of counter-intuitive or ontologically-confused idea that one would expect to find widely shared among members of a newly formed religious in-group.

First, research in the bio-cultural sciences of religion suggests that supernatural agent conceptions are *born* in human minds as the result of evolved hyper-active *cognitive* mechanisms that are part of our phylogenetic inheritance. Although the tendency to over-detect human-like agents regularly leads to mistaken perceptions, such as seeing faces in the clouds, it would have been naturally selected in the upper Paleolithic environment of our African ancestors because it would have given survival advantage to those who, when confronted by an ambiguous pattern or movement in the forest, immediately jumped at the guess “hidden agent.” Those who lazily guessed “just the wind” when it was really a predator (or a prey) would have been more likely to be eaten (or failed to eat). Notions of hard-to-detect, disembodied intentional forces lurking around are relatively easily and naturally conceived in the human mind.

When it comes to *raising* gods, however, it takes a village. Second, then, we also need to recognize that supernatural agent conceptions are *borne* in human groups as a result of evolved hyper-active *coalitional* mechanisms that are also part of our phylogenetic (and cultural) inheritance. Ideas about gods multiply like rabbits in the human Imaginarium, reproducing rapidly in fertile cognitive fields cultivated by participation in religious rituals. But only some of these conceptions have been domesticated and bred across generations: those that encouraged the over-protection of in-groups.

If the members of a coalition really believe that there are disembodied punitive agents around who are watching out for cheaters, freeloaders or potential defectors, they are more likely to cooperate and stay committed to the norms of the group. The development of rituals in which such hidden agents (e.g., animal-spirits, ancestor-ghosts) are allegedly engaged or manipulated

reinforces such beliefs. Groups whose members regularly shared in this kind of ritual would have been more likely to hold together in the upper Paleolithic, and so able to out-compete groups that could not “bear” gods.

Supernatural agents who are cared for and ritually engaged within a coalition then become easy imaginative targets for the hair-triggered agency detection mechanisms of each new generation. In the environment of our early ancestors the selective advantage went to hominids whose cognitive capacities led them to quickly *infer* the presence of hidden (possibly punitive) agents and to strongly *prefer* the parochial norms monitored by the supernatural authorities of their coalition, especially when they felt confused or threatened. The early followers of the Way, evolved hominids like the rest of us, felt extremely confused by the death of a man whom the leaders of their sect took to be supernaturally sanctioned, and extremely threatened by ridicule and persecution from all sides.

Jesus Christ. Yes, he is just the type of supernatural agent that one would expect to find born(e) within the mental and social space of a religious coalition under this sort of pressure. Within two or three decades after his death, stories about the birth, ministry and resurrection of “the Christ” emerged in which Jesus was portrayed in very much the same way as other gods are portrayed; contingently-embodied (walking through walls, walking on water, ascending to the clouds) and morally-concerned about the behavior of the members of the group (watching, preparing, coming soon to judge, etc.). Such concepts are easy to remember and transmit from one generation to another – as long as they are reinforced by relatively frequent, memorable and emotionally arousing rituals that provoke ongoing costly signals of commitment to the in-group.

And this is exactly what we find in the ritual commonly called the “Eucharist.” Paul’s warnings to the Corinthians about their practice of the “Lord’s Supper” are illuminative in this regard (1 Cor. 11:17-32). He is not surprised at the factions among them, since such conflict is necessary to determine who among them is “genuine.” Participation in the ritual is a proclamation of “the Lord’s death until he comes.” Because they have not been examining themselves adequately before participating, he insists that they are eating and drinking “judgment against themselves; for this reason, many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.” Paul concludes: “if we judged ourselves we would not be judged, but when we are judged by the Lord we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.”

In other words, early Christians were warned that their weakness and illness were the result of their failure to detect the real presence of a judgmental supernatural agent who was returning soon to reveal who was genuinely in the in-group and who would be eternally condemned. Although it promotes anxious self-judgment and antipathy toward out-groups, this is just the sort of ritual that holds a religious coalition together. And so the birth of Christ helps to explain the emergence of Christianity, as the regular arrival of new claims to have (re)discovered the “correct” understanding of this supposedly transcendent religious Figure helps to explain the fragmentation of Christianity throughout church history. As long as some group or groups continue to imaginatively engage in shared ritual interactions that they interpret as mediating some relationship with a supernatural agent associated with one of these fragmented traditions, “Christianity” will survive.

### **Part III. How Christianity will die**

All religions eventually die. No one takes Baal or Zeus seriously anymore. Of course, there may well be a new religious movement whose recent emergence I have missed, whose members are devoted to supernatural agents they call “Baal” or “Zeus,” but it is highly unlikely they engage them using the same sort of animal sacrifices common among the ancient Israelites and ancient Greeks. Most of the manifold expressions of the Christian tradition over the centuries have also died, and those that remain continually reinvent themselves to survive. Eventually all forms of Christianity will die. What would it mean to become worthy of *this* event – the death of Christianity?

But, first, let’s back up and clarify how and why this religion (among others) is already dying, at least in the West, and what this has to do with the “germ of tranquil atheism” that Deleuze perceived as secreting from Christianity. As I have argued elsewhere (Shults 2016), the emergence of *theology* in the wake of the axial age (800-200 BCE) introduced a conceptual (and political) crack out of which atheism could grow and eventually thrive. For most of human history supernatural agents were typically imagined as finite in knowledge and power, and had provincial interests; e.g., animal spirits, ancestor-ghosts and war gods. For most of human history, supernatural rituals were typically performed only within relatively small groups, and had provincial purposes; e.g., mediating the group’s success in hunting, child-raising, and battle.

During the first millennium BCE, however, a new sort of god-concept was born in the minds of intellectual and priestly elites within the largest and most complex literate states across east, south and west Asia: an all-encompassing

Supernatural Agency whose influence was universal and in relation to whom all behavior was punished (or rewarded). The most common ideas about an ultimate Reality that emerged in east and south Asia during this period did not explicitly (or unambiguously) involve the attribution of anthropomorphic agency to an infinite Force. Dao and Dharma, for example, were supposed to be morally relevant for any and all groups, but most Chinese and Indian religious scholars seriously questioned whether such Realities should be primarily conceived as person-like and coalition-favoring.

The priestly and theological elite in the monotheistic religions that flowed out of the *west* Asian axial age, on the other hand, were far more willing to make this sort of attribution. Insofar as they took seriously the narratives of their holy texts, as well as the lived experience of the religious communities to which they belonged, they affirmed that the gods they worshiped (or feared) were hidden agents who favored their own coalitions, and who were capable of meting out temporal punishments (or rewards). All of this was easily born(e) by the evolved cognitive and coalitional biases discussed above. However, most theologians in these west Asian (Abrahamic) traditions have also wanted to claim that “our” Supernatural Agent is the one true “God” upon whom all creation is dependent. It has been revealed to “our” Group that ultimate Reality is a Person with *infinite* knowledge and power who is concerned about the punishment (or reward) of everyone for all *eternity*.

This idea of “God” was tentatively born(e) in the minds of theologians who pressed the anthropomorphic and ethnocentric biases (described above) as far as they would go – but this turned out to be too far. If God is so transcendent that He cannot be represented, then he cannot be conceived (or perceived) as a

human-like agent (or anything else). If God eternally fore-knows and pre-ordains everything, then it is hard to understand the point of praying to or ritually engaging Him. Throughout the centuries, monotheistic theologians have worked hard to defend hypotheses about the existential conditions for human life that utilize symbols (or Icons) of God that try to uphold both the infinite transcendence of God and his immanence within (or to) a finite world.

As you all know, the concept of Christ as the Logos (Image, Son, Face, etc.) of God was intended to solve this dilemma, but this led to interminable debates among philosophical factions within the church, and an increasing chasm between lay piety toward Jesus and “theologically correct” notions of an infinite Son of God (see Shults 2014a for details). I suggest that the “germ of tranquil atheism” within Christianity is perhaps best expressed in the impossible task of trying to *represent* “Christ” in doctrine – as well as in painting – in such a way that he is supposed to depict both the essence of an infinite Father in the quodlibetal arguments of theologians, while simultaneously being “besieged, even replaced” (Deleuze 2005, 101) by accidents in ways that can be identified within the quotidian life of the Oedipalized laity.

The problem (for priests and theologians invested in keeping their in-group’s religious doctrines and rituals alive) is that the evolved cognitive tendency to detect hidden finite supernatural agents crumples under the pressure of trying to think an infinite intentional Entity. The evolved coalitional biases for protecting in-groups implode (or explode) under the stress of trying to live together in complex literate states. It is not hard to understand why and how atheism would emerge as an option (albeit rarely, slowly and tentatively) as monotheism took over within large-scale, pluralistic societies. The abstract,

transcendent God described by the priest does not seem to have any relevance for daily life. All these people around me have different views of gods whom they think care about their group. They try to explain the natural world in superstitious ways that make no sense to me. They try to regulate the social world in segregative ways that make it difficult for me and those I love.

Perhaps we can make sense of the world and act sensibly in society without God – or any other finite supernatural agents preferred by particular in-groups. And, so the atheist machine was born(e), opening up lines of flight that were previously unimaginable. As more and more minds and cultures were freed of god-bearing cognitive and coalitional biases, atheist machinic assemblages have expanded within mental and social spaces previously dominated by the despotic machines of Abrahamic monotheism.

In the contemporary West (and the online global village), atheism is rapidly secreting. The secret is out: none of the (contradictory) supernatural ideas proposed by competing religions are necessary for interpreting nature and none of the (contradictory) supernatural norms authorized by their holy texts are needed for organizing the social field. Segregative inscriptions of the latter based on superstitious beliefs about punitive (or otherwise axiologically relevant) gods are becoming more and more problematic in our pluralistic, globalizing context. A growing number of people, especially young people, are finding it increasingly easy to evaluate explanatory hypotheses and normative proposals without the need for supernatural agents as causal powers or moral regulators.

In other words, the secretion of atheism (from Christianity and other religions) has facilitated the production of *naturalism* and *secularism*. These god-

dissolving forces help people challenge the evolved god-bearing biases discussed above. They learn to solve problems related to initially confusing natural phenomena through critical reflection and the scientific method. They learn to resolve problems related to initially frightening social phenomena by constructing and maintaining non-religious legislative and judicial institutions. They learn to lay out plan(e)s of immanence within socio-ecological niches in which survival no longer depends on the detection and protection of the gods of any particular in-group.

In such contexts, day by day, Christianity dies a thousand little deaths. Theologians with expertise in the anatomy of this moribund monotheism have at least two options. They can struggle to keep (some version of) it on life support by constantly repairing or replacing its exhausted despotic religious machinery. Or they can nurture the germ of atheism that is being secreted by its demise, releasing and spreading naturalism and secularism, which are increasingly contagious in populations characterized by relatively easy access to scientific education and social welfare provided by transparent, stable governments.

Deleuze urged us to create rhizomes, not to prop up and idealize arboreal religious Figures (even one crucified on a tree). For me, the question is not whether we can be worthy of the event of someone else's crucifixion. It is whether we can be worthy of the *Eventum tantum* of all events, the "eternal return" of the Different, the infinite expression of accidental singularities, the univocity of being that flattens any and all hierarchical claims to represent a transcendent Logos (in painting, thought, or politics). And then what? We do not yet know what naturalistic-secularistic bodies can do. Let's find out.

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