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Working-Through Christianity: Lacan and Atheism¹

§1 Indeed, not very catholic: subtle heresy, but heresy nonetheless

Jacques Lacan looks like an atheist. He talks like an atheist. But, do not be fooled: He really is an atheist.

Having to argue that Lacan is indeed atheistic might seem rather strange. Despite Lacan's background as a Jesuit-educated French Catholic, his biography reveals someone who, with a little help from Baruch Spinoza, very early on broke for good with the religious ethos of his childhood.² Anyone even minimally familiar with facts about his adult character and behaviors would have trouble maintaining with a straight face that he led the life and embodied the values of a devout Christian. Moreover, Lacan devoted his entire career to teaching and practicing psychoanalysis. He truly was, as he insisted, a tireless champion of Sigmund Freud, another "godless Jew" (along with Spinoza and Karl Marx).

Yet, other details about Lacan tempt the faithful. These include his taste for custom-tailored Yves Saint Laurent dress shirts with clerical-style collars, his Benedictine monk brother Marc-François (dubbed by Paul Roazen "Lacan's first disciple"³), and his overtures to the Vatican and visits to Rome.⁴ Lacan's discourse is littered with references to Christian texts and traditions. Some of his key terms and images (*le Nom-du-Père*, the trinitarian Borromean knot, etc.) are

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² Élisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co.: A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925–1985*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1990, p. 104.

³ Paul Roazen, "Lacan's First Disciple," *Journal of Religion and Health*, 35 (4/1996), pp. 321–336.

⁴ Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co.*, pp. 260–261; Élisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan: Outline of a Life, History of a System of Thought*, trans. Barbara Bray, Columbia University Press, New York 1997, pp. 204–206.

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taken directly from this religious legacy. He even designates his female followers as “the nuns of the Father” (*les nonnes du Père*).⁵

But, likely the most important feature of Lacan’s version of psychoanalysis attracting the theologically minded is what appears to be a pronounced difference between him and Freud apropos their evident attitudes to religion. Freud’s staunch commitments to the ideals of the Enlightenment and the *Weltanschauung* of the modern natural sciences render him implacably hostile to religiosity *tout court*.⁶ In works such as “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices” (1907), *Totem and Taboo* (1913), and *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), Freud establishes himself as one of the most virulently and uncompromisingly atheistic thinkers in history.

By seeming contrast, Lacan not only refrains from Freud’s more bluntly combative style of anti-religiosity—he often comes across as somewhat sympathetic toward the religious materials he references. Lacan’s careful invocations of the Bible, Saint Paul, Augustine, the Christian mystics, and so on gives the impression of an analytic theoretician who, despite his avowed fidelity to Freud, does not share with the founder of psychoanalysis a fierce animosity to all things religious. Similarly, the difference in manner between how Freud and Lacan each engage with religions leads some to suspect that the latter never really left behind the Catholicism surrounding him during his upbringing. As the title of a 2015 study by Jean-Louis Sous expresses this suspicion, *Pas très catholique, Lacan?*⁷ Others go even further, trying to lay claim to Lacan as an analytic theologian rendering Freudianism and Christianity fully compatible with one another. The Jesuit priest turned analyst Louis Beirnaert pins on Lacan his hopes for a rapprochement between psychoanalysis and faith.⁸

⁵ Stanley A. Leavy, “The Image and the Word: Further Reflections on Jacques Lacan,” in: J. H. Smith, W. Kerrigan (Eds.), *Interpreting Lacan*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1983, p. 13.

⁶ Sidi Askofaré, “De l’inconscient au sinthome: Conjectures sur les usages et le renoncement possible au Nom-du-Père,” *L’en-je lacanien*, No. 6 (2006), p. 30.

⁷ Jean-Louis Sous, *Pas très catholique, Lacan?*, EPEL, Paris 2015, pp. 15–16.

⁸ Louis Beirnaert, “Introduction à la psychanalyse freudienne de la religion,” in: *Aux frontières de l’acte analytique: La Bible, saint Ignace, Freud et Lacan*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1987, pp. 57–58.

I can begin arguing against these various doubts about and denials of Lacan's atheism by pointing out the exaggerated, even false, contrast between Freud's and Lacan's fashions of relating to religions. Freud, despite his clear, unwavering atheism, nonetheless carries out sophisticated examinations of Christianity and Judaism especially. Indeed, his last major work is 1939's *Moses and Monotheism*, a project that consumed him for much of the 1930s. There is no substantial difference between Freud and Lacan in terms of one dismissing and the other attending to religious subjects.

Furthermore, Lacan repeatedly reminds his audiences of his own irreligiosity. In *Seminar VII (The Ethics of Psychoanalysis [1959-1960])*, during a discussion of Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans, he observes, "We analysts... do not have to believe in these religious truths in any way... in order to be interested in what is articulated in its own terms in religious experience."⁹ During a two-part lecture in Brussels summarizing much of his then-current seventh seminar, Lacan avers, "the least that one can say is that I do not profess any confessional belonging."¹⁰ During this same lecture, he speaks of "earth" (*la terre*) and "heaven" (*le ciel*) as "empty of God" (*vides de Dieu*).¹¹ Likewise, in the contemporaneous 1960 écrit "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious," Lacan declares, "We need not answer for any ultimate truth, and certainly not for or against any particular religion."¹² One does not have to believe in religion to take it seriously. And, even if one denies the reality of other worlds, one cannot deny the all-too-real cultural and socio-historical presence of religions in this world. Jean-Daniel Causse, in his 2018 study *Lacan et le christianisme*, contends that Lacan is interested specifically in the secularizable form, rather than the doctrinal content, of "religious experience."¹³

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter, W. W. Norton and Company, New York 1992, pp. 170–171.

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, "Conférence de Bruxelles sur l'éthique de la psychanalyse," *Psychoanalyse: La Revue de l'École Belge de Psychanalyse*, No. 4 (1986), p. 170.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹² Jacques Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious," in: *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, W. W. Norton and Company, New York 2006, p. 693.

¹³ Jean-Daniel Causse, *Lacan et le christianisme*, Paris: Campagne Première, 2018, p. 148.

Sous, at one point in his above-mentioned book, asserts that, “Lacan always left in suspense the answer to the question of knowing if the analyst should make a profession of atheism or not.”¹⁴ As I just indicated, and as I will proceed to substantiate further, Sous’s assertion here is highly contestable. But, even if one grants it, Lacan’s alleged hesitancy about professions of irreligiosity arguably concerns the analyst-*qua*-practitioner, rather than the analyst-*qua*-theoretician. The analytic clinician should, with few if any exceptions, refrain from confessions of his/her beliefs (or lack thereof) to analysands. However, the analytic thinker addressing persons other than analysands on the couch is another matter altogether. Lacan, in his role as theorist and teacher of analysis, showed no hesitations about openly professing his atheism to various others.

In the opening session (December 1, 1965) of the thirteenth seminar (*The Object of Psychoanalysis* [1965–1966]), published separately in the *Écrits* as “Science and Truth,” Lacan maintains that the truths of religions always amount to posited final causes.¹⁵ Religion is centered around significance-sustaining teleologies, meaning-giving purposes. By contrast, both modern science and psychoanalysis as (partly) conditioned by such science immerse humanity in what is ultimately a meaningless material Real devoid of design, plan, or direction. Hence, analytic truths are, in essence, irreligious¹⁶ (at least for Lacan’s anti-hermeneutical rendition of analysis as oriented towards “the materiality of the signifier,” instead of the meaningfulness of signs).

Also in “Science and Truth,” Lacan pointedly repudiates religifications of analysis. He states, “As for religion, it should rather serve us as a model not to be followed, instituting as it does a social hierarchy in which the tradition of a certain relation to truth as cause is preserved.”¹⁷ He immediately adds, “Simulation of the Catholic Church, reproduced whenever the relation to truth as cause reaches the social realm, is particularly grotesque in a certain Psychoanalytic International, owing to the condition it imposes upon communication.”¹⁸ Religion generally, and Catholicism especially, with its truths as final causes, is said by Lacan to pose a great threat to and have deleterious effects upon the

¹⁴ Sous, *Pas très catholique, Lacan?*, p. 38.

¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, “Science and Truth,” in: *Écrits*, p. 741.

¹⁶ Causse, *Lacan et le christianisme*, p. 201.

¹⁷ Lacan, “Science and Truth,” p. 744.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

integrity of psychoanalysis. Considering Lacan's disdain for the International Psychoanalytic Association (i.e., "a certain Psychoanalytic International"), made intensely bitter by his 1963 self-described "excommunication" from the Church of the IPA, his association of it with Catholicism speaks powerfully against attributing to him any desire to somehow or other Catholicize psychoanalysis. Close to the time of "Science and Truth," in 1967, Lacan characterizes analysis both metapsychological and clinical as involving the "most complete as possible laicization" of a "practice without idea of elevation."¹⁹ Relatedly, in the 1974 interview "The Triumph of Religion" given in Rome, he vehemently repudiates any superficial association between the Catholic ritual of confession and the clinical practice of analysis.²⁰

§2 The divine subject supposed to know: between the religious and the pseudo-secular

At one point in the *écrit* "The Youth of Gide, or the Letter and Desire" (1958), Lacan suggests that, "the psychoanalyst in our times has taken the place of God," coming to be viewed as "omnipotent," by being the addressee of persons' religious needs.²¹ Quite obviously, this suggestion anticipates Lacan's subsequent identification of the "subject supposed to know" as the essential center of gravity of all transference phenomena. Unsurprisingly, Lacan goes on to depict God as the *Ur*-instantiation of the structural role of *le sujet supposé savoir*.²² He consequently maintains that the figure of the analyst, in becoming the pivotal incarnation of the subject supposed to know thanks to analysands' transference neuroses, is positioned as occupying the "place of God-the-Father... that which I have designated as the Name-of-the-Father."²³ Lacan likewise depicts transference as inherently involving "idealism" and "theology."²⁴

¹⁹ Jacques Lacan, "De la psychanalyse dans ses rapports avec la réalité," in: *Autres écrits*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 2001, p. 352.

²⁰ Jacques Lacan, "The Triumph of Religion," in: *The Triumph of Religion, preceded by Discourse to Catholics*, trans. Bruce Fink, Polity, Cambridge 2013, p. 63.

²¹ Jacques Lacan, "The Youth of Gide, or the Letter and Desire," in: *Écrits*, p. 627.

²² Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVI: D'un Autre à l'autre, 1968-1969*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 2006, pp. 280–281.

²³ Jacques Lacan, "La méprise du sujet supposé savoir," in: *Autres écrits*, p. 337.

²⁴ Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVI*, p. 280; Adrian Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism, Volume One: The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2013, pp. 22–23.

For Freudian psychoanalysis, transferences are ubiquitous in human life off as well as on the analytic couch. Hence, the position/function of *le sujet supposé savoir* sustains omnipresent idealist and theological dimensions across vast swathes of humanity, including most of those who take themselves to be non-believers. From a Lacanian perspective, many people can and do believe in the subject supposed to know while not believing in any of the deities on offer from culturally recognized religions. Subjects supposed to know substituting for God include not only clergy and analysts, but also, for example, parents, doctors, scientists, politicians, professors, gurus, institutions, traditions, and experts and authorities of myriad stripes.

According to Lacan, so long as one transferentially invests in anyone as representing an unbarred big Other (in Lacan's mathemes, S(A)) possessing some sort of absolute knowledge about the ultimate meaning of existence, one remains a theist. Thus, "God is unconscious" for many self-proclaimed atheists. By itself, "God is dead" leaves in place and intact *le sujet supposé savoir*²⁵ (Jacques-Alain Miller speaks of the death of God as failing to kill "the power of the signifier 'one,'" namely, Lacan's "master signifier" [S,]²⁶). In *Seminar XVI (From an Other to the other [1968–1969])*, Lacan observes that most supposed atheists, while disavowing God, still believe in some sort of "Supreme Being" (*l'Être suprême*), an ontological foundation of significance, lawfulness, and/or order.²⁷ As such, these believers are not really atheists. Just about everyone remains religious, even if only unconsciously.²⁸

Also in the sixteenth seminar, Lacan at one point declares, "A true atheism, the only one which would merit the name, is that which would result from the putting in question of the subject supposed to know."²⁹ He echoes this a year later in the seventeenth seminar (*The Other Side of Psychoanalysis [1969–1970]*) when

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²⁵ Causse, *Lacan et le christianisme*, p. 45.

²⁶ Jacques-Alain Miller, "Religion, Psychoanalysis," trans. Barbara P. Fulks, *Lacanian Ink*, No. 23 (Spring 2004), pp. 11–12.

²⁷ Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVI*, p. 176.

²⁸ Jacques Lacan, "Conférences et entretiens dans des universités nord-américaines: Yale University, 24 novembre 1975," *Scilicet*, No. 6/7 (1976), p. 32.

²⁹ Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVI*, p. 281.

he states, “The pinnacle (*pointe*) of psychoanalysis is well and truly atheism.”³⁰ Even Father Beirnaert concedes that at least a momentary loss of faith is integral to the analytic experience.³¹ Lacan furnishes a lengthier explanation of all this in *Seminar X (Anxiety [1962–1963])*³²:

Within what I might call the heated circles of analysis, those in which the impulse of one first inspiration (*le mouvement d'une inspiration première*) still lives on, a question has been raised as to whether the analyst ought to be an atheist or not, and whether the subject, at the end of analysis, can consider his analysis over if he still believes in God... regardless of what an obsessional bears out in his words, if he hasn't been divested of his obsessional structure, you can be sure that, as an obsessional, he believes in God. I mean that he believes in the God that everyone, or nearly everyone, in our cultural sphere (*tout le monde, ou presque, chez nous, dans notre aire culturelle*) abides by, this means the God in whom everyone believes without believing (*croit sans y croire*), namely, the universal eye that watches down on all our actions.³³

Lacan soon adds that, “This is the true dimension of atheism. The atheist would be (*serait*) he who has succeeded (*aurait réussi*) in doing away with the fantasy of the Almighty (*Tout-Puissant*).”³⁴ He signals that this line of questioning apropos the atheism (or lack thereof) of analyst and analysand is to be taken seriously. He does so by attributing it to those who remain, like him, moved and impassioned (i.e., “heated”) by Freud’s original influence (i.e., “*le mouvement d'une inspiration première*”). Indeed, Lacan likely intends these remarks to be taken as friendly supplements to Freud’s “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices,” a text in which the founder of psychoanalysis characterizes obsessional

³⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse, 1969–1970*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1991, p. 139; Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis, 1969–1970*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg, W. W. Norton and Company, New York 2007, p. 119.

³¹ Louis Beirnaert, “Psychanalyse et vie de foi,” in: *Aux frontières de l'acte analytique*, p. 138.

³² Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism, Volume One*, pp. 22–23.

³³ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre X: L'angoisse, 1962–1963*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 2004, p. 357; Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety, 1962–1963*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A.R. Price, Polity, Cambridge 2014, p. 308.

³⁴ Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre X*, p. 357; Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, p. 308.

“neurosis as an individual religiosity and religion as a universal obsessional neurosis” (*die Neurose als eine individuelle Religiosität, die Religion als eine universelle Zwangsneurose*).³⁵

As Lacan indicates, “nearly everyone” (*tout le monde, ou presque*), if only unconsciously (as “believing without believing”), has faith in God as omniscient (i.e., the all-seeing “universal eye” as the fantasized locus of absolute-*qua*-infinite knowledge) and omnipotent (i.e., “the fantasy of the Almighty [*Tout-Puissant*]”). However, the qualification “nearly” (*presque*) is not to be overlooked here. On the one hand, theism, in the broader Lacanian sense as a belief in any instantiation whatsoever of the subject supposed to know, is virtually omnipresent and stubbornly persistent. As Lacan puts it in “The Triumph of Religion,” religion is “tireless” (*increvable*).³⁶ That same year (1974), Lacan, in another interview, points to religiosity’s contemporary revivals and describes religion as a “devouring monster.”³⁷ As a Freudian would put it, transference (à la Lacan, investment in a subject supposed to know) is ubiquitous and recurrent.³⁸ *Le sujet supposé savoir*, this fantasmatic unbarred Other of thoroughly total knowledge, indeed is a relentless, all-consuming specter.

But, on the other hand, not all are theists. Or, at least, not everyone is doomed to what would be a universal, eternal, and invincible religiosity. In the material quoted from the tenth seminar above, Lacan does not say that uprooting an obsessional’s neurotic “structure” is by itself automatically sufficient for transforming him/her into a true atheist. When speaking of true atheism, he does so conjugating in the conditional tense (*serait, aurait réussi*). Yet, in 1975, and dovetailing with claims I already quoted from the sixteenth and seventeenth

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, “Zwangshandlungen und Religionsübungen,” in: *Gesammelte Werke, Band VII*, Fisher Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1999, p. 139; Sigmund Freud, “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices”, in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. IX*, trans. James Strachey, Vintage, London 2001, pp. 126–127.

³⁶ Jacques Lacan, “Le triomphe de la religion,” in: *Le triomphe de la religion, précédé de Discours aux catholiques*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 2005, p. 79; Lacan, “The Triumph of Religion,” p. 64.

³⁷ Jacques Lacan, “Freud pour toujours: Entretien avec J. Lacan,” November 21, 1974, <http://ecole-lacanienne.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/1974-11-21.pdf>.

³⁸ Sigmund Freud, “The Dynamics of Transference”, in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XII*, trans. James Strachey, Vintage, London 2001, pp. 101, 106.

seminars, Lacan muses, “Perhaps analysis is capable of making a true atheist.”³⁹ How so, exactly?

The simplest and shortest preliminary answer is readily arrived at by doing as Lacan does and returning to Freud. On Freud’s conception of analysis, the formation in the analysand of a “transference neurosis” is crucial to the therapeutic process.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the “dissolving” (*Auflösung*) of the transference is a major criterion for the successful termination of what could count as a satisfactorily completed analysis.⁴¹ For Lacan, the Freudian dissolution of the transference (neurosis) is equivalent to a (transitory) disruption of the function of *le sujet supposé savoir* in the structure of the analysand’s subjectivity.⁴² Therefore, as seen, Lacan goes so far as to equate a thoroughly analyzed subject with someone who has, at least for a time, acceded to what would count as real, true atheism *qua* disbelief in any and every subject supposed to know.

François Balmès and Sidi Askofaré both highlight the specificity of Lacanian analytic atheism as disbelief in *le sujet supposé savoir tout court*, not just loss of faith in a religious God or gods.⁴³ Askofaré and Sous appropriately warn that the working-through of all fantasies of the Almighty (i.e., all configurations of the subject supposed to know) is a long, arduous process coextensive with the labor of analysis itself, namely, a hard-won achievement.⁴⁴ Causse adds to this that “psychoanalysis leads the subject to becoming an atheist” by enabling him/her to disinvest from neurotic symptoms that themselves are tantamount to Other-sustaining (self-)sacrifices.⁴⁵ Causse’s addition fittingly suggests that neurotics become truly atheistic when analysis enables them to cease consciously and

³⁹ Lacan, “Conférences et entretiens dans des universités nord-américaines: Yale University, 24 novembre 1975,” p. 32.

⁴⁰ Freud, “The Dynamics of Transference,” p. 154.

⁴¹ Sigmund Freud, “Zur Einleitung der Behandlung,” in: *Gesammelte Werke, Band VIII*, Fisher Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1999, p. 478; Sigmund Freud, “On Beginning the Treatment (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis I,” in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XII*, trans. James Strachey, Vintage, London 2001, p. 143.

⁴² Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVI*, pp. 388–389.

⁴³ François Balmès, *Dieu, le sexe et la vérité*, Érès, Ramonville Saint-Agne 2007, pp. 27–30; Askofaré, “De l’inconscient au sinthome,” p. 25.

⁴⁴ Askofaré, “De l’inconscient au sinthome,” p. 34; Sous, *Pas très catholique, Lacan?*, p. 93.

⁴⁵ Causse, *Lacan et le christianisme*, p. 162.

unconsciously making themselves suffer in the name of shielding certain significant Others in their life histories from ignorance and/or impotence. If and when the specter of a flawless *Tout-Puissant* is exorcised, the analysand is free to stop martyring him/her-self in vain to preserve the illusory existence of this phantasm.

In a 1972 seminar session, Lacan coins one his many neologisms: “*incorreligion-nible*.”⁴⁶ That is to say, the religious are incorrigible in their religiosity. This neologism resonates with Lacan’s above-cited remarks about religion’s invincibility in 1974’s “The Triumph of Religion.” This prompts one to ask: Is radical analytic atheism a sustainable stance according to Lacan? Both Askofaré and Causse contend that it is not. For Askofaré, whereas religiosity is a curable symptom for Freud, it is an incurable *sinthome* for Lacan.⁴⁷ Causse says the same thing specifically in terms of the function of *le Nom-du-Père*.⁴⁸ Furthermore, for Causse, insofar as the structural place of the subject supposed to know cannot be entirely eliminated—in other words, transferences continue to arise for post-analytic subjects too—there is no sustainable atheism in the aftermath of even the most thorough analytic process.⁴⁹

Apropos the alleged unsustainability of radical analytic atheism, I would caution against making the perfect the enemy of the good. As with the ego, so too with theism for Lacan: The related eclipses of the ego and theism during the concluding moments of the analytic process must be experienced and endured by the analysand for a complete analysis, although this is a fleeting event of passage rather than entrance into a thereafter persisting state of being. Identifications, transferences, defenses, and the like inevitably will reemerge on the hither side of the end of analysis. But, in Lacan’s view, there is enormous value in the speaking subject passing through, if only momentarily, disappearances of ego-level identities and subjects supposed to know. Such traversals make a difference in relation to whatever post-analytic selfhoods and theisms (re)congeal for the analysand.

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⁴⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XIX: Le savoir du psychanalyste, 1971–1972* (unpublished typescript), session of January 6, 1972.

⁴⁷ Askofaré, “De l’inconscient au sinthome,” p. 36.

⁴⁸ Causse, *Lacan et le christianisme*, p. 240.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Another aspect of Lacan's substitution of "God is unconscious" for "God is dead" as "the true formula of atheism"⁵⁰ is crucial to appreciate at this juncture. The unconscious never disappears anytime during or after analysis; the analytic process does not result in a liquidation of the unconscious. Likewise, the spontaneous theism of conscious and unconscious transferential investments in subjects supposed to know does not vanish forever either.

So, analysis can and should instill a measure of lasting, persistent vigilance in analysands. Lacanian atheism thus amounts not to a permanently assumed and unchangingly occupied position. Rather, it involves a recurring distance-taking from theistic structures and phenomena. Such disbelief is an intermittent meta-level occurrence, instead of a constant and unfaltering first-order stance.⁵¹ Its salutary disruptions are no less worthwhile for all that.

In the seventh seminar, Lacan stresses that, "desire... is always desire in the second degree, desire of desire."⁵² The same might be said of belief. If so, Lacan's atheism perhaps is (dis)belief "in the second degree," namely, a second-order (dis)believing in first-order beliefs (with obdurate religious/theistic *sinthomes* perhaps being instances of the latter).⁵³ As I highlight elsewhere,⁵⁴ Lacan places himself in the same post-Hegelian lineage epitomized by Ludwig Feuerbach, among others. In a Feuerbachian-style inversion, Lacanian atheism is an ascension by a second-order subject over the first-order (resurrected) God, rather than an ascension of this God over the subject.

⁵⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1964*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, W. W. Norton and Company, New York 1977, p. 59.

⁵¹ Balmès, *Dieu, le sexe et la vérité*, pp. 13–15, 169–170; Adrian Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2014, pp. 219–221; Adrian Johnston, "Lacan's Endgame: Philosophy, Science, and Religion in the Final Seminars," *Crisis and Critique* (special issue: "Lacan: Psychoanalysis, Philosophy, Politics", ed. Agon Hamza and Frank Ruda), 6 (1/2019), pp. 180–184; Adrian Johnston, "The Triumph of Theological Economics: God Goes Underground," *Philosophy Today* (special issue: "Marxism and New Materialisms") (2019, forthcoming).

⁵² Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, p. 14.

⁵³ Johnston, "Lacan's Endgame," p. 180–184.

⁵⁴ Adrian Johnston, "Lacan and Monotheism: Not Your Father's Atheism, Not Your Atheism's Father," *Problemi International* (ed. Simon Hajdini), 3 (1/2019), pp. 109–141.

Lacan's analytic atheism amounts to non-belief in the very position of the subject supposed to know. And, insofar as *le sujet supposé savoir* represents for Lacan an unbarred big Other, the Lacanian atheist holds to the barring of any such Other. Therefore, this atheism's emblem is nothing other than Lacan's matheme of the signifier of the barred Other, $S(\mathcal{A})$.⁵⁵

§3 Transference doth make believers of us all: true and false atheisms

Yet, can more be said, particularly without excessive reliance on Lacanian technical jargon, about the features that distinguish properly analytic atheism from non-analytic (i.e., garden-variety) atheism? Lacan indeed is convinced that there is a drastic distinction here.⁵⁶ But, in what does it consist?

Lacan, during his 1971–1972 seminar on *The Knowledge of the Psychoanalyst*, dismissively depicts ordinary, commonplace atheism as mere “drowsiness” (*somnolence*).⁵⁷ Such disbelief allegedly would be due to a mere thoughtlessness about the issues and concerns animating religious belief systems. It definitely would not be due to a focused, conscientious thinking through of theological concepts. This explains Lacan's provocative remarks to the effect that only theologians can be true atheists.⁵⁸ Yet, I would note that one need not be a card-carrying professional theologian to qualify as a Lacanian “theologian” *qua* someone who has seriously worked-through theological ideas. That noted, even if, for Lacan, religious answers to certain questions are not to be accepted, the questions themselves are still important to ask.

In addition to drowsy atheism as intellectually indefensible in its thoughtlessness, there is the naturalistic atheism of the scientific *Weltanschauung* appealed to by Freud. Lacan dismisses this variety of atheism too. He does so because,

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⁵⁵ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, pp. 192–193; François Balmès, *Le nom, la loi, la voix*, Érès, Ramonville Saint-Agne 1997, p. 145; Causse, *Lacan et le christianisme*, pp. 46–47.

⁵⁶ Causse, *Lacan et le christianisme*, pp. 20–21.

⁵⁷ Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XIX*, session of January 6, 1972.

⁵⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XII: Problèmes cruciaux pour la psychanalyse, 1964–1965* (unpublished typescript), session of March 3, 1965; Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore, 1972–1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink, W. W. Norton and Company, New York 1998, pp. 45, 108; Askofaré, “De l'inconscient au sinthome,” p. 34.

by his lights, it is not really atheistic. As Lacan observes in *Seminar XII (Crucial Problems for Psychoanalysis [1964-1965])*, these sorts of “atheistic arguments... are often much more theist than the others.”⁵⁹

In fact, modernity’s empirical, experimental sciences of nature, from their very inception onwards, arguably rely upon something along the lines of the Cartesian-Einsteinian God guaranteeing the knowability of reality by not being a game-playing trickster.⁶⁰ Likewise, by at least presupposing an omnipotent and absolute knowledge of a unified, at-one-with-itself physical Real, the natural sciences remain theistic in the sense of continuing to be invested in a version of the subject supposed to know.⁶¹ Moreover, Lacan, however fairly or not, accuses the scientific worldview of subscribing to a pseudo-secular theodicy. He charges that, “scientific discourse is finalist,”⁶² namely, teleological *qua* oriented by final causes. Specifically, this Lacan sees Freud’s favored *Weltanschauung*, including as it does certain perspectives on the implications of Darwinian evolutionary theory, as wedded to a grand-scale teleology and metaphysical hierarchy valorizing human consciousness as the crown jewel of all creation, the ultimate *telos* of the entire history of nature.⁶³ In a similar vein, Lacan derisively associates naturalism with an organicist harmonization of micro- and macro-spheres of existence and a related Jungian-type religiosity anathema to any true Freudian.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XII*, session of March 3, 1965.

⁶⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XV: L’acte psychanalytique, 1967-1968* (unpublished typescript), session of February 21, 1968.

⁶¹ Jacques Lacan, “On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis,” in: *Écrits*, p. 480.

⁶² Jacques Lacan, “Du discours psychanalytique,” *Lacan in Italia, 1953-1978*, La Salamandra, Milan 1978, p. 45.

⁶³ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli, W. W. Norton and Company, New York 1988, p. 48; Lacan, “Conférence de Bruxelles sur l’éthique de la psychanalyse,” p. 165; Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano, “Ethics and Capital,” in: A. Skomra (Ed.), *Ex Nihilo*, *Umbr(a): A Journal of the Unconscious—The Dark God*, State University of New York at Buffalo, Buffalo 2005, p. 10; Lorenzo Chiesa, “Psychoanalysis, Religion, Love,” *Crisis & Critique* (special issue: “Politics and Theology Today,” ed. Frank Ruda and Agon Hamza), 2 (1/2015), p. 63.

⁶⁴ Lacan, “Conférence de Bruxelles sur l’éthique de la psychanalyse,” pp. 166, 176; Beirnaert, “Introduction à la psychanalyse freudienne de la religion,” p. 53.

There also are Lacan's arguments, spelled out in "The Triumph of Religion" and directed against Freud, upending the Enlightenment progress narrative about the victory of science over religion. In 1974, Lacan contends that the advances of the sciences, instead of compelling a withering away of religions, provoke intensifications of religiosity, spiritualism, idealism, and the like. This is so because, as the material universe is scientifically rendered ever-more foreign and indifferent to human experience, intentions, significances, and so on,⁶⁵ humans seek compensatory refuge in the religious. Such refuge provides a seemingly secure little boat of oriented meaning on science's sea of senselessness. Science (re)vivifies and sustains, rather than corrodes and destroys, religion—hence religion's invincibility despite, or rather because of, science.⁶⁶

In the *écrit* "In Memory of Ernest Jones: On His Theory of Symbolism" (1959/1960), Lacan speculates about the "elimination" of God from the natural sciences.⁶⁷ Lacan's repeated observations about the theism subsisting within these ostensibly secular, if not atheistic, disciplines implicitly call for efforts to detheologize them fully.⁶⁸ He prompts one to wonder: What would the sciences be like without presupposing or positing any variant whatsoever of God? Could there be a new scientific *Weltanschauung* that is really, instead of speciously, atheistic?

Relatedly, whereas Freud considers his atheism and scientism to be of a piece, Lacan indicates that Freud's Godlessness is undercut by his fidelity to what he takes to be the scientific worldview. Adherents of this view are those Lacan has in mind when, in *Seminar XVII*, he provocatively maintains that, "materialists are the only authentic believers."⁶⁹ Lacan gives to this a further counter-intuitive twist: Not only is the scientific *Weltanschauung* embraced by Freud theistic—Christian theology furnishes key resources for a genuinely atheistic materialism. Lacan's privileged "Exhibit A" for this assertion is the theologi-

⁶⁵ Lacan, "Conférence de Bruxelles sur l'éthique de la psychanalyse," p. 181.

⁶⁶ Lacan, "The Triumph of Religion," pp. 56, 64, 67, 71–72, 77–78; Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XXIV: L'insu que sait de l'une-bévue s'aile à mourre, 1976–1977* (unpublished typescript), session of May 17, 1977; Miller, "Religion, Psychoanalysis," pp. 16–19; Causse, *Lacan et le christianisme*, p. 47; Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism, Volume One*, pp. xiii, 32–33, 37, 175–176; Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*, pp. 187–188; Johnston, "The Triumph of Theological Economics".

⁶⁷ Jacques Lacan, "In Memory of Ernest Jones: On His Theory of Symbolism," in: *Écrits*, p. 596.

⁶⁸ Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism, Volume One*, pp. 13–38.

⁶⁹ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII*, p. 66.

cal conception of creation *ex nihilo*.⁷⁰ The idea here is that, despite its religious provenance, only this conception allows for thinking the existence of things without a God or a God-like substance as their origin. It permits replacing the Other-as-creator with a void.

It must be asked: How is (Christian) theology atheistic? What does Lacan mean when he says things such as “atheism is tenable/bearable (*soutenable*) only to clerics?”⁷¹ I already have mentioned one response to this line of questioning, a response that can be summarized here in the form of a syllogism: One, true atheism can be arrived at only via the arduous working-through of religious concepts; Two, anyone who arduously works through religious concepts is a “theologian” in the sense of a thinker who thinks about theological matters; Therefore, true atheists are also theologians. This argument dovetails with *Seminar XI*’s “God is unconscious.” A conscious atheism arrived at without the costly effort of critically scrutinizing theological ideas and arguments will remain haunted by unscrutinized remainders of religiosity (i.e., God as unconscious).

However, there are two more senses to Lacan’s paradoxical equation of theology with atheism. One of these arguably harks back to Blaise Pascal’s reactions specifically to René Descartes and generally to philosophical attempts at rationally proving God’s existence.⁷² In “The Subversion of the Subject,” Lacan speaks in passing of “the proofs of the existence of God with which the centuries have killed him.”⁷³ From a Pascalian perspective, philosophers and rational(ist) theologians debase God by turning Him into merely one entity among others to be judged before the tribunal of human (all-too-human) rationality. God is made subservient to reason in a hubristic, blasphemous inversion of the

⁷⁰ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, p. 261; Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, pp. 41, 43; Chiesa and Toscano, “Ethics and Capital, *Ex Nihilo*,” pp. 10–11; Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano, “Agape and the Anonymous Religion of Atheism,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 12 (1/2007), p. 118; Causse, *Lacan et le christianisme*, p. 35.

⁷¹ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XX: Encore, 1972–1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1975, p. 98; Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, p. 108.

⁷² Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer, Penguin, New York 1966, §142 (p. 73), §190 (p. 86).

⁷³ Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious,” p. 694.

proper order of things. Rendering the divine the object of a *logos* is to betray this divinity. Making God's existence depend upon reason's proofs is to nullify His very being (as the just-quoted Lacan indicates). This entails that not only philosophy, but any and every rational theology, is inherently antithetical to *theós* itself. Rational theology is deicide. Another sense in which theology is atheistic according to Lacan surfaces in the twentieth seminar. He states there:

God (*Dieu*) is the locus where, if you will allow me this wordplay, the *dieu*—the *dieur*—the *dire*, is produced. With a trifling change, the *dire* constitutes *Dieu* (*le dire ça fait Dieu*). And as long as things are said, the God hypothesis will persist (*l'hypothèse Dieu sera là*).⁷⁴

Lacan immediately remarks, “That is why, in the end, only theologians can be truly atheistic, namely, those who speak of God (*ceux qui, de Dieu, en parlent*).”⁷⁵ He then proceeds to assert:

There is no other way to be an atheist, except to hide one's head in one's arms in the name of I know not what fear, as if this God had ever manifested any kind of presence whatsoever. Nevertheless, it is impossible to say anything without immediately making Him subsist in the form of the Other.⁷⁶

Lacan, consistent with other pronouncements of his I already referenced earlier, maintains a broad definition of “theologians” as “those who speak of God” (*ceux qui, de Dieu, en parlent*). Linked to this speaking (*parler*), he coins here another neologism: “*dieur*,” a combination of “*dire*” (saying) and “*Dieu*” (God). This neologism emphasizes that “*le dire ça fait Dieu*,” that God is created through being spoken about (whether by theologians or others).⁷⁷

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Lacan's claims at this moment during *Seminar XX* cannot but call to mind the Feuerbach for whom the secret of theology is anthropology⁷⁸ (although, of

⁷⁴ Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XX*, p. 45; Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, p. 45.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Causse, *Lacan et le christianisme*, p. 208.

⁷⁸ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot, Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1989, pp. xvii–xviii, xxiii, 17–18, 29–30, 336–339.

course, Lacan does not endorse a Feuerbachian anthropology with its humanism). Indeed, two sessions later in the twentieth seminar after introducing “the God hypothesis,” Lacan indicates that this manner of linking the divine to the socio-symbolic big Other “was a way, I can’t say of laicizing, but of exorcising the good old God.”⁷⁹ When he proclaims that “*le dire ça fait Dieu*,” it sounds as though he is deliberately echoing the young Marx when the latter declares that, “The foundation of irreligious criticism is: *Man makes religion*, religion does not make man.”⁸⁰ Restated in Lacan’s terms, analytic atheism affirms that the speaking subject makes God through its saying (*dire*), rather than God making the speaking subject through His Word; in the beginning was not God’s Word, but, instead, that of the *parlêtre*. Again, the neologism “*dieur*” is designed to condense and convey this thesis. Although Lacan makes no references to Feuerbach by name that I know of, he seems to entertain some very Feuerbachian ideas (and, he rightly credits G.W.F. Hegel as the forefather of such atheistic insights⁸¹).

At this juncture, I wish to draw attention to a tension within these just-quoted statements from the twentieth seminar, a tension that marks one of Lacan’s divergences from Feuerbach and a certain Marx. On the one hand, Lacan underscores his own thoroughgoing atheism when suggesting that God has never “manifested any kind of presence whatsoever.” This God is feared only by those drowsy, thoughtless atheists who, in their half-hearted disbelief still haunted by (unconscious) theism, are vulnerable to reconversion by such sophisticated priestly cons as Pascal’s wager.

Yet, on the other hand, this same Lacan, in his resignation to “the triumph of religion,” maintains that “the God hypothesis will persist” (*l’hypothèse Dieu sera là*).⁸² There is a socio-symbolic structural place (i.e., a “locus”) where the inevitable God-effect of *dieur* comes to be. Any and every instance of speaking/

⁷⁹ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, p. 68.

⁸⁰ Karl Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. Introduction,” in: *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, Penguin, New York 1992, p. 244.

⁸¹ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, pp. 178, 193; Louis Beirnaert, “De l’athéisme,” in: *Aux frontières de l’acte analytique*, pp. 128–129; Chiesa, “Psychoanalysis, Religion, Love,” p. 63; Causse, *Lacan et le christianisme*, pp. 221, 245; Johnston, “Lacan and Monotheism”.

⁸² Roazen, “Lacan’s First Disciple,” p. 331.

saying (*parler/dire*) conjures up the divine, at least in the form of a hypothesized (and hypostatized) *grand Autre* (“it is impossible to say anything without immediately making Him subsist in the form of the Other”). What does it mean for an atheist such as Lacan to concede these points apropos theistic phenomena?

The Symbolic, in Lacan’s register theory, is a condition of possibility for speaking subjectivity. And, as just seen, this register also inevitably secretes “the God hypothesis” through any and every speaking/saying as involving *dieur*. Therefore, it would not be much of a stretch to connect Lacan’s account of divine Otherness in the twentieth seminar with Immanuel Kant’s doctrine of transcendental illusion (*transzendentalen Schein*) in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.⁸³

Kant carefully distinguishes between a phenomenon being “defective” (*mangelhaft*) and its being “deceptive” (*trüglich*).⁸⁴ Once Kantian critique has identified a transcendental illusion as illusory, the illusion ceases to risk being deceptive to the critic, but still continues to be defective. As a flawed and initially misleading experience, the illusion continues to be experienced. This is because, as transcendental, it is generated and sustained by the subject’s own possibility conditions. It thus is transcendental as well as illusory.

Nonetheless, through Kant’s comparisons of transcendental illusions with those optical illusions viewers learn to judge as deceptive (such as distortions of objects’ sizes and shapes due to the effects of refractions of light rays), he indicates that subjects can be taught through critique to treat transcendental illusions similarly to how they do such optical illusions.⁸⁵ At the same time, Kant urges eternal vigilance:

⁸³ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1, *Werkausgabe, Band III*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968, A293/B349-A298/B355 (pp. 308–311); Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, A293/B349-A298/B355 (pp. 384–387); Marc De Kesel, “Religion as Critique, Critique as Religion: Some Reflections on the Monotheistic Weakness of Contemporary Criticism,” in: *Umbr(a): A Journal of the Unconscious—The Dark God*, pp. 121–122, 126–127.

⁸⁴ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1, A293/B349-350 (p. 308); Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A293/B349-350 (p. 384).

⁸⁵ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A296-297/B353-354 (p. 386).

...there is a natural and unavoidable dialectic of pure reason, not one in which a bungler might be entangled through lack of acquaintance, or one that some sophist has artfully invented in order to confuse rational people, but one that irremediably attaches to human reason, so that even after we have exposed the mirage it will still not cease to lead our reason on with false hopes, continually propelling it into momentary aberrations that always need to be removed.⁸⁶

Lacan's "God is unconscious," as "the true formula of atheism," likewise counsels being perpetually on guard against the inexorable phantom of "*l'hypothèse Dieu*." This hypothetical God arises on the basis of the register of the Symbolic as itself a possibility condition for both the speaking subject and the unconscious-structured-like-a-language. Hence, Lacan's God hypothesis would appear very much to qualify as a case of transcendental illusion à la Kant. As such, Lacan in no way compromises his atheism in conceding the inescapability and necessity of the God illusion, just as Kant in no way compromises his critical epistemology in conceding to "pure reason" that its dogmatic transgressions are encouraged by transcendental illusions.

However, Lacan goes beyond the conscious-centric horizon of Kantian critical epistemology. As a Freudian psychoanalyst, the unconscious is central to Lacan's perspectives as regards various issues, theosophical ones included. Even if a transcendental illusion is corrected and compensated for consciously, this illusion *qua* defect may continue to deceive unconsciously.

Again, if God (or the God hypothesis) is a transcendental illusion, "God is unconscious" signals that a mere adjustment of one's conscious cognitive attitude to and judgments about the illusory divine is not necessarily enough. Additional working-through of cognitive-ideational, emotional-affective, and motivational-libidinal investments in God at unconscious levels too is absolutely requisite. Lacan further complicates this labor by, through his concept of *le sujet supposé savoir*, revealing the multitude of pseudo-secular or speciously atheistic incarnations of the divine. The God hypothesis/effect persists unconsciously in part through manifesting itself in the guises of things other than the monotheistic God, in forms that do not appear to be theological in any received sense.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, A298/B354-355 (pp. 386-387).

Furthermore, Lacan can and should be construed as subscribing to a post-Kantian line of thought laid down by both Hegel and Marx. With Hegel's "concrete universality" and Marx's "real abstractions," both Hegelianism and Marxism contend that the notion of the concrete apart from the abstract is itself the height of abstraction.⁸⁷ Similarly, as Lacan emphasizes against the May '68 slogan "structures don't march in the streets," his structures have legs; rather than being lifeless abstractions, they walk about.⁸⁸ For Hegel, Marx, and Lacan alike, even if the concepts of monotheisms are illusory conceptual-symbolic constructs, they nonetheless are far from being merely epiphenomenal. Lacan's God hypothesis, if it is a Kantian-style transcendental illusion, is also, although illusory, nonetheless a very real abstraction with the most concrete of consequences. No tenable atheism can or should deny this.

§4 Monotheism's *passe*: towards a new *père-version*

During the sixteenth seminar, Lacan contends that subjectivity itself is made possible by the barred status of the big Other—with this barring epitomized by, among other things, the unprovable, unknowable existence of God.⁸⁹ In relation to this in the context of the present discussion, it must be asked: Does confronting the atheistic truth that "the big Other does not exist" (*le grand Autre n'existe pas*) always and unavoidably require passage through monotheism's immanent-critical negation of a transcendent divine Father (as per a Hegelian reading of Christ's crucifixion⁹⁰)? *Seminar XXIII (The Sinthome [1975-1976])* seems to

⁸⁷ Karl Marx, "Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State", in: *Early Writings*, p. 161; Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, Penguin, New York 1973, pp. 85, 88, 100–102, 104–105, 142–146, 157, 164, 331, 449–450, 831–832; Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin, New York 1976, pp. 739, 909; Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume II*, trans. David Fernbach, Penguin, New York 1978, p. 185; Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume III*, trans. David Fernbach, Penguin, New York 1981, pp. 275, 596–597, 603.

⁸⁸ Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2008, pp. 43–44, 281–283; Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*, pp. 13–22.

⁸⁹ Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVI*, pp. 59–60.

⁹⁰ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995, p. 145; Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, trans. J.T. Swann, Herder and Herder, New York 1972, pp. 129, 169, 171, 257; Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2003, pp. 91, 101–102, 138, 171; Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, MIT Press, Cam-

propose that a viable atheism engages with theism (a proposal Causse imputes to Lacan⁹¹):

Presupposing the Name-of-the-Father, which is certainly God, is how psychoanalysis, when it succeeds, proves that the Name-of-the-Father can just as well be bypassed. One can just as well bypass it, on the condition that one make use of it.⁹²

On the one hand, the later Lacan on this occasion reaffirms the atheistic *telos* of the analytic experience itself. A “successful” analysis “bypasses” (or, at a minimum, makes explicit the option of bypassing) anything along the lines of the Judeo-Christian paternal divinity. On the other hand, such bypassing still must pass through (or “make use of”) *Dieu comme le Nom-du-Père*. Why? And, what does this mean?

Does the precondition of analysis somehow or other utilizing “God” entail that, for Lacan, the clinical process must traverse a form of monotheism? Is working through Judeo-Christianity specifically an integral part of the Lacanian analytic process? I would argue against reaching such conclusions on the basis of moments like the one quoted above from the twenty-third seminar. On what do I base myself in arguing thusly?

As I underscored earlier, Lacan operates with an analytically broadened conception of theism. On this conception, God, instead of being limited to what goes by that name in established, received religions, is equivalent to the structural function of the subject supposed to know. If this is the essence of the *theós*, then it can appear in any number of guises: not only God, but parent, analyst, leader, expert, nature, society, etc. According to the later Lacan particularly, this God as the Name-of-the-Father would be any “master signifier,” any S_1 ,⁹³ designating the place of a *sujet supposé savoir* (and/or *sujet supposé jouir*).

bridge 2006, p. 352; Slavoj Žižek, “The Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity,” in: C. Davis (Ed.), *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2009, pp. 39–40, 48–49; Johnston, “Lacan and Monotheism”.

⁹¹ Causse, *Lacan et le christianisme*, pp. 245–246.

⁹² Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXIII: The Sinthome, 1975–1976*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A.R. Price, Polity, Cambridge 2016, p. 116.

⁹³ Paul Verhaeghe, “Enjoyment and Impossibility: Lacan’s Revision of the Oedipus Complex,” in: J. Clemens and R. Grigg (eds.), *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanaly-*

One must connect the immediately preceding with two other claims. First, for Lacan, the subject supposed to know generates transference. Second, for both Freud and Lacan, working through the transference is essential labor in the analytic experience. Therefore, with Lacan's equivalence between theism and investment in *le sujet supposé savoir*, working through the transference could be redescribed as passing through or "making use of" *Dieu comme le Nom-du-Père*.

Transference doth make believers of us all. Thus, with the dissolution of transference being a criterion for analytic termination, atheistic unbelief indeed is the "pinnacle of psychoanalysis" (as Lacan puts it in *Seminar XVII*). Such disbelief goes much further than what ordinarily counts as atheism, withdrawing not only from God, but from all instances of the subject supposed to know.

Yet, Lacan's paraphrase of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, according to which "if God is dead, then nothing is permitted,"⁹⁴ seems to convey the sense that permanent radical atheism is undesirable as per the strict Lacanian definition of *désir*. Marc De Kesel claims that, for Lacan, religion enjoys the virtue of sustaining desire.⁹⁵ If so, does Lacan's version of analysis really seek to do away with theism, religiosity, and the like?

Similarly, the Lacanian alteration of the line from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* can be taken as insinuating an ambivalent stance *vis-à-vis* core aspects of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy. On the positive side of this ambivalence, Lacan looks as though he agrees with Nietzsche that "untruth" can be de-

sis: Reflections on Seminar XVII, Duke University Press, Durham 2006, pp. 30, 44–45; Dominiek Hoens, "Toward a New Perversion: Psychoanalysis," in: *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, p. 100.

⁹⁴ Jacques Lacan, "A Theoretical Introduction to the Functions of Psychoanalysis in Criminology," in: *Écrits*, pp. 106–107; Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book V: The Formations of the Unconscious, 1957–1958*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg, Polity, Cambridge 2017, p. 470; Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII*, pp. 119–120; Lacan, "Conférence de Bruxelles sur l'éthique de la psychanalyse," p. 173; Jacques Lacan, "Discourse to Catholics," in: *The Triumph of Religion, preceded by Discourse to Catholics*, p. 25; Miller, "Religion, Psychoanalysis," p. 36; Balmès, *Le nom, la loi, la voix*, p. 94; Adrian Johnston, *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2005, p. 286; Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*, pp. 219–220.

⁹⁵ De Kesel, "Religion as Critique, Critique as Religion," p. 128–129.

sirable, that falsehoods, fantasies, fictions, illusions, etc. can be life-affirming.⁹⁶ On the negative side, Lacan, unlike the vehemently anti-Christian Nietzsche,⁹⁷ appears to flirt with the idea that Judeo-Christian monotheism is precisely such a desirable untruth, a life-affirming lie.

Correlatively, Lacan repeatedly indicates that Nietzsche's anti-Christianity falls prey to the libertine delusional belief according to which if God is dead, then everything indeed is permitted.⁹⁸ In fact, in 1950's "A Theoretical Introduction to the Functions of Psychoanalysis in Criminology," Lacan, when referencing *The Brothers Karamazov*, invokes the "modern man... who dreams of the nihilistic suicide of Dostoevsky's hero or forces himself to blow up Nietzsche's inflatable superman (*la baudruche nietzschéenne*)"⁹⁹ (thereby hinting that the Nietzschean happy pagan lord of antiquity is nothing more than a very recent dream of modernity). Likewise, in the seventh seminar, he responds to Nietzsche, among others, with the proclamation, "Great Pan is dead."¹⁰⁰ This arguably is a retort to Nietzsche's declaration of the death of the Judeo-Christian God, a declaration the Lacan of *Seminar XI* describes as Nietzsche's "own myth" akin to that of Freud's myth of the death of the father.¹⁰¹

Lacan's "Great Pan" is to be associated with Nietzsche's romanticization of antiquity's "master morality" and its pagan hedonism. The Nietzschean Great Pan and *Übermensch*, on Lacan's judgment, both are permutations of Freud's always-already dead *Urvater*. On a Lacanian interpretation, this deceased father himself represents, *contra* Nietzschean libertinism, the fact that uninhibited, uncastrated Dionysian enjoyment is not to be found anywhere, including in

⁹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, Vintage, New York 1989, §1 (p. 9), §4 (p. 11), §24 (p. 35).

⁹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," in: *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, Vintage, New York 1967, §5 (p. 23); Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §46 (p. 60); Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols", in: *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Penguin, New York 1990, pp. 52–53, 55–56, 120.

⁹⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XIII: L'objet de la psychanalyse, 1965-1966* (unpublished typescript), session of May 25, 1966.

⁹⁹ Jacques Lacan, "Introduction théorique aux fonctions de la psychanalyse en criminologie," in: *Écrits*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1966, p. 130; Lacan, "A Theoretical Introduction to the Functions of Psychoanalysis in Criminology," p. 106.

¹⁰⁰ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, p. 198.

¹⁰¹ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, p. 27.

the pre-Christian world of ancient Greece (something Lacan indicates against Nietzsche in the nineteenth seminar [...ou pire]¹⁰²).

Maybe the preceding apropos Nietzsche is another implication of Lacan's "God is unconscious": The libidinal economy of the unconscious, centered on *désir* with its fundamental fantasies involving *objet petit a*, is sustained by the Law of God as the dead father and/or Name-of-the-Father. If this God dies, then the entire economy He supports collapses (i.e., "nothing is permitted"). In *Télévision*, Lacan, speaking of matters Oedipal, remarks, "Even if the memories of familial suppression weren't true, they would have to be invented, and that is certainly done."¹⁰³ Paraphrasing this remark, one might say that, by Lacan's lights, if God is dead, then, at least for libidinal reasons, he would have to be resurrected—and that has certainly been done.

Yet, as I already stressed, Lacan is a staunch atheist and identifies his proposition "God is unconscious" as "the true formula of atheism." Under the shadow of the immediately preceding, it now would look as though Lacan's atheism is a particularly perverse sort. What I will proceed to argue is that the later Lacan places the post-Hegelian thesis of atheism-in-Christianity in relation to his very precise psychoanalytic conception of perversion as a diagnostic category.

At least as early as the tenth seminar, Lacan begins portraying perversion as involving placing oneself at the service of a certain version of the big Other. Specifically, as he says in *Seminar X*, "the perverse subject... offers himself loyally to the Other's jouissance."¹⁰⁴ Subsequent years of *le Séminaire* echo this characterization of the pervert.¹⁰⁵ Perverse subjectivity devotes itself, through its conformist transgressions, to keeping up appearances to the effect that there really exists somewhere a locus of absolute knowledge, enjoyment, and/or authority.

¹⁰² Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XIX: ...or worse, 1971–1972*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A. R. Price, Polity, Cambridge 2018, pp. 148–149.

¹⁰³ Jacques Lacan, "Television", trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson, in: J. Copjec (ed.), *Television/A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, W. W. Norton and Company, New York 1990, p. 30.

¹⁰⁴ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, p. 49.

¹⁰⁵ Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XII*, session of June 16, 1965; Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XIV: La logique du fantasme, 1966–1967* (unpublished typescript), sessions of February 15, 1967, May 31, 1967.

In the sixteenth seminar, Lacan identifies his matheme for the signifier of the unbarred Other, S(A), as the veritable “key” to perversion.¹⁰⁶

Seminar XVI also links perversion to monotheism in general and Christianity in particular. Through this linkage, Lacan is not just making the point that speciously atheistic libertines and superficially blasphemous hedonists (or a Nietzsche for whom God is dead rather than simply non-existent) need the divine big Other as an implicit or explicit point of reference lending their pseudo-transgressive actings-out an aura of titillating defiance. He additionally maintains that this monotheism’s God-the-Father, Christ-the-Son, and community of believers (i.e., the Holy Spirit) all are figures of perversion themselves.

In Lacan’s Freudian eyes, all parties to Christianity’s Trinity are at least as perverted as the anti-Christian provocateurs whose cheap thrills rely upon permanent impotent rebellion against this theistic triumvirate. God is grounded in the fantasmatic figure of the *Urvater*, the obscene paternal *jouisseur* whose excessive enjoyment tries to blot out his own barred, castrated status. Christ sacrifices himself so as to save not only humanity, but also so as to cover and compensate for the supposed transcendent Father’s ignorance, impotence, evil, and/or other imperfections. The Holy Spirit, especially as the social institutionalizations of organized religion, often involves repressing those moments within Judeo-Christianity when it comes perilously close to atheistic realizations within its own contents and confines. Lacan emphasizes the especially intense perversity of the strictest literalists of paternal monotheism.¹⁰⁷ And, in *Seminar XXI*, he directly associates Christianity with perversion¹⁰⁸ (likewise, the sub-title of Slavoj Žižek’s 2003 book *The Puppet and the Dwarf is The Perverse Core of Christianity*). In the sixteenth seminar, Lacan observes that, “the pervert is he who consecrates himself to plugging the hole (*boucher le trou*) in the Other... he is, up to a certain point, on the side of the Other’s existence. He is a defender of the faith.”¹⁰⁹ This observation is reiterated several sessions later.¹¹⁰ Also in *Seminar*

¹⁰⁶ Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVI*, p. 292, 382, 401.

¹⁰⁷ Jacques Lacan, “Introduction to the Names-of-the-Father Seminar,” trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, in: *Television/A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, p. 89.

¹⁰⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XXI: Les non-dupes errent, 1973–1974* (unpublished typescript), session of December 18, 1973.

¹⁰⁹ Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVI*, p. 253.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

XVI, Lacan asserts of the perverse subject that, “He gives to God His veritable plenitude.”¹¹¹ Similarly, in the twenty-third seminar, he describes the pervert as a “redeemer” (*rédempteur*).¹¹²

Given the preceding, the figure of Jesus Christ counts as a Lacanian perverse subject. He explicitly functions within Christianity as the redeemer *par excellence*. On Lacan’s account, Christ-the-Son’s primary redemption, as perverse, is of the big Other (i.e., God-the-Father).¹¹³ His life and, particularly, His death are meant to restore the lawful reign of S(A). By extension, all those Christian believers (i.e., “defenders of the faith,” the earthly community of the Holy Spirit) who seek to emulate Christ come to operate as little redeemers, as copycat perverts.

The paradoxical status of Christianity as the religion of atheism, a status Lacan joins everyone from Hegel to Žižek in assigning to this monotheism,¹¹⁴ is integral to what makes it perverse in the strictest of senses by Lacan’s reckoning. The Lacanian pervert plays a double game. On the one hand, he/she registers, at least unconsciously, the signifier of the barred Other, S(A), namely, indications that there is no locus of omniscience, omnipotence, perfection, and the like. On the other hand, the pervert repeatedly sets about, in reaction to this registration of S(A), trying in one or more ways to plaster over the cracks in *le grand Autre* (i.e., “plugging the hole in the Other”).

As the religion of atheism, Christianity simultaneously both reveals that “*le grand Autre n’existe pas*” (“Father, why hast Thou forsaken me?,” etc.) as well as conceals this revelation through various means (denying God’s death, deifying/fetishizing Jesus as Christ-the-God, and so on). Octave Mannoni, one of Lacan’s analytic followers, famously depicts the fetishist, the paradigmatic perverse subject, as living according to the logic of “*je sais bien, mais quand même...*” (I know full well, but nonetheless...).¹¹⁵ Christianity, including the *Christian*

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¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

¹¹² Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XXIII: Le sinthome, 1975–1976*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 2005, p. 85; Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXIII*, p. 69.

¹¹³ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, p. 108.

¹¹⁴ Johnston, “Lacan and Monotheism”.

¹¹⁵ Octave Mannoni, “*Je sais bien, mais quand même...*,” in: *Clefs pour l’Imaginaire ou l’Autre Scène*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1969, pp. 12–13, 32.

atheism of the likes of G.K. Chesterton, indeed plays the double game of “I know full well that God is dead, but nonetheless...”

However, Lacan insinuates in multiple fashions that even the most thoroughly analyzed person, on the other side of concluding an exhaustive (and exhausting) analysis, cannot but lapse into this same double game of “*je sais bien, mais quand même...*”—albeit perhaps now with a little more occasional self-conscious awareness of doing so. In Lacan’s view, analysis does not rid the analysand of his/her unconscious or, for that matter, his/her ego either (and the latter despite Lacan’s lifelong, vehement critiques of ego psychology). Passage through a concluding experience of “subjective destitution,” in which ego-level identifications as well as points of reference such as big Others and subjects supposed to know vacillate or vanish altogether, indeed is an essential, punctuating moment of the Lacanian analytic process.

Nevertheless, Lacan does not consider it possible or desirable to dwell permanently in such an analysis-terminating destitute state. He sees it as both appropriate and inevitable that egos, big Others, subjects supposed to know, and the like will reconstitute themselves for the analysand in the aftermath of his/her analysis. Hopefully, the versions of these reconstituted in the wake of and in response to analysis will be better, more livable versions for the analysand. But, in their unavailability, persistence, and resilience, they arguably are *sinthomes* rather than mere symptoms.

For reasons I have delineated at length above, the structural *sinthomes* of *le grand Autre* and *le sujet supposé savoir* bring with them (mono)theism as a *sinthome* too. Another of Lacan’s neologisms, one he coins starting in *Seminar XXII* (*R.S.I.* [1974-1975]), is connected to what I have just been discussing: “*père-version*” as associating perversion with paternity.¹¹⁶ As Lacan puts it the following year in the twenty-third seminar, *père-version* is perversion as the “version towards the father.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XXII: R.S.I., 1974–1975* (unpublished typescript), session of January 21, 1975.

¹¹⁷ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXIII*, p. 11.

I view it as no accident that Lacan introduces this particular neologism in a seminar (the twenty-second) whose title, *R.S.I.*, is intended, in its original French pronunciation, to evoke the word “*hérésie*” (heresy). In *Seminar XXIII*, Lacan indeed heretically depicts Christianity as entailing sadomasochistic *père-version*.¹¹⁸ Christ and Christians *père-versly* serve a God who, according to Freudian psychoanalysis, is modeled on a *père-vers* (obscene, brutal, etc.) primal father.¹¹⁹ These servants/redeemers seek to prop up and render consistent this *père-vers* Other, as Himself really barred, as S(A).

In the twenty-second seminar, while discussing Freud’s theory of religion and God as *père-vers*, Lacan reminds his audience of just how monotonously repetitive and rigidly unimaginative perverts are.¹²⁰ Perversions exhibit pronounced mechanical, stereotyped characteristics, as anyone familiar with the Marquis de Sade’s writings, pornography website categories and taxonomies, or various types of fetishisms readily can attest. Instead of being thrillingly subversive and mind-bendingly transgressive, perversions are, in fact, profoundly boring formulaic spectacles ultimately laboring to sustain the authority of some form of *grand Autre*.¹²¹ Just as Freud famously compares the rituals of obsessional neurotics to religious practices, so too does Lacan compare perverse practices to theistic rites.

Similarly, in *Seminar XXIII*, Lacan complains aloud that psychoanalysis has not invented, at least not yet, “a new perversion.”¹²² In light of this lack of inventiveness, he proclaims analysis to be “a fruitless practice” (*quelle infécondité dans cette pratique*).¹²³ Analysis itself originates in part with Freud’s identification of the inherently perverse nature of human sexuality starting in 1905’s groundbreaking *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. As Lacan indicates, despite this, neither the theory nor the practice of analysis has (yet) prompted the gen-

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¹¹⁸ Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XXIII*, p. 85; Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXIII*, p. 69.

¹¹⁹ Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XXII*, session of April 8, 1975; Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXIII*, p. 130.

¹²⁰ Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XXII*, session of April 8, 1975.

¹²¹ Jacques Lacan, “Monsieur A.,” *Ornicar?*, No. 21–22 (Summer 1980), p. 20.

¹²² Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXIII*, p. 132.

¹²³ Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XXIII*, p. 153; Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXIII*, p. 132.

esis of novel, previously-unseen perverse phenomena. Although Freud's self-styled Copernican revolution revolutionizes thinking about sexuality, it does not seem, on Lacan's assessment, to revolutionize sexuality itself.

Lacan's 1976 complaint about the analytic failure to invent a new perversion directly applies also to his contemporaneous reflections on the *père-version* of monotheisms. It is no coincidence that the God hypothesis, *dieur*, the *sinthome*, and *père-version* all surface during the same period of Lacan's teachings. The Lacan of this later era additionally evinces pessimism at times about analysts, analysands, and humanity as a whole, so as to sustain livable lives of desire, coming up with anything other and better than the old gods or these gods' thinly-veiled substitutes and disguises. These would be lives that are livable through at least something being permitted to desire.

Again, if God is dead—this God comes in the myriad fantasmatic guises of the omniscient and omnipotent subject supposed to know and enjoy—then nothing is permitted. This God stubbornly remains a *sinthome*. Even well-analyzed subjects promise nevertheless still to persevere in respecting the stale, stereotyped images of religious and pseudo-secular theisms whose styles and contents are properly perverse/*père-vers*. These subjects' libidinal economies, on the other side of their completed analyses, continue to require leaning upon fantasies of transcendent all-enjoyers and unbarred big Others, prohibited Elsewheres of speciously possible absolutes. How else to avoid being crushed by the trauma of the second of Oscar Wilde's "two tragedies" ("There are only two tragedies in life: one is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it")?

In the twenty-fourth seminar (*L'insu que sait de l'une-bévue, s'aile à mourre* [1976-1977]), the very late Lacan speaks somewhat enigmatically of striving "towards a new signifier."¹²⁴ In terms of Lacan's interlinked theories of signifiers and mathemes, perversion involves, for him, the perverse subject attempting to turn $S(\mathcal{A})$, the signifier of the barred Other, back into $S(A)$, the signifier of the unbarred Other. This leads to the idea of an analysis that possibly could assist in inventing an alternative to *père-version* in which new signifiers tied to $S(\mathcal{A})$, rather than to

¹²⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XXIV: L'insu que sait de l'une-bévue, s'aile à mourre, 1976-1977* (unpublished typescript), session of May 17, 1977; Johnston, "Lacan's Endgame".

S(A), become the nodal anchors of transformed libidinal economies, the *points de capiton* of renewed *désir*.

Lacan's atheism hence points to an anti-Heideggerian "only we can save God." More exactly, only we can save ourselves through inventing a new *sinthome* for our desiring lives instead of staying stuck in theistic *père-versions*. Once earthly as well as heavenly fathers have been demystified,¹²⁵ can another figure different-in-kind from them take their places? Can we move in a direction other than one "from Dad to worse" (*du père au pire*), as the later Lacan described it?¹²⁶ Is our only choice really between, to paraphrase Friedrich Engels, paternalism or barbarism? Are we condemned to the perverse game of continuing to buttress the paternal *imago* during its long decline?¹²⁷

One of the final Lacan's hopes is that a desirable, rather than desire-extinguishing, atheistic alternative to *le Nom-du-Père* and its ilk, a fundamentally new S_1 , just might arrive at some point. This strain of Lacanianism would involve, like Marxism, a messianic atheism: We at last will be redeemed from our redeemer—without, for all that, falling into (self-)condemnation. One fine day, God finally no longer will arrive. We will have transubstantiated Him into something else... *a-men*.

¹²⁵ Johnston, "Lacan and Monotheism".

¹²⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Télévision*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1973, p. 72; Lacan, "Television," p. 46.

¹²⁷ Jacques Lacan, "Les complexes familiaux dans la formation de l'individu: Essai d'analyse d'une fonction en psychologie," in: *Autres écrits*, pp. 60–61.