

## “Who do you say I am?”: Secular Christologies in Contemporary French Philosophy

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### Christ, Our Contemporary

The scene is dramatic. Likely, after decades of film versions of the story of Christ, every Western reader will bring to mind those films' *mise en scène*. Providing the color palate is a certain orientalist hue, some mix of sun and sand, while a steely old Hollywood tone and look is given to our white, WASP-y actors. And we see a version of Jesus as white Western man—that burdened absolute image of the human—speaking with gravitas and graveness amongst the orientalist background, emotionally but directly demanding of Peter “But what about you?” he asks. “Who do you say I am?” with Peter’s response, a triumph of sorts for the audience, “You are the Christ (Mark 8:29 NRSV).” It is strange, then, that in the next moment the actions of this declared Christ are described in this way, “Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him (Mark 8:30 NRSV).” But, of course, they did and this domestication is what resulted. Perhaps it is owing to the Hollywood *mise en scène* that we have adopted that the drama of this scene can be so foreign, albeit safely foreign, with its strange mix of orientalist images and (however bronzed they are for the scenes) white actors speaking with their refined gravitas. This safe foreignness covers over the demands being spoken; the distance created by the *mise en scène* makes it seem that the question being posed by the one declared to be Christ is posed in the past and so does not bear on the present or the future.

In fact, it seems that the true of this exchange is passed over, the true strangeness of it. Today Christianity is but one choice amongst many acceptable religions to believe in one can be a Christian and not be a weirdo, simply put. According to Søren Kierkegaard—writing at perhaps his most pious in *Practice in Christianity*—if one is to believe in Christ one must be contemporary with Christ: “as long as there is a believer, this person, in order to have become that, must have been and as a believer must be just as contemporary with Christ’s presence as his contemporaries were.”<sup>1</sup> He goes on to write, “This contemporaneity is the condition

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<sup>1</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1991), 9.

of faith, and, more sharply defined, it is faith.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps though, contrary to Kierkegaard, making this question contemporary will have nothing to do with Christianity, not even the Christianity purified of Christendom that Kierkegaard hoped for. This may be because, as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche argued in their own ways and others after them have argued in theirs, the Christ of Christianity has nothing to do with the real Christ. If these heretics are correct then the wager is that one can do a Christology outside of Christianity and its institutions, which would reveal Christ as a contemporary in a way that Christian theology obscures.

This is the wager that is explored in this essay, by teasing out the forms of three specific Christologies in contemporary French philosophy. I have chosen to call these “secular Christologies” because, even with certain caveats around the work of Michel Henry, the three figures (Alain Badiou, Michel Henry, and François Laruelle) speak without any churchly authority and they speak about Christ in a specifically philosophical manner. Though this essay is a secondary work—meaning I do not develop a secular Christology in my own voice—if this wager is correct any philosopher could develop a Christology as many others in fact have. However, I have chosen these three because of the radical nature of their respective projects and because of their deep connection to various forms of philosophical materialism.<sup>3</sup> What does materialist philosophy, assumed to move philosophy to this World, have to do with Christ? To answer this question this essay will proceed impressionist-ically and presumes familiarity with the figures discussed. The point of this essay will be to see how these philosophers writing in the secular age have made Christ contemporary for their philosophy. It will attend to the questions: How does this engagement with the problem of Christ reveal how their philosophies engage with religion in general? Does this engagement modify anything about their philosophy? Does it do any philosophical work or is it just the work of thinkers returning to piety in their twilight years?

In a certain sense this speaking of the one claimed to be the Son of God, God incarnate, is a reiteration of Deleuze’s question regarding the moderns, “Why is philosophy so compromised with God? . . . Is it a dishonest compromise or something a little purer?”<sup>4</sup> Our reiteration might be phrased something like: “Why is philosophy still concerned with Christ? Is it simply piety, a bit of playfulness, or something a little more interesting, more productive?” Perhaps this isn’t quite the way Kierkegaard would like us to pose this question or to be concerned with

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Henry’s recasting of a radical phenomenology has been predicated on directing his analyses away from the *eidos* and towards the *hyle*—see his *Material Phenomenology*, trans. Scott Davidson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008)—while Badiou has explicitly declared his project to be an attempt to reinvent dialectical materialism—see his *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event 2*, trans. Alberto Toscano (New York and London: Continuum, 2010)—and Laruelle’s non-philosophy began with an attempt to think matter as such outside of the determination of an idealist materialism—see his *Le principe de minorité* (Paris: Aubier, 1982) and *Anti-Badiou: On the Introduction of Maoism into Philosophy*, trans. Robin Mackay (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Seminar on Spinoza/Cours Vincennes 25/11/1980”, available at <<http://www.webdeleuze.com/php/texte.php?cle=17&groupe=Spinoza&langue=2>>, accessed 12/06/2012.

Christ's contemporaneity, seeing as he railed against the idea of the interesting in *Fear and Trembling* and *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*, but what I refer to as interesting is precisely what is worth giving our attention to, what we should allow to capture our attention within thought—what challenges the smooth functioning of the philosophical machine.<sup>5</sup> For the problem of Christ is ultimately a problem of the identity of humanness. Not what it means “to be” human, not what it means to be a particular man or a woman, but of what at our most generic and in our most radically lived experience our humanness consists. To ask, “who do you say that I am?” and to hear back the answer “the Christ” cracks open the real drama of each life.

### **Christ, the Firstborn Son of the Father**

Michel Henry's work is a limit case in how far one can go philosophically with religious materials. Without falling into the trap of thinking that philosophy and theology can be easily separated out into their pure forms, there does seem to be some difference between religious organizations of thought and philosophical ones. The philosopher may come up against the religious material, but it is far from clear at what point the work of the philosopher is completely determined by their religious belief and experience and when their understanding of these religious modalities are being shaped by their philosophical work. Michel Henry's work is a limit case because the line between philosophy and theology is even more razor thin and tarries closer to heresy in the light of orthodox theology than we find in the work of other Catholic phenomenologists. In fact there is something of a tug-o-war over Henry's work, between those like Jean-Yves Lacoste who see in Henry's late Christian works a sign of the philosopher's “resolute commitment to Christianity” and those like Michelle Rebidoux who see in this “Christian turn” an attempt to solve the philosophical problem of solipsism that threatens Henry's phenomenology of radical immanence.<sup>6</sup> Of course, none of the secondary work on Henry would go so far as to present such a stark choice. It is not the case that in Henry we find an either/or between theology and philosophy, but the tension in what is emphasized by his readers points to a real tension in Henry's work between theological determination and the automation of philosophy with religious materials that we see in each of our three philosophers.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This is Philip Goodchild's point in his philosophical analysis of piety. See Philip Goodchild, *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> See Jean-Yves Lacoste, “Foreword to Michel Henry's *Words of Christ*,” trans Aaron Riches and Peter M. Candler Jr. in Michel Henry, *Words of Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), x and Michelle Rebidoux, “*C'est Moi le Principe et la Fin*: The Mysterious ‘Middle’ of Michel Henry's (Christian) Phenomenology of Life,” *Analecta Hermeneutica* 3 (2011): 7-10. A particularly desperate attempt to make sure Henry is rigorously and unimpeachably orthodox may also be found in Karl Hefty's “Introduction to the English Edition” of *Words of Christ*. Throughout his introduction Hefty goes to great pains to emphasize that Henry's philosophy is completed in an already decided theology.

<sup>7</sup> For more on these two tendencies in Continental philosophy of religion see Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler, “What is Continental Philosophy of Religion Now?” in *After the Postsecular and the*

Henry's engagement with Christology over the course of three books takes a decidedly phenomenological approach. His phenomenology is radical as it attempts to create a thought that is immanent to the material it is investigating which requires that Henry take the words of Christ as if they were true. This is of course largely self-grounding, but in terms of investigating a phenomenon in its "for-itself" modality it is potentially more fecund than reductionist or relational accounts of religious phenomena. This would seem to suggest that the organon for evaluating Christology will be Christ himself and this would seem to be in accord with such a radically immanent method. However, there is always a temptation to let the *logos* come to define Christ, rather than holding them in superposition, a logos defined not by Christ but by those who speak about him. Henry gives away the game from the start in *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity* by making his Christology a philosophy of Christianity. He writes:

I do not intend to ask whether Christianity is 'true' or 'false,' or to establish, for example, the former hypothesis. Rather, what will be in question here is *what Christianity considers as truth*—what kind of truth it offers to people, what it endeavors to communicate to them not as a theoretical or indifferent truth but as the essential truth that by some mysterious affinity is suitable for them, to the point that it alone is capable of assuring them salvation.<sup>8</sup>

The question begged here, what does Henry mean by Christianity, is quickly answered by him when he writes:

What we find expressed in a set of texts designated by the title *New Testament* is what we mean by Christianity—and rightly so, it would seem. Where else would we seek the 'content' of Christianity, so as to reflect on what it considers truth to be, if not in the corpus constituted by the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, their Epistles (by Paul, James, Peter, John, and Jude), and last of all in the Revelation attributed to the same John? Were not the dogmas defining Christianity elaborated on the basis of this corpus? Does not the knowledge of Christianity—and thus all reflection on its possible 'truth'—come by way of these texts? Only a meticulous analysis of them can lead, it would seem, to understanding of what Christianity is at its essential core.<sup>9</sup>

But this decision on Henry's part to make of the New Testament the material revealing of the essential core of Christianity is not nearly as obvious as he makes out. Why not a material analysis of the communities who take the name Christian?

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*Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: CSP, 2010), 1-24.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Henry, *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

Is Henry blind to the problem of supercessionism raised by limiting the analysis of Christianity (and so, for him, of Christ) to the New Testament, excising the Christian experience of its Jewish roots completely?

A decision will always excise something, leaving a thinker open to some rebuke, and while the issue of supercessionism is very real considering how it has undergirded anti-Semitism throughout the centuries, something else is at work in this decision of Henry. It is the real separation of the radical immanence of some phenomenon from the World in the philosophical sense of the field of projected transcendental signifiers. He puts this starkly writing, “*the truth of Christianity differs in essence from the truth of the world. . . . Living is not possible in the world. Living is possible only outside the world, where another Truth reigns, another way of revealing.*”<sup>10</sup> In Henry the World is synonymous with the scientific reduction of everything to what can be measured, thus the truth of the World always reveals itself through some relation, never getting to the ipseity or radical immanence of the thing itself. This is ultimately the meaning of his anti-modernism and seeming hatred of the natural sciences on display whenever he speaks of the Galilean failure of Western thought.<sup>11</sup> This is not some kind of “natural” Roman Catholic distrust of the secular and modern analogous to Pope Benedict XVI’s constant warnings about science unmoored from Christianity, as some commentators may want to suggest, but there is something perhaps troubling about such an easy dovetailing of an institutionalized theology of fear alongside a real philosophical commitment. What does such closeness reveal about Henry’s Christology?

To answer that question we need to first look more closely at what Henry’s Christology is. While this plays itself out in increasingly complex levels of nuance over the course of three texts, moving from the way Life, the Body, and Speech are manifest purely in Christ, the structure of this Christology is given in a relatively simple way in *I Am the Truth*. What Henry sees in Christian Christology is a response to the problem of pure manifestation over and against the reduction or relational philosophies that cover over the thing-in-itself. In *I Am the Truth* this is related specifically to the way Life is manifested as such. Not life as studied in the natural sciences, which really only studies living beings and not Life itself, but life as manifestation, as Life is in and of itself. This is then a problem of how Life engenders itself within the living and on the basis of itself, so without any reference to a relationality that would erase the Ipseity of identity. The self-grounding relationship of God the Father and Christ the Son provides Henry with a model of this non-relational but not solipsistic Ipseity. He writes:

What was clearly established was this: absolute Life experiences itself in an actualized Ipseity, a Self that is itself actualized and, as such, singular. It is in this way that the self-engendering of the Father implies within it the engendering of the Son and is one with this engendering.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 23, 30.

<sup>11</sup> These remarks are found throughout *I Am the Truth* but perhaps nowhere is the vitriol so much on display as in *Barbarism*, trans. Scott Davidson (New York and London: Continuum, 2012).

Or rather: the engendering of the Son consists in the Father's self-engendering and is one with it. No Life without a Living. Not one Living without Life. . . . *Life engenders itself like the Living that Life itself is within its self-engendering.* And this is why that Living is the Unique and the First—'That man,' as John says (1:33).<sup>12</sup>

In other words, what Christology does for Henry is allow for a thinking of Life grounded in nothing but itself, not in the World, nor in living beings, but Life as pure actuality. Thus, Christ comes to be but the Firstborn Son of the Father where each of us is a Son:

I myself am this singular Self engendered in the self-engendering of absolute Life, and only that. *Life self-engenders itself as me.* If, along with Meister Eckhart—and with Christianity—we call Life God, we might say: 'God engenders himself as me.' The generation of this singular Self that I myself am—the living transcendental Me, in the self-generation of absolute Life: this is my transcendental birth, the one that makes me a *true man* [emphasis mine], the transcendental Christian man.<sup>13</sup>

All of this is in itself interesting, especially reading these late books as attempts to deal with problems raised by his early philosophy. But without accounting for the generation of Christianity as such Henry leaves his philosophy open to a theological determination that suppresses the power of his thought. Instead of addressing this issue of *religion* as such, rather than assuming Christianity as the bearer of truth, Henry ends up grounding a new dualism between Christianity and the World in a cultural monism that he critiques in the World itself, "To reduce man to a part of the material universe, similarly subject to the physical and mathematical approach of modern Galilean science, it is necessary to have previously reduced any form of knowledge to such an approach: *to presuppose that there exists no mode of knowing other than Galilean science, that is to say, modern physics.*"<sup>14</sup> But, Henry has done the same in his immanent approach to Christianity as can be seen in the block quote above where Christianity reveals *true man*. Not the human as a multiplicity, but the human as truly invisible in the sense that everything that matters to our transcendental Self is invisible like pain and love. Only, Henry says, does Christianity reveal that, ignoring the plethora of religious traditions outside of Christianity that deal with the invisible and the occulted as well, perhaps in ways that institutionalized Christianity does not.<sup>15</sup>

But ultimately it is institutional Christianity that haunts Henry's phenomenology. Interestingly, nowhere to my knowledge does he consider the role of the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 60. [Translation modified.]

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>15</sup> For example, on the hidden and invisible in Islam see Christian Jambet, *Le Caché et l'Apparent* (Paris: Herne, 2003).

Church as such. What is institutional for Henry is the Scriptures that records the words of Christ and with which the Christian community engages in its development of dogma. These are spoken of by Henry in a way that assumes them, without paying much attention ultimately to their political or social reality. So, what we are given in Henry's passing over in silence of the institutions of Christianity is simply the idea that there is an ethic developed and that is distinctly Christian. He writes: "The Christian ethic aims to allow people to overcome the forgetting of their condition as Son in order to rediscover (thanks to it) the absolute Life into which they were born."<sup>16</sup> So Christianity ends up doing what the Marxist demands but is unable to do except in a Galilean way—it changes the world. These sorts of claims about the efficacy of one religious tradition over others, about how medicine or care of the vulnerable develops, are always highly speculative and ultimately idealist. Is charity a fundamentally Christian notion or a fundamentally human one? For Henry, this question is unintelligible, for the answer is that to be truly human is to be truly a Son of God. But this means for him not to be a Christ, but to be a Christian. And this coupling of Christ to Christianity is both not necessary within the bounds of Henry's own philosophy, but is also not necessary within the bounds of reason and experience. The evidence for which will be seen not just in our last philosopher, Laruelle, but also in the traditions that Laruelle draws upon, like certain Gnostic sects, and those he didn't, like the Christologies and Imamologies found in various strands of Islam.<sup>17</sup> But, is it not fear of the barbarism of this age, the barbarism about which Pope Benedict XVI also speaks from his gilded throne, that drives Henry into the arms of not Christ but Christianity. The Christ spoken about by Henry is ultimately a manifestation not of Christ himself, but of the culture of Christ, not Christ crucified, but a world transformed into a Christian world after Christ's resurrection. Christ manifests Henry's own concerns.

### **Christ, Consubstantial with the Father**

It may be surprising for readers of Badiou's seemingly sparse words directly on religion to see him listed here. While Žižek has pointed out that there seems to be a fifth truth condition of religion to add to Badiou's four of art, science, politics and love, Badiou's own direct engagement is usually thought to consist of his book on Paul.<sup>18</sup> Žižek's point is that Badiou's theory of fidelity to an event determines the relationship to philosophy of the other four conditions as a kind of metacondition. It is not a demand that Badiou engage more directly with religious material, instead it is a demand that Badiou recognize how his own subtractive method already

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<sup>16</sup> Henry, *I Am the Truth*, p 171.

<sup>17</sup> While the obsession with messianism is well known in Continental philosophy of religion, largely dominated by Christian concerns with some important Jewish thinkers also finding a certain pride of place, the particular form this takes in Islam is all but unknown, especially in the Anglophone literature. Christian Jambet's *Le Grande resurrection d'Alamūt* (Paris: Verdier, 1990) should be a classic in this regard, but has been mostly passed over.

<sup>18</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London and New York: Verso, 2008), Ch. 3 as well as Bruno Bosteels remarks in his translator's introduction to Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), x.

presupposes a certain Christian notion of faithfulness. While Badiou has not yet added religion to his list of truth conditions, he has engaged with Christological material directly in a way that shows his subjective method at work and often declares a certain fascination with Christianity that he does not have with Judaism or Islam (just to name the main varieties of monotheism). Even though he claims in *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* that, “For me, truth be told, Paul is not an apostle or a saint. I care nothing for the Good News he declares, or the cult dedicated to him” we find him in his *Theory of the Subject* and *Logics of Worlds* discussing Christ in way that illuminates a different approach to the relationship of Christ and philosophy than the one we have seen with Henry.<sup>19</sup> However, it is still in his *Saint Paul* that we find a clearer exposition of his subtractive method than the one in *Theory of the Subject* and a less complex one than in *Logics of Worlds*; so before turning to his Christology we will remain there in order to understand his early engagement with Christ before he turned to Paul.<sup>20</sup>

Badiou’s evaluation of Christianity is in line with his generally polemical stance as can be seen when he writes:

Let us be perfectly clear: so far as we are concerned, what we are dealing with here is precisely a fable. And singularly so in the case of Paul, who for crucial reasons reduces Christianity to a single statement: Jesus is resurrected. Yet this is precisely a fabulous element [*point fabuleux*], since all the rest, birth, teachings, death, *might* after all be upheld. A ‘fable’ is that part of a narrative that, so far as we are concerned, fails to touch on any Real, unless it be by virtue of that invisible and indirectly accessible residue sticking to every obvious imaginary.<sup>21</sup>

Badiou is quite clear that his only reason for engaging with such a religious fable and the apostle who preached it is to “organize” his “own speculative discourses,” as Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud and others have done before him.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, for Badiou there can be no compromise with the fabulous element in the way we have seen Henry fully embrace and think from that element (being, of course, Christ’s life, death *and* resurrection). For Badiou “it is a question of restoring the universal to its pure secularity, here and now.”<sup>23</sup> Thus Paul can only be of use to Badiou if he is separated from the fable. Badiou is explicit that this will be his method, he will subtract Paul from the very fable of which Paul rightly could be called the inventor

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<sup>19</sup> Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>20</sup> I am assuming that the reader is relatively familiar with Badiou’s project. If the reader is not there are resources that already exist which can do a far better job than some hurried summary I could provide that would do nothing more than clutter up the rest of the essay. In addition to Žižek’s excellent summary mentioned above see Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press: 2003), which remains the best overview of the fundamentals of Badiou’s philosophy.

<sup>21</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

and examine him only formally as a “subject devoid of all identity and suspended to an event whose only ‘proof’ lies precisely in its having been declared by a subject.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, for Badiou the figure of Paul, and really any religious figure, will only be of interest for his philosophy as an *example* of some element of his philosophy, in this case the coupled theories of the event and the subject. The example is only useful as a point of reference if it reveals the formal structure of fidelity to the event, this fidelity being one mode that subject creation takes in Badiou.<sup>25</sup>

The subtractive element of Badiou’s philosophy is where the power of his thought would seem to lie. It is what could be most productive for those who want to do something with Badiou’s work, that is, most powerful outside of the particular instantiation of philosophy through the Badiou-subject. The process of subtracting allows for the philosopher to take what is most powerful within some particular phenomenon, religion in this case, and remove it from the structures surrounding it that would sediment and ultimately disempower that element. Subtraction is then not a negation, or if it is, it is a positive instance of negation, which opens up thought to new forms of coherence and construction. Thus Christ may come to challenge the current understanding of the human, mired as we are in the drive not towards a fulfilled life but in many ways mere survival. Whether that is the mere survival forced upon the majority of people in the world today or it is the mere survival of the denizens of the First World, living without any sense of what Badiou calls “the Idea.” The message of Christ, which spoke against the power of this world, opens up to a vision of the human who, to paraphrase Aristotle, lived as if immortal.

One might expect Badiou’s subtractive engagement with Christianity to produce a vision of Christ subtracted from orthodox theology. However, turning to his own remarks on Christology in *Theory of the Subject*, one is confronted with something strange: seemingly Badiou endorses the strict Christological orthodoxy established by the Council of Nicaea, which he calls “the first of the great politico-ideological conferences in history.”<sup>26</sup> The only thing that is seemingly subtracted from Christian theology is the notion that any of this is true and not simply a fable, albeit for Badiou it is a helpful fable for delimiting the authentic Maoism against a right-wing Statism and an ultra-left fanaticism. For Badiou reads the consubstantial being of God the Father with God the Son as a dialectical arrangement, expressing the fundamentally decentered and split identity of the absolute. If the Arians had been triumphant over what became Christian orthodoxy it would be but an example of “right-wing opportunism” where the “revolution is dissolved within the state.”<sup>27</sup> He doesn’t go into great detail about why he associates this particular Christian heresy with that particular Marxist deviation, but it has something to do with the overly hierarchical and thus ordered and secure anchoring of identity that comes out

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> For Badiou’s mature theory of the subject and the different figures in which a subject may be expressed as a mode of the event (faithful, reactive, and obscure) see *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), 43-78.

<sup>26</sup> Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 15.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 17, 16.

of Arianism. Regarding the ultra-left deviation, this is lined up with Gnostic Docetism, which is fanatical in prohibiting Christ “from truly dying on the Cross, from having a sexed and precarious being.”<sup>28</sup> Badiou’s true target here is not, of course, actual Gnostics (as if there were any left), but rather the ultra-left theory of Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet which played out in practice through their leading roles in the ultra-left organization *Le Gauche Prolétarienne*. For their concern, as it was with other ultra-leftists in Europe at that time, was the complete overturning of the current order of things what they called a Cultural Revolution, rather than an Ideological Revolution. Badiou puts his fear thus:

Gnostic radicality maintains an ironclad divergence between the original purity of the divine Father and the blemishes of sex, the world, and death. If God comes to *haunt* the world in order to indicate the true way, he cannot establish himself therein in his essence. Obsessed by the pure and the original and violently inclined toward Manichaeism, this ultra-leftist heresy blocks the fecundity of the message just as much as the rational and peaceful hierarchical ordering proposed by the Arians.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, what Badiou is concerned with is finding a way to articulate a message that is seemingly unable to be articulated. The message of consubstantiality is one of a dialectical operation between what is and what is to come.

It might seem that relegating Christianity to a fable is enough to disempower the claims of its worldly authorities, but in actuality it is revealing of something deeply conservative within Badiou’s thought. Badiou’s philosophy vacillates between the extremes of supporting absolute revolution and of ultimately finding no way to express such desire or even the actuality of such a revolution outside of the terms already given. As he writes in his *Logics of Worlds*, “As we’ve already said, the Christian paradox (which for us is one of the possible names for the paradox of truths) is that eternity must be encountered in time.”<sup>30</sup> The question remains: does modeling one’s revolutionary philosophy upon orthodox Christology really confront us with eternity in time or does it merely provide a divine cover over the World. In other words, in religious terms, does not Badiou’s philosophy remain all-too Worldly?

He notes in *Theory of the Subject* that the imaginary and theology provide an advantage that is found in working out such paradoxes in fabulous and affective language, but he recognizes that these fables have a dark side. He writes: “To enjoy them [the advantages of the imaginary and of theology] to the fullest, the heretics must be burned. Which is, it must be admitted, quite real.”<sup>31</sup> Badiou’s subtractive method, with regards to his Christology, fails precisely because it treats religion and theology as mere fable and does not treat its “quite real” aspects in the same way. It

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 428.

<sup>31</sup> Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 16.

is not just eternity that must be encountered within time, but tales of eternity and the material structures that organize and safeguard them must also be encountered within the lived. It is to this that we turn with the Gnostic Christology found in François Laruelle.

### **Christ, Victim-in-Person**

At this stage I want to return for a moment to Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity*, with which this essay began. For there is a difference marked in Laruelle's account of Christ that strikes me as fundamental if we are to see what differentiates his account from both Badiou's and Henry's. For both Badiou and Henry, there is a certain privileging of the institutions of Christianity that we have seen in the previous sections. In Laruelle's account this is rejected and it is this *radical* separation of Christ from Christianity that moves us closer to the generic truth revealed in Christ. Consider, then, Kierkegaard's words again:

So look at him once again, him the abased one! What effect does this sight produce? Should it not be able to move you in some way to want to suffer in a way akin to his suffering, to want to witness for the truth with the danger that just because of that you will have to suffer? If possible, forget for a moment everything you know of him; tear yourself away from the perhaps apathetic habitual way in which you know about him; approach it as if it were the first time you heard the story of his abasement. Or if you think you are not able to do that, well, then, let us help ourselves in another way, let us use the help of a child, a child who is not warped by having learned by rote a simple school assignment about Jesus Christ's suffering and death, a child who for the first time hears the story—let us see what the effect will be, if only we tell it fairly well.<sup>32</sup>

To forget everything that one knows about Christ, to forget what has been learned by rote in Kierkegaard's day, and what has been learned through the play of light and magic on the screens of movie theaters, televisions, and whatever other screens we watch today, to forget that and to see this as just the story of a human being, however innocent, however loving, however much others claimed he was God, against his own demands not to tell anyone about him, means we simply watch, with childlike horror, a human being murdered. Not particularly brutally murdered nor is it a particularly unjust injustice, despite what Kierkegaard tells us his hypothetical child would think.

Such an injustice is enough. This is where François Laruelle begins his engagement with Christology, separating out Christianity from Christ. He writes, "What an error in ever having said the 'essence of Christianity' . . . Man is without essence and he removes the essence of Christianity more so than Christ removed the

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<sup>32</sup> Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 174.

sins of the World.”<sup>33</sup> Unlike both Badiou and Henry, Laruelle is more explicit in his account of the identity of Christianity. It is not simply a fable as it is for Badiou nor is it the bearer of a culture safeguarding Truth and Life as it is for Henry. Instead Christianity, or as he calls it here ‘the-Christianity’ [*le-Christianisme*], is “that mixture that we know, in its infinite tensions between faith, dogma, temporal and spiritual authority, who yet hope to confess an ecumenical faith from a common origin—unitary aggregate validated by common sense, history, and finally theology and philosophy brought together.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, Christianity is just another material created by human beings that can be worked with, that can be used to burn the flesh of other human beings, that can be a source of creative resistance to the World, and that can be repeated with and without the institutions of Christianity.

But in this way Christianity and Christ are separated. Christianity becomes just another material through which the “messianity” of Christ is manifest.<sup>35</sup> It is important to emphasize this Docetic aspect of Laruelle’s Christology, its unorthodox direction, precisely because amongst the few things written on Laruelle and theology there has been an attempt to neutralize Laruelle’s challenge and bring his non-philosophy under a Christian mandatum he never signed.

This attempt is made by Gabriel Alkon and Boris Gunjevic in their article “Theology and Non-Philosophy” found in the collection of Laruelle’s essays they edited entitled *The Non-Philosophy Project*. Their essay is thin on citations, but this aspect of their essay is forgivable considering Laruelle’s own practice of theory as living thought and his emphasis not on the history of philosophy but the construction of theory. So even though there are issues with their essay at the level of scholarship, I do not think that this is really where any criticism should operate if it wants to get to the heart of the matter. Rather, the proper place for any critique of this kind of writing has to take place at the science of theology, what I’ve termed elsewhere as “non-theology.”<sup>36</sup> From such a perspective, aiming to identify and disempower the self-sufficiency of theology, what Alkon and Gunjevic miss in their advocacy of the centrality of Christianity, is precisely the way this would inscribe a principle of sufficient (Christian) theology in the place of the principle of sufficient philosophy. The authors at one point write: “But why . . . does Laruelle focus on the figure of Christ? Why does Laruelle invoke *this* name? The answer cannot be, as

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<sup>33</sup> François Laruelle, *Future Christ: A Lesson in Heresy*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 113. Again, I assume a certain familiarity with Laruelle and do not unpack his system in this essay. Those interested in Laruelle may find the recent collection *Laruelle and Non-Philosophy*, eds. John Mullarkey and Anthony Paul Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012) helpful.

<sup>34</sup> Laruelle, *Future Christ*, 114.

<sup>35</sup> For more on messianity in Laruelle and the specific way in which Laruelle sees messianity as a fundamental bridge between science and philosophy in a human subject see Anthony Paul Smith, “Laruelle and the Messiah before the Saints” in *The Postmodern Saints of France: Reconfiguring the Holy in Contemporary French Philosophy*, ed. Colby Dickinson (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2013).

<sup>36</sup> See my “What Can Be Done with Religion?: Non-Philosophy and the Future of Philosophy of Religion” in *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: CSP 2010), 280-298.

Laruelle sometimes suggests, that he is simply making non-religious use of given religious and theological material.”<sup>37</sup> The answer cannot be? Wait . . . why not?! The authors tell us the reason is that Laruelle connects his most recent work very strongly to the figure of Christ, which is true, but that does not mean there is any necessity there! What we see the editors doing here is something akin to when Pope Benedict XVI said that there was a certain providence in Christianity, originally a Jewish religious movement, merging with Greek philosophy and European culture. It turns something completely contingent, ultimately insufficient, into something necessary, and absolutely sufficient unto itself. What the authors are claiming is that Christianity has no need of non-philosophy, but non-philosophy secretly needs Christianity. This is perhaps Christianity’s oldest trick, at least as it plays out in philosophy, for Christianity is necessary because it, like capitalism, can always overcode anything that comes before it.

At one point the editors try to argue that Christian theology already has put forward some of the central ideas of non-philosophy, like Laruelle’s theory of the “given-without-giveness” of things since the pure transcendence of God is immanent in creation as gift. And here they point towards, though do not develop, a more interesting theme concerning the role of transcendence and immanence in non-philosophy. For Laruelle transcendence isn’t rejected, but instead is made relative. Which means, of course, that transcendence is no longer transcendence as the boosters of transcendence would like to present it. But Alkon and Gunjevic try to move us towards the notion that transcendence theologically understood isn’t really like this. Instead, they write:

Transcendence is internal to the structure of things that exist in mutual determining relation to each other, a relation that is *positive* and not just differential or dialectical; and so transcendence cannot, even in-the-last-instance, be foreclosed from any form of worldly knowledge. Transcendence *as such* is foreclosed: that which gives the world as a whole is as unknowable for theology as it is for non-philosophy; the doctrine of creation insists that the world is given without a philosophically recoverable givenness.<sup>38</sup>

What else is this but a “weaponized apophaticism”? That is, transcendence here is said to be positive, meaning we ought to be able to engage with it, to see it, but it is positive in such a way that its positivity cannot be confronted like the positivity of all other things; it is both positive and above engagement, thereby making any rebellion against transcendence, against the underlying structure of the World, impossible. For what you would be rebelling against is simply an appearance, while the truth underlying the appearance always slips away. It is an unsaying, but this time it is the unsaying of creatures always in the name of the creator.

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<sup>37</sup> Gabriel Alkon and Boris Gunjevic, “Theology and Non-Philosophy” in *The Non-Philosophy Project: Essays by François Laruelle*, eds. Gabriel Alkon and Boris Gunjevic (New York: Telos Press Publishing, 2012), 238.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

The authors are deploying old theological tricks, analogous to the philosophical ones Laruelle rejects, that require the humiliation of human beings in the face of transcendence. And why? For Laruelle the point of emphasizing Christ over God the Father is that Christ is human, Christ is in-person, whereas God the Father, for Laruelle, has the same structure as Hell and the World.<sup>39</sup> Non-philosophy is a gnosis and as such it is a radical rejection of this World, not in the name of Michel Henry's transcendence-in-immanence, as the editors suggest, but in the Name-of-the-Human.<sup>40</sup> What the editors want to do by insisting that Laruelle has a faith in the Christian version of Christ is to make non-philosophy submit, not to the Name-of-Man, but to the Christian tradition, all the while realizing that what fascinates Laruelle about Christ is that he refused to submit to tradition as such. For, it isn't Jesus Christ of Christianity, but the Christ of victimized gnosis. Christ in this sense is much more akin to the heresy (to Christianity) of Docetism, as already mentioned. In this way one could develop a non-theology out of Laruelle without any of the primacy that Alkon and Gunjevic think belong to the Christian version of Christ. One could look to Shi'a Islam and the Hidden Imam, or to Hinduism and its avatars, or any number of religious materials that are not Christianity. But in each case it wouldn't be enough simply to inscribe non-philosophy into those systems, as if it were the occasion of their thought, but, just as he does with Christianity, those systems have to be inscribed as occasions of human thought and practice. "Could Laruelle have articulated his non-religious faith without the direction provided by his personal belief [sic] in—his inclination towards, his attention to, his imagination of—Jesus Christ?", Alkon and Gunjevic ask us.<sup>41</sup> The only answer that rigorously holds to the principles of non-philosophy is, "No, because Laruelle did not and since non-philosophy is actual, but that doesn't make it sufficient, it only makes it an occasion."

Like Kierkegaard, Laruelle's Christ is an abased one. A victim-in-person, which is the way that Laruelle signifies in writing a concept in actuality, or "flesh and blood" as he likes to say. What is present in Christ, not just the historical Christ of Christianity, but the Christs that appear throughout history, whether it be a Gnostic manifestation of Christ formerly hidden or the divine martyrdom of Imam Ali, is the disempowering of the vicious circle that is the dialectic of victim and oppressor—the refusal to let the identity of the human be determined by the death-dealing that comes from oppressors and the victors of history. The victim-in-person that these Christs are reveals a certain radical identity of humanity, a unilateral identity, where the oppressor is denied their role and made ultimately relative in their autonomy to the radical autonomy of the victim. Laruelle writes, "Radical humanity, non-ontological, is *proven* when men are murdered and persecuted. The performance of their being-murdered and burned is in the manifestation and only persecution reveals as such the victim's irreducible non-consistency, only that non-

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<sup>39</sup> François Laruelle, *Mystique Non-Philosophique à l'usage des contemporains* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007), 104.

<sup>40</sup> See François Laruelle, *Struggle and Utopia at the End Times of Philosophy*, trans. Drew S. Burk and Anthony Paul Smith (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Alkon and Gunjevic, *The Non-Philosophy Project*, 241-42.

consistency determined death as that of a human subject rather than of a ‘beast.’”<sup>42</sup> Beast here refers to the notion that the human is just some brute living thing, a concept that is overturned in the rebellion of victims against their oppressors that is both endless in the sense of eternal and end-less in the sense of having no true telos. From this point of view, Laruelle claims, “*onto-biological death is already defeated by Man-in-Man* [i.e., the human manifest in nothing but the human, without relation to some logos]. The prosecution of the World against the heretical Christ reveals the already-defeated-death and therefore New Life from which we thus understand the irreducibility to the World. Not that the historical Christ’s sacrifice had been the necessary condition for that victory. Human death can only be in-the-last-identity the effect of the hallucination brought about by the world of Man-in-person, with the constitutive repression of the subject.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, it is human beings who kill human beings; the reasons for doing so are ultimately hallucinations, projections that cover over the radical immanence and common name of the victims with their oppressors, a fact that brings judgment upon the heads of the oppressors and speaks to a radical freedom of the victims.

Ultimately, Laruelle’s engagement with Christology combines the most interesting elements of both Henry’s and Badiou’s. For here we see the combination of Henry’s radical immanence of the human with the subtractive method of Badiou.<sup>44</sup> Both are ultimately taken further in Laruelle than in either Henry or Badiou, precisely because Laruelle’s drive to separate out Christ from Christianity allows Laruelle to avoid the mistakes of tying his engagement to the idealism necessary for holding to but an aspect of the Christian tradition. Badiou avoids this aspect when he turns away from the real burning of heretics, and Henry when he considers Christ only as the triumphant Christ of orthodox, institutional Scriptures. Laruelle’s Christ is ultimately contingent, but all the more revealing of the true abasement and power of Christ for it.

### **Christ, Our Future, Perhaps**

So why is philosophy concerned with Christ? Is it just piety, as it may seem with Henry; a bit of playfulness, as it may seem with Badiou; or is it something a bit more philosophically interesting, as I want to suggest it is with Laruelle? What even counts as “interesting,” since this word’s normal function in this field is to politely acknowledge another intellectual’s work: “Oh, that sounds interesting” we politely say, and move on. I hold ‘interesting’ in this case to refer to something that disrupts philosophy’s normal mode of functioning, that breaks philosophy’s drive to be respectable in this world. Engaging with the material of religion—both the intellectual traditions that constitute religion and their practices—will simply be another instance of philosophy’s drive toward domination, towards self-sufficiency,

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<sup>42</sup> Laruelle, *Future Christ*, 102.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>44</sup> Laruelle discusses the differences between his method, which he likens to superposition, and Badiou’s in his *Anti-Badiou*, 111-146.

rather than the mutation of philosophy for a mode of thought that isn't worldly, is made for humans and other creatures, rather than the hallucinations we create.

There has been an assumption made throughout this essay, an assumption shared with Kierkegaard, who has framed this essay, but also with the other great 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Nietzsche. This assumption holds that Christ was an event in the world, but an event that has been obscured. For these two great anti-Christian thinkers, the radicality and contemporary nature of Christ is obscured by Christendom (Kierkegaard) or already betrayed by the slave morality of St. Paul (Nietzsche). For any true secular philosophical engagement with Christ, one must go a step beyond the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where so much Continental philosophy of religion has remained, ripping apart the identity of Christianity into a true Christianity, one that lies at the core of the message of Christ, and a Worldly Christianity. From here, philosophy of religion has fallen prey to a trap of its own creation. Unable to bring together the ideal with the actual or concrete, it has either had to reject the edifice of Christianity altogether, at best merely tolerating it as in Marx's philosophy, or it has found itself strangely defending the Christian legacy as able to go beyond itself into the European version of the secular. All of this is ultimately blind to the invention of Christianity and the subsequent invention of religion and the secular as categories dependent upon Christianity as institutionalized in Europe and its colonial projects.<sup>45</sup>

This is the trap that Badiou and Henry fall into with regard to their Christologies. Both thinkers have a vision of the World that follows this same split between the ideal and the actual that is only reconciled in appeals to paradox, but paradox does not think an unsplit object, even if it brings attention to the difficulty inherent in such a thought. For Badiou it is the paradox of Christianity, of eternity encountered in time, that is taken as a model for the faithful subject, and for Henry it is the paradox of attempting to think a radical immanence separate from the World that ends up creating a Christian World. The secular engagement with Christology that we find in philosophy will continue as long as philosophy cares about the ultimate questions of human being and the salvation of humanity. But if we are to think Christ in a way that is truly radical we must think Christ separate from eternity and from the Christian World. As Laruelle says: "Through their divinity religions think of themselves auto-foundationally, refusing to be born or being born from an ageless process."<sup>46</sup> This must be reversed. Rather than ripping the object apart in order to think it, the philosopher of religion who wants to truly encounter Christ must begin to think of Christianity as having an identity. So a more interesting engagement with Christ and with Christianity cannot simply play this old philosophical game, but must engage in a rigorous critique and mutation of this material. Engaging with Christ in the light of Christianity must be like going to a respectable midnight mass on Christmas Eve, surrounded by the droves of respectable families; but during the sharing of the peace you realize that you must now shake hands not just with these respectable types but also with the homeless

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<sup>45</sup> On this see Daniel Colucciello Barber, *On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion, and Secularity* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 88-114.

<sup>46</sup> Laruelle, *Future Christ*, 100.

who have come in for warmth. That sickly sweet smell of a dirty human body, a human body in pain, ravaged by a climate and an economy, dirty—you have to touch him. But in the sharing of the peace, in the touching of this man, you cannot think that this moment is the truth of Christianity and the other more respectable, more Worldly is some mere appearance. This is Christianity, fraught as it is with contradictions, not paradoxes—but the homeless person is Christ.

Those in the Continental tradition doing a kind of philosophy of religion are concerned with Christ and the reasons are not so obscure. Christ names something human, a hope beyond this World, a human and divine protest against the way things are. It is not simply piety, though there is some of that, nor is it simply playfulness: the murder of a human being is a real thing. But if this concern is to be interesting and productive then we must separate out the confrontation with Christ that Kierkegaard speaks of from the Churches that bear his name. For the actuality of these Churches is that this protest has gone cold, it has died the death of overfamiliarity. For the original message of those who followed the historical Christ was that a peasant was put to death by the State and that this murdered peasant was resurrected and is in fact God. It is as if we are looking into the eyes not of a bronzed white actor but a black death row inmate. It is as if Troy Davis, put to death by the State of Georgia in September of 2011, were looking at us and asked “Who do you say that I am?” and we answered back “You are the Christ.” Philosophy has shown that it can think Christology, despite the protests of Kierkegaard, but can philosophy think the ordinary human victim as Christ and still remain philosophy or must it be transformed into something a bit more human?