



# Hurly-Burly

No. 4  
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	Bernard Seynhaeve, "A Pass in Three Phases"	102
9	Rose-Paule Vinciguerra, "Authorising Oneself, But Twice Over"	107
15	Patrick Monribot, "The Lasting Desire to Last"	113
25	Laure Naveau, "Médusée"	117
	Monique Kusnierek, "Going Back to my Analyst"	123
	Dominique Laurent, "To Dream Beyond the Worst"	127
	Marie-Hélène Brousse, "Fury"	135
35		
	<b>Workshop</b>	
39	Florencia F.C. Shanahan, "Normally Mad, <i>Diseases of Mentality, Ordinary Psychosis</i> "	143
	Armelle Gaydon, "Celebrities and the Anonymous Tell the Story of their First Psychoanalytic Session"	147
55	<b>Studies</b>	
61	Jean-Luc Monnier, "On Geneviève Asse"	155
65	Ruth Ronen, "Dying of Shame, Consumed by Anxiety"	157
69	Jacques Aubert, "Passed Over Stories"	167
73	Sophie Marret, "Reading Joyce"	185
79		
83	<b>Hypermodern Times</b>	
	Jacques-Alain Miller, "Financial Crisis"	203
89	Graciela Brodsky, "Contemporary Utopias"	207
95	Jean Luc Monnier, "Shame, An Old-Fashioned Affect?"	219
99	Eric Laurent, "New Erotics of the Divine"	231

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Studio  
Hypermodern Times

Éric Laurent

## New Erotics of the Divine

### The European path to God

There is a European pathway towards God. I will follow it, beginning with the French Revolution. Napoleon, writing to the Pope in the year of the concordat, formulated simply the need for religion in the new society. He wrote:

How can one have order in a state without religion? Society cannot exist without the inequality of fortunes and the inequality of fortunes cannot survive without religion.

Disraeli, an admirer of Napoleon and the jewel in the crown of the Victorian era whose rejection was going to give us psychoanalysis later on, gave an English version of this same necessity speaking at Oxford. This occurred shortly before the publication of Darwin's work, *The Descent of Man*, in 1871. With Darwin, science found new influence on politics.

My Lord, man is a being born to believe. And if no Church is present to guide him with its titles of truth endorsed by the tradition of sacred ages and the conviction of countless generations, he will find altars and idols in his own heart and imagination [...] The discoveries of science are not, we are told, consistent with the teachings of the Church [...] The question is this: is man an ape or an angel? I, my lord, I am on the side of the angels.<sup>1</sup>

The era was awash with religious endeavours wanting to make religion and science compatible by softening the dogma. Though romantic, Disraeli defied ethical and aesthetic cults: "All religion of the Beautiful finishes in debauchery." He wanted a hierarchy and positivist dogmas to frame religious sentiment. To dean Stanley, partisan of the liberal interpretation of the sacred texts, he said ironically one day: "Pray remember Mr. Dean, no dogma, no dean."<sup>2</sup> This is where he was truly Victorian. He did not want orgy, but a renouncement of the drive in the Freudian sense.

He had a very precise idea of the relationship between the Church and the State. The Church must reinforce the State. Disraeli thus admits to the profound collusion between Church and State that constitutes European "secularism" (*laïcité*). Both contribute to form the Ego-Ideal that defines civilisation. The Ideal is the foundation of the discourse of the master and, as Jacques-Alain Miller specified in his Course, "identification as key to the discourse of the master, that is to say the structure of politics, [makes] the subject disappear beneath the signifier which he becomes."<sup>3</sup> The function of God with respect to this discourse is specified. If the discourse of the master produces object (a), the latter burdens the subject. "God is a function to which the subject remits the load of object little a."<sup>4</sup> It is through this logical function that the connections between the Church and State are established.

This logic is supple and produces a good many apparatuses. Disraeli died in 1881, when Freud was twenty. The same year saw the publication of *The Gay Science*. Marx was able to supervise the French translation of book one of *Capital* before dying in 1883. In the post Victorian era, let's say the twentieth century, the dogmas were to take a blow and psychoanalysis to contribute profoundly to defining a new figure of God. In the twenty-first century, the European path to God has met with a new crisis. Numerous symptoms attest to this fact. They are testifying to the upheaval of equilibrium established since the twentieth century in the United Nations. The assaults by religious communities on weakened states is manifesting itself in diverse ways. They accompany the erasure of that *laique* religion of the twentieth-century which communism, in its variant of belief in the little-father-of-the-people, in the singular or bureaucratic plural, revealed itself to be. The all-politic seduces no more. God is back.

### The revival of civil society and the communitarian God

The new divine presence is not manifesting itself in the same manner throughout Europe. The integration of the new European religion that Islam is becoming seems to be creating a touchstone to differentiate differing sensibilities. British multi-faithism tolerates the expression of conspicuous, exterior religious signs while the protestant multi-faith in Netherlands supports this less well, not to

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## and the communitarian God

ing itself in the same manner throughout European religion that Islam is becoming differentiate differing sensibilities. British of conspicuous, exterior religious signs Netherlands supports this less well, not to

mention the French non-religiosity (*laïcité*). In countries of the catholic tradition, such as Spain and Italy, what comes to the fore is the reticence of Catholic Church to accept the new personal rights represented by the strict privatisation of sexual conduct and orientation. Contraception, medical assistance in reproduction, homosexual partnerships, civil partnerships, and demands for the right to euthanasia all meet with resolute opposition. The Catholic Church finds itself on the defensive to such an extent that the Pope recently had to forgo speaking at the University of Sapienza in Rome. In France, the choices made by the President of the Republic have led him to wish to define new affiliations between God and the State. He explained himself in three successive speeches in three locations important to the monotheistic religions: Rome, Riyadh, and Jerusalem. During his reception in the Lateran Palace, the President, inspired by his "quill" Henri Guéno, affirmed that France has "essentially Christian" roots. He compares, to the benefit of the latter, the non-religious vocations in the service of the State and the ecclesiastical vocations; finding that they have something extra. Bernard-Henri Lévy, as soon as the first speech at Lateran was given, denounced a communitarian drift and foreshadows, no doubt, future speeches to Muslims, Jews, and Freemasons.<sup>5</sup> It was rather well spotted: Riyadh followed the Lateran, the French President has just come back from Israel, and it is Xavier Bertrand [then Vice-General Secretary of the UMP] who has distinguished himself by affirming his Freemason faith on the cover of *L'Express*.

Henry Tincq, a catholic progressive, inheritor of the Second Vatican Council, can't get over this method either:

Affirming in Riyadh that, "God is in the heart of every man" is a philosophical option, a stunning one on the part of the head of a non-religious state. Also stunning, for historians, is the unilateral vision of the history of secularism (*laïcité*).

Therefore he asks himself: "Is it up to the State to compensate for what the religious discourse has lost in pertinence and the capacity to convince?"<sup>6</sup> These two critics decode the intention of the President differently. For B.-H. Lévy, the call made to faith, by its non-dupe character, attaches to an enduring French current, to the

only great French ideology which thought of Catholicism as that "culture", one is not forced to believe in, but which, if one subcontracts its care, cements the cohesion of the social bond as no other does: *Maurrassisme*.<sup>7</sup>

Tincq sees there rather an importation, a dream of civil religion, American-style.

However, this American civil religion is complex and not easy to reduce to a univocal spiritual request. It includes a tension between the two aspects of post-

revolutionary modernity: the spirit of the Enlightenment which insists on the rights of man and therefore the separation of politics and religion, and a romantic conception emphasising the personal religious experience. The romantic conception is, in contrast to the first, favourable to the expression of religious values in the public sphere.<sup>8</sup> This tension allows for renewed uses of the American Credo. The inscription "In God we trust" on the dollar bills, dear to Philippe Sollers, is not an inheritance from the Founding Fathers, a relic from day one. It dates from 30 July 1956 and is an effect of the Cold war. One specialist concludes from this, therefore, that in the shaping of American identity, the "civil religion" does not cease to revitalise itself and that the most recent events in the public sphere are not obtaining general assent. In his own recourse, the Sarkozian use of civil religion wants to make the Enlightenment-Anti Enlightenment tension disappear in favour of the romanticism of the satisfaction of spiritual need. It is a matter of reinforcing the social bond through a new hedonism of the divine.

### The God of philosophers and scholars

In their willingness to reconcile science and religion, the philosophers of the Enlightenment adopted the figure brought out by "the century of genius": the God of philosophers, in reducing Him to a hypothesis. In limiting knowledge so as "to give its right place to faith", Kant came to place God in "the fault in knowledge."<sup>9</sup> In this way, the God of philosophers and scholars appears to guarantee a world where everything is in its right place. And yet, the development of knowledge and of the sciences themselves does not stop pushing back the frontiers. In touching the body in a new manner, the neurosciences want to renew the marriage vows between knowledge and Faith. We have collected two testimonies. The first is that of Dr Jill Bolte Taylor, neuroscientist. She considers herself to have had an experience of Nirvana caused by a vascular accident. She explains it to herself by the fact that the vascular accident interrupted the functioning of her left lobe, "I felt like a genie liberated from its bottle", she later wrote. All daily worries of a schizophrenic brother or her high level research were forgotten. She experienced an oceanic sensation, in the sense of Romain Rolland. She no longer had any limits, "my perception of physical boundaries was no longer limited to where my skin met air", she wrote in her recently published memoirs.<sup>10</sup> Without a doubt, the most surprising thing is that this modest mystique of the left hemisphere has had a resounding echo. After a lecture at the Technology Entertainment Design Conference, and an interview with Oprah Winfrey, she was chosen by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people of 2008. Numerous enthusiasts of the intersections between Buddhism and the neurosciences are particularly receptive. Like her father, an Episcopalian pastor,

she knows how to tell a story that the

*Time* magazine people of the year Laboratory for Affe also used the happiness thanks when the right previous case, who to show that the appropriate technique his interviews with Lama, who is not seems that even to the laboratory. than common presented with The In sum, meditation free-floating attention reduction of Buddhist application of the Johnstone, a man people who resist contemporary society defining the front the New Age and the Age is calling upon In its way, it is converging towards "Course of positive and then his meditation religion of human goal." The New Age

### God and science

The dream of a Shiite Iran eager but also American reconciled with its but also by its state

the Enlightenment which insists on the separation of politics and religion, and a romantic ideal religious experience. The romantic imagination allows for renewed uses of the "God we trust" on the dollar bills, dear to the Founding Fathers, a relic from day after day, an effect of the Cold war. One specialist of the shaping of American identity, the "civil religion" itself and that the most recent events in the history of the United States find a general assent. In his own recourse, the scholar wants to make the Enlightenment-Anti-Enlightenment of the romanticism of the satisfaction of reinforcing the social bond through a new

## scholars

science and religion, the philosophers of the 19th century thought out by "the century of genius": the 19th century hypothesis. In limiting knowledge so that God came to place in "the fault in the system" the philosophers and scholars appears to have found its right place. And yet, the development of the sciences does not stop pushing back the boundaries. In this manner, the neurosciences want to renew the link between Science and Faith. We have collected two testimonies. Catherine Taylor, neuroscientist. She considers her coma caused by a vascular accident. She writes: "the vascular accident interrupted the 'genie liberated from its bottle'", she later writes: "the brother or her high level research were a sensation, in the sense of Romain Rolland. The dissolution of physical boundaries was no longer a dream", she wrote in her recently published memoirs.<sup>10</sup> What is that this modest mystique of the left hemisphere? After a lecture at the Technology Center, in an interview with Oprah Winfrey, she was named one of the 100 most influential people of 2008. The intersections between Buddhism and the sciences. Like her father, an Episcopalian pastor,

she knows how to speak to believers by juxtaposing science and belief. "Religion is a story that the left-brain tells the right-brain."<sup>11</sup>

*Time* magazine has a clear political agenda for choosing the 100 most influential people of the year. In 2006, another chosen figure, Pr. Richard J. Davidson of the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, also used the dissymmetry of cerebral localisation, imaging the experience of happiness thanks to PET scans of localities. For him, happiness is what occurs when the right prefrontal cortex is activated. This is in the same line as the previous case; what activates the left cortex refers to judgements, etc. He wants to show that it is possible to train oneself to ward off negative thoughts by appropriate techniques such as meditation. The Dalai Lama confirmed this in his interviews with Mathieu Ricard. Who could possibly be against the Dalai Lama, who is in the same popularly held category as kittens and the sun! It seems that everyone, except the Chinese, is for him. He lent meditation athletes to the laboratory, which was able to establish that the monks were less attached than common mortals to horrible or pleasant significations of images they were presented with. They had little mental inertia mired in any particular signification. In sum, meditation would permit one to truly achieve the ideal of psychoanalytic free-floating attention, a stable level of attention. The laboratory, delighted by its reduction of Buddhism to a technique, tried to propose a cognitive therapeutic application of this. Alas, in August 2007, in *The Journal of Neuroscience*, Tom Johnstone, a member of the laboratory, observed that there are depressed people who resist these exercises, thus adding to the vast category formed by contemporary psychiatry of "resistant depression". Proof by medication is defining the frontiers between religion and wisdom that want to be abolished by the New Age and its demand for proof of the existence by well-being.<sup>12</sup> The New Age is calling upon a God that would be reconciled with science by science itself. In its way, it is pursuing the project of Auguste Comte who wanted to make minds converge towards the unique doctrine, which were unremitting in creating their "Course of positive philosophy". After his psychological collapse, internment, and then his meeting with Clotilde de Vaux, he reformulated the principles of his religion of humanity: "Love our principle, Order our foundation, progress our goal." The New Age goes way back.

## God and science: from dream to nightmare

The dream of a God reconciled with science can take strange forms. For one, Shiite Iran eagerly welcomes physicians, not only Pakistanis or North Koreans, but also Americans, for active university exchanges. Iranian mysticism is reconciled with science, not only through its nuclear energy research program but also by its state of the art nanotechnologies or, even more shockingly, stem

cells. Not only has the Iranian Islamic revolution acquired a powerful automobile industry, but also armaments which allow it to produce ballistic missiles and space rockets. Soon, Iran will be attempting to place its second satellite in orbit. The supreme leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei encouraged researchers "if you are in pursuit of a science, you bring dissatisfaction and displeasure to the enemy of the revolution's aspirations", he declared during a visit to the Iranian stem cell research centre in 2006.<sup>13</sup> The Iranian example celebrates the marriage between the development of technology and the call of the martyr. Shia Islam is characterised by this call, not only in the Jihadist usage, but also in its cultural style exalting the reminder of the injustice of the murder of Ali, or its processional style, close to the flagellations of the catholic Holy Week in Seville. Henri Corbin has taught us a great deal about Shiite theology, the only inheritor, it seems, of Averroism, and its disciples have educated us on the complexities of the "act of being".<sup>14</sup> They have meditated less on the mortal call than on the non-signifier side of jouissance. This is the side which Lacan indicates on the fantastic page<sup>15</sup>, a veritable historical treatise critiquing religions, where he opposes infinite, transcendent love which, having reduced God to "the universality of the signifier" and "the offering to obscure gods of an object of sacrifice is something to which few subjects can resist succumbing, as if under some monstrous spell", defines the place of the philosopher for Spinoza. Does God want sacrifices? The Aztecs were sure of it, as were the Phoenicians. Did the sacrifice of Abraham, the *Akedah*, truly land a decisive stopping blow to this certitude? Joseph de Maistre, doubted it, and Lacan confirmed it. Infinite love does not hold up faced with the call to mortal ecstasy. The conjunction between the God of the signifier and the offering of the sacrifice can be joined in a figure that reveals to us a point of structure. The knowledge engendered by reason unveils a mortal face. How, therefore, to appease reason when it manifests itself as the death drive?

### The limits of salvation through theological rationalism

Pope Ratzinger dives into this question in a text published not long before his ascent to the throne of St. Peter, when he was still Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. To mark in a new manner the limits of reason, he left off from globalisation in which civilisations meet in a common space. This meeting of civilisations simultaneously renders possible the forces of production and destruction of each civilisation present. Even more than the commodity fetishism that turns people away from God in the generalisation of consumption, what the future Pope underlines is the impact of the biological industry that permits man to produce man. "Man is from now on capable of making men, to produce them, as it were, in test-tubes. Man becomes a product, and from that same fact, the relationship of man to himself has been modified from top to

bottom. It is no longer his own product. Man becomes a product used in research, a product of knowledge. So, man turns to itself, without need to found an ethics. The ethics of reason rests on the one hand on this stitching that comes from the limitlessness of human science, religious, and political. To limit the ethics, he himself can see. After the cold war, it is terrorism that especially in the cite radicalises terrorism.

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bottom. It is no longer a given that nature or God is creator, man has become his  
 own product."<sup>16</sup> He defines the danger of this in the degree to which, as product,  
 man becomes a waste object. Above all, he has in mind the question of embryos  
 used in research. It is in this way that he perceives the death drive at work in  
 knowledge. So he wonders how to guarantee that the functioning of reason, left  
 to itself, will not drive to the atomic or biological annihilation of the species; how  
 to found an ethic, which preserves one from the void and death? His questioning  
 of reason rests on the synonymy between two uses of reason: Greek *reason* on  
 the one hand and *knowledge* produced by the subject of science. The stakes of  
 this stitching together are that it makes one forget the epistemological cut that  
 comes from the springing up from science. It really is science that produces  
 limitlessness in knowledge and which forbids any reconciliation with the reason  
 of humanism. To forget this is to open up the path to the scientism of the  
 religious, an oh so contemporary figure.

To limit the unleashing of knowledge, religion is a candidate. But the Pope  
 himself can see the limits of his power represented by the obscure face of God.  
 After the cold war, if the spectre of the Great Nuclear War has drawn back, now  
 it is terrorism that has come to the foreground, in the bosom of civilisation itself,  
 especially in the name of the defence of religion. The Pope does not explicitly  
 cite radical Islam, but he poses a more general question about religious  
 terrorism.

Terrorist behaviour is also justified in part as a defence of religious  
 tradition against the atheism of western society [...] Is religion itself  
 a force that permits one to be happy or saved, or isn't it rather an  
 archaic and dangerous force that edifies false universalisms and  
 in this way foments intolerance and terrorism.<sup>17</sup>

How then to guarantee that the religious sentiment does not drive towards the  
 worst, if not by reason? The Pope is a dialectician and reminds us, as does Lacan,  
 that it was the fathers of the Church who were the first to call upon reason to  
 regulate what the Pope himself calls pathologies of religions.

They necessitate considering the divine light of reason as a sort of  
 organ of control that religion must accept as a permanent organ of  
 purification and regulation – a view which, moreover, was that of  
 the Fathers of the Church.<sup>18</sup>

Can one find a principle of regulation of reason in reason itself such as was  
 attempted in the definition of "natural rights"? The disappearance of the very  
 idea of nature in scientific knowledge dismisses the very idea of a harmony  
 between nature and reason to the ranks of dead utopias. The turning point to all

this was Darwinism. "This vision of nature crumbled once the theory of evolution triumphed."<sup>19</sup> That is why the Pope concludes that the search for a fundamental common universal ethic is mere vanity, a vain abstraction. It is a jab at his old adversary Hans Küng, partisan of the definition of a "world ethos". In this way he justifies his search for a master signifier mightier than natural Law and the necessity of the place of the Creator as "nature's reason". This original appeal to reason understood in this manner permits him to extend the principle to other civilisations. For India and Buddhism, it would be Dharma, for the Chinese world it would be Heaven. He concludes: "Today, interculturality seems to me to constitute an indispensable dimension in the debate on fundamental questions concerning humankind."<sup>20</sup> In this quest, interculturalism plays the role intersubjectivity played in founding the dream of the universal. It is by listening, as he says quite justly of this rustling of the master signifier which all traditions have known, that the universal will be saved by a new *agape* presented as "consent to listen" to other cultures, in this way guaranteed by a principle of "nature's reason."

### From pluralisation to *not-all*. Religion and uncertainty

Can contemporary civilisation, of a nature distraught by knowledge, truly be guaranteed? It seems rather that the vigour of faith originates in the situation of uncertainty felt in western democracies. The public investigation published on 23 June 2008 by the famous Pew Research Center ascertained that 90% of Americans believe in God.<sup>21</sup> However, the results are difficult to interpret. One commenter noted that in the USA, even the atheists believe in God. Likewise in Europe:

It is now necessary to distinguish between "believers without religion" and "non-believers without religion". The fact of declaring oneself "without religion" does not signify the absence of beliefs or spiritual interests.<sup>22</sup>

The spiritual has diffused into the public political sphere, teeming with "questions of society" where the philosophical-religious divides traverse political leanings. The French Gay Pride parade of 28 June 2008, opened by Bertrand Delanoë and Jack Lang, was there to remind us of this, along with confrontations with conservative Catholics in the Czech Republic. The deinstitutionalisation of faiths reinforces mechanisms of identification reconstructed where religions are participating with other identifications to provide the individual isolated from the new secularisation with a plural identity. The new call of the religious does not have a necessary fundamentalism for its ultimate reference. It adapts to

instability and paradoxically pluralisation of modernity.

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1 Speech at Orange

2 *Ibid.*

3 Miller, J.-L. unpublished

4 *Ibid.*

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## Religion and uncertainty

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r. The new call of the religious does not  
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instability and pluralism. For some, it is in line with the secularism that  
paradoxically "reinforces the specificity of the religious."<sup>23</sup> This reign of  
pluralisation can be described by sociology as the current style of unbelief in our  
modernity.

With ultramodernity, it's no longer about competing to exercise  
collective transcendence as in the good old days when politics and  
religion were contesting the marketplace, but to reconfigure its  
relations in a completely different conjuncture of civilisation  
marked by uncertainty and the subjectification of values.<sup>24</sup>

Does it have to do with pluralisation or uncertainty? What the sociologists fail to  
perceive is that the disjunction between belief and certainty, if it can define our  
times, is that, to say it with Jacques-Alain Miller, "The true revelation is the  
absence of sexual relation". This is what psychoanalysis heralds. The analysand  
and the believer separate in as much as the believer renounces the revelation  
that can come to him from the Unconscious that speaks in him. "Whereas the  
analysand, in placing the object *a* in the analyst, carefully handles his access to  
truth."<sup>25</sup>

For our revelation, each subject's access to his truth is particular. There is no  
one access for all. In opposition to all those who think they can save the world by  
reinforcing the name of God as the name of the social bond, we maintain that  
Society is not the Other. The new divine erotics will not be ordained by a new  
*agape*, a new love of universal humanity oriented by the master signifier of The  
Creator. They go via the not-all (*pas-tout*) with which the contemporary subject  
of psychoanalytic discourse is confronted. This discourse brings to light the  
inexistence of the sexual relation between the boundaries of phallic jouissance  
and the infinitude of womanly jouissance. It is not only about pluralisation. At the  
time of the Forum of November 2007<sup>26</sup>, Jean-Claude Milner put forward an  
unexpected consequence of the principle of limitlessness in society: for want of  
a possible exterior, the subject turns back in on himself. If the body alone gives  
consistency to the *parlêtre*, and not the dreamt of universal discourse, the  
extraction of object *a* will be ever more pressing to compensate for the effects of  
the unleashing of the death drive.

**Translated from the French by David Hafner & Adrian Price**

Text originally appeared in *La Cause freudienne*, Issue 72, pp. 50-8

1 Speech at Oxford Diocesan Conference, 25 November 1864.

2 *Ibid.*

3 Miller, J.-A., Lesson of 14 May 2003, *L'orientation lacanienne, Un effort de poésie*, 2002-3,  
unpublished.

4 *Ibid.*

- 5 Lévy, B.-H., "Chronique", in *Le Point*, 16 January 2008.
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