

## Introduction

### Secular Faith as Tragic Faith

In 1949, a collection of essays titled *The God That Failed* brought together the reflections of a variety of former Communist Party members and sympathizers. Richard Wright, Arthur Koestler, André Gide, and others had put their faith in the Communist Party, and each had become disillusioned. The purpose of the collection, wrote its editor, the English politician Richard Crossman, was “to study the state of mind of the Communist convert” (2). For Richard Wright, it had been Communist support for African American writers that drew him in, for Ignazio Silone, it began with a sense of the indecency with which the lower classes were treated in the Italian village of his childhood; for other writers, there were other paths. Like the intellectual partisans of the French Revolution, according to Crossman, these writers had seen in Communism “a vision of the Kingdom of God on earth” (3). They were intrigued, they were drawn in, they became true believers, they subjected themselves to Party discipline, they became disenchanted, they de-converted.

Of course, the god that failed had a double, obvious and unacknowledged. The god that failed was a false god, an idol. The true god was not the Christian God; that God was long gone, faith in Him sublimated into secular society. It was that secular society, or more precisely its values condensed into an invisible object of worship, that was the flip side of the god that failed. Freedom, equality, creativity, democracy, these formed the proper object of worship. Idolatry tempted those whose faith in this god was not sufficiently strong, those who dwelt too long on the distance between Western ideals and the actual existing Western world, filled with inequalities, with imperfect democracy, with freedom only for the few. Those particularly prone

to idolatry, according to Crossman, were those whose Christianity had never been properly sublimated – that is, Catholics, and those from Catholic countries.<sup>1</sup>

It is tempting to oppose this mid-twentieth century struggle of competing secular monotheisms with a late twentieth and twenty-first century return to secular polytheism. Then, there was our god and their god; now, we all have many, albeit lesser, gods. The strength of our faith, our secular faith, is no less, but it is diffuse. We believe more than we ought, without reason, in celebrity, in science, in sports, in medicine, in sexuality, in movies.<sup>2</sup> Where myth, ritual, community, and worship, the accouterments of faith, once worked together to create and affirm Western ideals, where Mayberry and Bing Crosby and Dwight Eisenhower and the Brooklyn Dodgers stood as icons of the invisible, transparent god that never failed, today there is no such alignment. From Kanye West to Miley Cyrus, Richard Dawkins to Stephen Hawking, social networking websites to smartphones, secular faith and its accouterments persist, but haphazardly. Could it be that secular faith has entered a Constantinian era, its confident supremacy resulting in the desiccation of its soul, the diminution and displacement of its fervor?

The aggressive “New Atheists” --bestselling authors such as Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens -- see the world flooded by pernicious religious superstition, leaving science, reason, moral decency treading water. Something called “religion” -- caused by and reduced to erroneous belief in the supernatural -- is responsible for the vast majority of ills,

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<sup>1</sup> Crossman explains, “The Protestant is, at least in origin, a conscientious objector against spiritual subjection to any hierarchy. He claims to know what is right or wrong by the inner light, and democracy for him is not merely a convenient or a just form of government, but a necessity of human dignity. His prototype is Prometheus, who stole the fire from heaven and hags eternally on the Caucasian mountain, with the eagle pecking out his liver, because he refused to surrender the right to assist his fellow men by intellectual endeavor” (7).

<sup>2</sup> Or so Gary Laderman claims in his recent *Sacred Matters*; H. Richard Niebuhr discusses secular polytheism in his *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*. Of course, the small things in daily life – sports, hobbies, even obsessions – may distract from the big, political implications of such faiths: that we dampen our outrage with “science will correct the ecological devastation that we wrought,” “proper progressive education will turn the superstitious and apathetic masses into good citizens,” “democracy will be the salve for human misery.” These, too, are our current ideological faiths.

stumbling blocks placed before science, reason and other vehicles for human progress. The New Atheists' contempt for the beliefs of common people at times translates into contempt for common people themselves.<sup>3</sup> It could be said that they harbor a desire for a secular Constantinianism, where belief in science and reason muscles out the barbarous forces of non-secular faith. Even the erstwhile anti-religious forms of ersatz religion -- Communism and Nazism -- are explained away by the New Atheists as irrational secular faiths. What the New Atheists assert, on their own account, is not secular faith, but secular reason. Reason is besieged by the forces of irrationalism.

In contrast, Christian critics of the New Atheism perceive the West to be in an advanced stage of secular Constantinianism. The New Atheists are part of a tradition of anxiety about modernity. Ironically, a visit to the Creation Museum in Northern Kentucky confirms the degree to which fundamentalism seeks to assert its own faith claims in the language of secular logic and scientific methods. Akin to postmodern philosophers of science, the strategy of the Creation Museum is to foreground evident holes in "old Earth" science, while offering "New Earth" creationism as a plausible alternative to fill in the "gaps," but also as a salve the problems of this-worldly suffering. Some of Darwin's early followers, after all, advocated eugenics and genocide as the proper social application of Darwinism. Challenges to evolution in the schools and the museums are the subversive pushback of a community besieged by an imperializing secular reason, a new pagan Rome.

This story is tempting, but painfully simplistic. It accepts without interrogation both the assumed meaning of the secular and of faith. It is perhaps a distant, or not so distant, cousin of the secularization thesis, the view that the steady drumbeat of progress taps the rhythm of

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<sup>3</sup> See Jeffrey Stout, "The Folly of Secularism"

modernity and the death knell of religion. For the New Atheists, we have regressed in recent decades from the overall thrust of progress; for their Christian critics, secularization has intruded and despoiled a proper world suffused with piety and decency. Here we have the secularization thesis enchanted, deified: the gods that failed along with secularization, the implicit god that succeeds is the god of modernity, faith in Him is worship of the secular itself. Just as the secularization thesis has now been complicated by the stubborn, and highly visible, refusal of organized religions to go away (from evangelical Christianity to the Islamic revival), so too may the thesis of *The God That Failed* be complicated to accommodate today's more complex, and highly visible, forms of "idolatry."

The essays that follow conduct such an interrogation and explore how the two terms, secular and faith, may inflect each other. In light of recent genealogies of the secular that track its religious roots, might secular faith have become, perversely, a tautology? Or, in light of the turn of academic interest from belief to practice, does the possibility of faith disappear, returning only when it is excessive – that is to say, perhaps, when faith is necessarily non-secular?

These issues are addressed, often allusively, in the chapters of this volume. The essays' origins are in the disciplines of literature, anthropology, political theory, and religious studies. Their geographical focus varies from South Africa to China to Scotland to a prison in Texas. None takes for granted the meaning of the secular, or of faith. The essays, it seems to us, push the debate surrounding these issues, and the broader issues of enchantment, disenchantment, and re-enchantment, in a particular direction, towards what we will call tragic faith. The essays show that secular faith, thought rigorously, is neither tautology nor oxymoron. Secular faith, understood in the way that we propose, is tragic faith, faith without hope.

But let us first return to *The God That Failed*. The title is much more than a gesture

towards a suggestive metaphor. The first essay, by Arthur Koestler, begins, “A faith is not acquired by reasoning. One does not fall in love with a woman, or enter the womb of a church, as a result of logical persuasion” (15). Faith is unjustified belief, or rather belief that is not fully justified by reason. There are plenty of beautiful, charming, intelligent women, why am I in love with this one and not another? Social scientists can offer reasons – psychological, sociological, economic, cultural – but there is a chasm that can never be crossed between the social scientist's reasons and the belief, in love, of the lover. The social scientist's reasons are not the lover's reasons; at most, they are understandable to him intellectually, but they are not the sort of reasons that could motivate his actions. The lover's actions are motivated by faith in his beloved, faith in her as the ideal. This commitment to an ideal, a pure ideal, is, according to Koestler, the defining feature of faith. “All true faith is uncompromising, radical, purist,” he writes. Traditionalist and revolutionary faiths differ only in incidentals, they are essentially the same: “the true traditionalist is always a revolutionary zealot in conflict with pharisaian society, with the lukewarm corrupters of the creed. And vice versa: the revolutionary's Utopia, which in appearance represents a complete break with the past, is always modeled on some image of the lost Paradise, of a legendary Golden Age” (16). Faith in this sense is commitment to the pure, rejection of the impure. A complicated, difficult world composed of shades of gray becomes simple, easy. To the cumbersome and tiresome work of making judgments, weighing evidence, reasoning about whether a belief is justified or not, faith offers an easy escape. It is not just an escape for the lazy; it is also an escape for the exhausted intellectual. Crossman explains the apparent puzzle of thoughtful intellectuals buying into Stalinist dogmatism by suggesting, “The Communist novice, subjecting his soul to the canon law of the Kremlin, felt something of the release which Catholicism also brings to the intellectual, wearied and worried by the privilege of

freedom” (6).

Relegating faith to the lazy and exhausted seems a rather strange conclusion. Is it only the lazy and exhausted who fall in love? A more compelling explanation for the appeal of Communist faith, offered by Koestler, is the malaise of modernity. Between the World Wars the European social order felt as if it was disintegrating. The effect was a sense that the world was sullied. Beliefs that called out this impurity and offered an alternative ideal became plausible. But here we have a social scientific explanation, an explanation on the far side of a chasm from personal faith. The project of *The God That Failed* is to represent both sides of this chasm, and to do so through literary representation. According to Crossman, the essayists were chosen because they could do what neither a social scientist could do nor an autobiographical recollection could do. It is only through the aesthetic that faith can be represented, Crossman seems to suggest, only through the aesthetic that the chasm separating the social scientist's reasons and the faithful's desire for the ideal can be bridged. Faith comes alive in narrative. “Subjectively” as personal belief, or “objectively” as the data of the social scientist, it cannot be truly represented.

Note how Crossman's point about the aesthetic makes more sense when he is talking about faith than when he is talking about religion. Indeed, *The God That Failed* is a book about secular faith, not secular *religion*. Each essay's narrative arc tracks conversion and de-conversion; it is the desire for faith, and of faith, that motivates the contributors. There are rituals and myths, institutions and disciplines and vocations, but these become visible, become plausible, in the light of faith. When that light fades, religion fades to grey, its appeal gone. The importance of the aesthetic to represent faith is the importance of the beautiful to evoke desire, to present (secular) religion as if through the eyes of (secular) faith. Through the aesthetic, the reader samples the desire of the faithful; perhaps, similarly, it is also from the fount of the

aesthetic that the faithful renews her faith.

This is why the metaphor of Communism as the god that failed is more than a metaphor. It is only by means of metaphor, by mobilizing the repertoire of the aesthetic, that faith – idolatrous or real, it seems – can be expressed. What, then, are we to make of the autobiographical and the social scientific, of personal faith and of the faith studied by the sociologist, of the desire for the ideal and the consequence of anomie? Each, of course, is always already mediated – by language, by culture, by background assumptions – and each refuses this mediation. How can one have faith in the pure, the ideal, except by using the magic of the aesthetic to turn the mundane into the other-worldly? And how else can the social scientist measure anomie except by its symptoms, themselves stylized?

Is this space between the individual and the social scientific where faith just happens to be made visible, or is this the natural home of faith? A spate of recent scholarship has answered affirmatively to the latter question, proposing that the stark separation of the individual and the social scientific is symptomatic of modernity's vain efforts to maintain the appearance of something called "the secular." The weak form of this argument claims that, rather than faith appearing only at the edges of modernity, in the not-yet-modern, faith appears, or re-appears, at the heart of the modern. What is most modern is not most secular, it is *most religious* – or, it has the most secular faith. A frequent example is twentieth century totalitarianism, a peculiarly modern political phenomenon which resembles in many clear-cut ways a religious phenomenon. Indeed, nationalism as such, the construction of "imagined communities," is a peculiarly modern phenomenon the religiosity of which is difficult to deny. What makes these examples typically modern is their presupposition of, and their attempt to surpass, the chasm between individual belief and social scientific reason.

If the weak form of the argument about the role of faith in modernity focuses on faith as the return of the repressed, erupting when modernity has reached its extreme, the strong form charges that modernity has *never been* without faith. The advent of the modern, of the primacy of the individual and of the social scientific, simply displaced faith from a God beyond, His laws, and His worldly representatives to the individual human being, his ability to use science to discern the workings of the natural world, and his political and epistemological representatives, bureaucrats and technocrats. As Kafka's prose so vividly illustrates, the labyrinthine world of the bureaucrat is just as full of enchantment as whatever caricature of the pre-modern we may hold. Secular faith, on this view, is that peculiarly modern form of belief justified through an excess of logic, which is in fact pseudo-logic. The result is just as much a form of faith as a belief suffering from an outright deficiency of justifying reasons. This modern secular faith is the faith in experts whose esoteric work is only accessible to a handful, the faith in thousand-page documents produced by government workers and advocacy groups, the faith in the magical formulas of the statistician. When this world is looked at anew, as if it were foreign, the perpetual motion of factory machinery, the hours spent staring at colorfully lit boxes on top of desks, the conversations held with no one except a piece of plastic in one's ear – surely this is as enchanted a world as any.

There is a variation on the strong argument about faith in modernity that is increasingly attracting attention. It acknowledges the secular faith of modernity – and charges it with heresy. Modernity has brought with it “secular reason,” and this has displaced theological (specifically, Christian) reason.<sup>4</sup> There is a clash between two faiths, and we are faced with a choice. Secular reason is violent, for it rests on a view of the individual as atomized, in competition with all other individuals, secure only through the ever-present threat of coercion. Christian reason is peaceful,



harmonious, aesthetically pleasing. It does not privilege the individual and the sovereign, who has a monopoly on violence. There is no need for violence because the natural state of the human being, when her desires are rightly ordered, when the idolatries of psychologism, historicism, and scientism have been abandoned, is peace. In short, on this view secular faith is a god that will fail, a god that is failing; the true God has almost been forgotten and must now be reaffirmed.

This view, associated with the theological movement of “Radical Orthodoxy,” is not interested in faith as belief without sufficient reasons, nor is it interested in faith as belief with excessive reasons. It is not interested in belief at all, but in practice. The individual with faith acts rightly; beliefs are secondary to actions (after all, thinking and saying are kinds of doing). What does it mean to act rightly? It means to act beautifully, to act in a way that is aesthetically pleasing. The actions of the faithful – of Christians – should be like notes of music, each different, each taking their significance from their relationship to other notes, all working together to form a beautiful whole. To play an off note is to act without faith, to act wrongly, to sin. From this perspective, there is no such thing as secular faith, there is simply sin and heresy. Secular faith would be faith without the aesthetic, and faith without the aesthetic is not a different kind of faith, it is the simulacrum of faith – which is to say, it is heresy.

Whether or not this view sounds hopelessly sectarian, when put in other, non-Christian, terms, it sounds quite like a more familiar view. Faith is commitment to a tradition, commitment that can only be justified by reasons internal to that tradition. If we take tradition in the broadest sense, then this is not only Alasdair MacIntyre's point, but Thomas Kuhn's and Alain Badiou's as well. The Ptolemaic physicist, the Newtonian physicist, and the physicist schooled in relativity theory are all committed to background assumptions that guide their inquiry. From the physicists'

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<sup>4</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* and *The Future of Love*.

perspective, her beliefs are not faith: they are fully justified given the context in which they arise. For someone, in such a context, to believe anything different would be to practice pseudo-science, effectively to be a heretic. From a bird's eye view, the historian's view, the scientist in each case is committed to a tradition of inquiry, and she is justified in the terms of that tradition. If there are no alternative traditions, no live alternatives, no faith is needed. However, there are always alternatives, but they are only considered live by their adherents. To others, they are irrational, confused, heretical, idolatrous. They are commitments to gods that have, or will, fail. When faith is understood as commitment to a tradition, secular faith is everywhere: sometimes it is faith in a tradition of scientific inquiry, sometimes it is faith in a revolutionary event, sometimes it is faith in a religious tradition, sometimes it is faith in one's spouse. From inside a tradition, it is clear that faith in the tradition is faith in the good, the true, the beautiful, in the elegance of a scientific theory as much as its truth, in the goodness of one's beloved as much as in her beauty.

Traditions are traditions of practice. First one bends one's knees and says the words of prayer, then one believes. Louis Althusser extended Pascal's observation to the varied social practices of contemporary culture. Schools, administrative offices, how-to manuals, families, sporting events, all of the social practices of our world force us, without force, to bend our knees and say the words of prayer – and so we believe. We are committed. But has this not eliminated the space for faith, or deflated faith to such an extent that it covers the world, but is ultimately vacuous? Secular faith, it seems, has become simply doing what one is supposed to do. When one does what one is supposed to do, it feels right, it confirms belief. Is this not just a version of the rather banal postmodern conclusion that there is no difference between acting as if something is the case and acting with a belief that it actually is the case? To say that the former involves faith, but not the latter, would be a quite confused conclusion.

How can faith be restored to this world of deflated faith? Alain Badiou proposes that it is faith, secular faith, that constitutes the subject. It is faith that makes an individual a human being, that differentiates her from a mere animal.<sup>5</sup> Badiou's faith is not faith that has been secured through repeated practice or through acculturation. What he commends with the name faith is faith in heresy, faith in what cannot be understood or managed within the terms of the status quo, faith in what does not make sense in a given tradition of inquiry. What does not make sense erupts, breaks through the smooth surface of the status quo in what Badiou calls an event. Secular faith, for Badiou, is fidelity to an event. Meeting one's beloved, making a scientific discovery, the moment of revolution, these are events which solicit faith; commitment to pursue such events wherever they may lead is what makes one human. It is the event that shines the light of the good, the true, the beautiful onto the world. In love the roses never smelled so sweet; truths must be adjudicated according to Party doctrine; what is good is good because it contributes to the glory of Christ.

Understood in this way, faith is no longer vacuous, but Badiou's account still leaves too many questions without satisfactory answers. How is it that the sort of secular faith he advocates is connected with our very humanity? What distinguishes an event to which one can be faithful from the simulacrum of an event, from a moment that cannot fit into the status quo because it is simply wrong, not because it is the seed of a new status quo? More generally, discussions of secular faith, whether they be of personal faith, faith in the enchanted modern, faith in tradition, or faith in the event, seem to lean on a maneuver that makes religious studies scholars extremely uncomfortable.

There has been a long history in the academic study of religion of taking the religious (or the sacred, or faith) as *sui generis*, necessitating investigative procedures unlike those used in

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<sup>5</sup> For an introduction to Badiou's thought, see his *Ethics* or his *Saint Paul*.

any other discipline of the humanities.<sup>6</sup> That is why we need religious studies departments, the argument goes: because historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists all miss something when they investigate religion. What that something is, that is the religious, the sacred, or faith. It is of its own kind, not reducible to anything else.

This, of course, is absurd. It is the result of a desire to give foundations to the secular study of religions as opposed to the theological study of religions, but in its desire to avoid traditional theology it becomes an alternative theology. It advances a claim about the autonomy of the religious (or sacred, or faith) which is immune from critique. Do all accounts of secular faith rest on *sui generis* accounts of faith? This is a genuine worry about the personal faith described by the authors of *The God That Failed*; it is also a worry about those who would locate faith at the culmination of the modern, or who would locate it always already insinuated in the modern. What is added by talking about faith in Communism or in Science, and by claiming that the faith in question is more than metaphorical? Is it not implicit in this claim, if not a necessary corollary, that the faith found in these individuals, in these circumstances cannot be sufficiently described in any other terms, can only be accurately described with the concept of faith? Returning to Badiou's account of faith in heresy, of faith in the event: if it is only faith that makes us human, that differentiates us from animals, is this not just a spiced up version of Mircea Eliade's account of the human being as *homo religiosus*? Surely no such faith could be secular.

Yet the attention Badiou directs towards those moments incomprehensible in terms of the status quo seems to touch on a strong intuition we have about faith. We speak about individuals who are faced with trials and tribulations keeping faith. After natural disaster, affliction, or misfortune, individuals can react with resignation or with faith. In the latter case, they persevere despite the misfortune, doing the best they can even as the world they have grown used to and

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<sup>6</sup> For this argument, see Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*

fond of collapses around them. Might such encounters with the tragic be but generic forms of the “events” calling for faith of which Badiou writes? The status quo, the way we see the world, runs amuck. Things do not do what they are supposed to do. Every option we have is the wrong option; we will necessarily have regrets. The hold of the normative universe which we implicitly accepted is shaken. God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, and Abraham is faced with a choice. Does he have faith?

Faith understood this way is just as much a part of ordinary life as the tragic. It need not be commitment to grandiose revolutionary schemes, nor to the idealized beloved, nor to a once-in-an-era scientific revolution. Faith is elicited by loss, by upheavals large and small, by realizations that things are not as they were, and they will never be so again. If the tragic is not acknowledged, faith is not elicited. On this account, faith is not *sui generis*; it is a virtue. One who has faith has the disposition, when encountering the tragic, to persevere. There is no mysterious remainder, no *je ne sais quoi* in which the crypto-theological may lurk. Indeed, this sort of faith, tragic faith, just is secular faith.

As soon as the tragic makes sense, it is no longer tragic. When there is reason for loss or disruption, there is no tragedy – and so there can be no faith. Tragic faith is precisely the opposite of ideological (or, to take a special case, theological) faith, for ideology functions by concealing its own limits, and by incorporating its apparent limits into its own story. Ideology thrives on the pseudo-tragic, the apparently disruptive which, in fact, reinforces an ideology’s own claim of supremacy (to be rather glib, is this not precisely the function of sin?). Tragic faith refuses to turn a blind eye to contradictions, refuses the aestheticizing of ideological enchantments.

Put another way, tragic faith returns to the ordinary. It is anti-theoretical to the extent that theoretical frameworks make sense of contradictions, conceal the tragic. But tragic faith is not

naïve, it does not confuse the ordinary with the obvious.<sup>7</sup> Looking around us we see what is obvious, not what is ordinary. We are always already immersed in a tradition, trained to see things as we are to see them, the tragic elided or colonized by that tradition. Tragic faith grasps for the ordinary concealed by the obvious, and tragic faith uses theory as an instrument to peel the obvious from the ordinary. This is an instrumental use of theory, a use of theory to enhance *phronesis*, practical wisdom, the primary tool used in navigating the ordinary. Similarly, tragic faith is anti-aesthetic to the extent that the aesthetic smooths tensions: it is authentically secular, refusing to embrace the beautiful tied to the true and the good. However, tragic faith uses the aesthetic as an instrument: rhetoric is a tool to cleave the obvious from the ordinary.

Secular faith, as tragic faith, is deeply attentive to judgment. Bonnie Honig has recently argued that we ought to stop thinking about states of exception, moments when the rules are suspended, as extreme, unusual circumstances.<sup>8</sup> Rather, states of exception occur everywhere, every time a decision is made. The notion that there is a rulebook “out there,” ready for easy application to whatever set of circumstances present themselves, is one of the fundamental mystifications of ideology. Each time a decision is made rules are re-interpreted; technicalities are not footnotes, they are the substance of the law. Each time, it is as if the rules are suspended: decision is a taste of the tragic. Carl Schmitt's famous claim that the sovereign is he who decides on the exception is yet another attempt to control the tragic, to mobilize it in the service of the sovereign's authority – authority secured through indefinite detention of undocumented workers, through the suspension of the rule of law in an open-ended war on terror. Acknowledging the tragic element of all decisions refuses such mystifications, refuses to grant such emergency powers, and refuses to deify the sovereign, finding instead the power to decide on the exception

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<sup>7</sup> This point is elaborated in the Conclusion of Vincent Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace*.

<sup>8</sup> Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics*

at all levels of government, and in social movements outside of government. Tragic faith is secular faith, and it is democratic faith.

Secular faith, as tragic faith, acknowledges tradition but is not limited by tradition. Recognizing moments of the tragic requires an ability to recognize what is not tragic. Incompetence may produce something that cannot be understood within the status quo, but the product of incompetence is not tragic. Similarly, excellence may bring about something which has never been seen before (the world record of an excellent sportsman, the eloquence of an excellent politician), but this, too, is not tragic. To recognize the tragic, which is the prerequisite of tragic faith, takes wisdom, a deep familiarity with one's world and a capacity for discerning the normative skeleton of that world. Tragic faith is not required when the tragic that we encounter is long ago or far away. Tragic faith is displayed when we encounter the tragic that we recognize ourselves, when we see that it is our normative world that is inadequate, as it always is.

Secular faith, as tragic faith, refuses melancholia and refuses hope. When faced with the tragic, resignation is always an option. Resignation is not a response to the tragic, it is a refusal of the tragic. To attribute poverty to an all-pervasive imperialism or to the logic of Karma are instances of such resignation. On such views, suffering is to be expected in a world fallen by class division or determined by the merits and demerits of past lives – there is no tragedy here. When faced with dramatic and unexpected change, best to go on as before, even when this means something quite different in the shifted circumstances. There is a melancholic fixation on times past, and lost. In the face of these foreigners coming to take our land, it is better to ignore them and turn all our energies to our peculiar enchantment, on the hope for a time to come. Cleansed from the present, all that does not fit is condensed into a desired object and projected forward

and backward, into a lost past and a hoped for future which absorb our attention. The faith described by Koestler, faith in an ideal, is precisely this kind of faith, the opposite of secular faith, the opposite of tragic faith. The ideal is pure, unsoiled by the complexities of the present – which is to say, cleansed of the tragic. Tragic faith is faith without hope, persistence in the face of uncertainty with no rewards in sight, no past to blame. It encounters loss with a spirit of mourning, not melancholia: acknowledging the lost object and returning to the difficult world rather than fixating on the lost object interminably.<sup>9</sup>

What happens when one has *too little* tragic faith? To put it rather dramatically, the answer to the former question seems to be: evil at its most banal. When the tragic cannot be recognized, a normative framework feels fully secure. The bureaucrat forgets the implicit “as if” clause before applying the rule. And the application of the rule is mechanical; it seems as though there is no room for judgment. The fullness of a tradition that sets the context of judgment, and the practical wisdom needed to judge, are both forgotten. It is tempting to read Adolf Eichmann, the German bureaucrat concerned with maximizing the efficiency with which Jews were transported to their deaths, as an epitome of modernity, a character made possible because of the technocratic nature of the modern. But might Eichmann simply illustrate the danger that accompanies a pathological lack of tragic faith, of secular faith, a lack that could just as easily manifest itself in those strictly applying the rules of a cult leader or of Keynesian economics as if judgment was unnecessary, as if the world had been cleansed of the tragic?

What happens when one has *too much* tragic faith? To again be dramatic, the answer seems to be: sanctity. The secular saint sees locations of the tragic where others, even those with 20/20 tragic vision, see none. While others become accustomed to the suffering they encounter, far or near, and so it no longer puts their normative world in question, the secular saint always

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<sup>9</sup> See Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*



acknowledges these encounters and considers that each necessitates judgment. After giving away his wealth, Zell Kravinsky, a Philadelphia real estate mogul, saw a judgment that others (including his concerned wife) did not: should he give away one of his kidneys to an anonymous patient in need of a transplant? Kravinsky grappled with this question as others grapple with more typical encounters with the tragic. He knew that both options, undergoing kidney removal as an anonymous donor, against his family's wishes, and not undergoing the procedure, would have negative consequences. Others, many, many others, do not even see this tragic choice, which we all, of course, face just as much as Kravinsky.

When secular faith is understood as tragic faith, the vocation of the scholar becomes the work of what Edward Said has called “secular criticism.” By this Said meant a refusal to put scholarly work at the service of a religious or ideological agenda. The work of the scholar involves discernment, judgment, requires knowledge of tradition; it is difficult work. The work of the ideological or religious critic is easy: it is simply the application of a rule to a particular circumstance. What results is criticism that “must think of itself as life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse” (29).<sup>10</sup> What secular criticism is opposed to, which Said labels “religious criticism,” is characterized by “closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism, and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the other-worldly” (290). And religious criticism is gaining ground: “Once an intellectual, the modern critic has become a cleric in the worst sense of the word” (292). What the secular critic has is secular faith: a refusal to accept the purported closure of ideological and theological aestheticizing narratives, an acknowledgment of moments of the tragic that reveal those contradictions, and a further commitment to use rhetoric to bring to

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<sup>10</sup> Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. For discussion of Said’s use of these terms, see Gil Anidjar, “Secularism.”

pursue and publicize those moments of the tragic. Secular criticism is contagious: it calls out moments of the tragic so as to make it possible for others to call out moments of the tragic. It is difficult, exhausting work. It requires faith.

Turning back to the beginning again, perhaps it is secular faith as tragic faith that the essays collected in *The God That Failed* demonstrate all along. Perhaps the authors exemplify secular criticism. Perhaps the use of the aesthetic to reveal faith was, in fact, the use of rhetoric to expose faith. Perhaps the failure of god is but another name for the tragic, and the authors' texts their witness of faith in the face of the tragic. Richard Wright's essay concludes, after a tumultuous process of moving away from Communist orthodoxy, as Wright is physically thrown out of the Party's May Day parade by two white Communists. Black Party members watched but did nothing. He writes, "I could not move from the spot. I was empty of any idea about what to do. But I did not feel belligerent. I had outgrown my childhood" (161). The parade moves past him, with banners and drums and chants. Wright had encountered the tragic, his normative world, the stable world of his childhood, had collapsed. As the parade passes, he continues to reflect, "I was not thinking; I could not think. But an objectivity of vision was being born within me. A surging sweep of many odds and ends came together and formed an attitude, a perspective. 'They're blind,' I said to myself" (161-2). In light of his encounter with the tragic, endured with secular faith, Wright becomes a secular critic. "Voices of hope" chanted, as Wright records, but he will have nothing of their hope.

His narrative of the parade ends, and the final two paragraphs of his essay record what resulted: "I headed toward home alone, really alone now, telling myself that in all the sprawling immensity of our mighty continent the least-known factor of living was the human heart, the least-sought goal of being was a way to live a human life." (162) The parade and its hopes and

voices harmonized in protest chant left him behind. Wright was alone, but not alone with himself, for he could not know himself, that is part of what he had learned. He was left with a desire to live, to find a way to live, to find a way to be human. He was not left with a naïve humanism, with a faith in humanity. He was left with a distrust of humanity, but with a faith in the question of the human, a faith that acknowledged the tragic nature of that question and yet pursued it with vigor. In the next line he writes of the consequence: he became a writer. His essay ends, “I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo; and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human” (162). Here is secular faith crystal clear, as tragic faith, as commitment to ordinary human life, a humanism with no content other than its commitment to live in pursuit of the impossible, in pursuit of “the inexpressibly human.”

The essays collected here do not all share a conception of secular faith as tragic faith. However, they do share a commitment to secular criticism: worldly, historical, and, in broadest sense, humanistic. Joshua Dubler’s essay explores the deep and stormy relationship between contemporary socio-economic conditions and a religious ethos, though in this case these two forces are personified in the figure of the State and a certain Harry Theriault. The entanglement takes place at law: Theriault is a prisoner in the State’s custody, his claims to have created a new religious community amongst his fellow inmates must be adjudicated. Drawing on trial transcripts, Dubler finds startling significance in the frustration of the State with Theriault, and of Theriault with the State. At the end of the day, the faiths of both parties mime each other, revealing how easily good faith turns to bad faith.

The desire to understand faith, this time not by the State but by nineteenth century

scientists, is at the center of David Chidester's essay. What results when scientific, and pseudo-scientific, apparatus are brought to bear on "primitive" religion? Once again, the simple picture of religious data in contrast to secular, scientific reason is quickly complicated. Perhaps we can say that the beliefs and practices of the scientist are contaminated by the faith of the "savage." Chidester's essay pivots on the figure of the dog, a creature eliciting the complexities of nineteenth century intellectual's secular faith.

Cindy Huang discusses the faith of the woman on the street -- though this is a very particular street. Huang writes of Uyghur women, Muslims living in China. She finds them torn between ideological faiths: the faith elicited by the Chinese Communist Party, the faith elicited by the increasing presence of Western culture and values, and the community's historical faith in Islam. Through close attention to the life of one Uyghur woman, Huang finds a secular faith that is necessary to live through the clash of these ideological faiths, a faith elicited not by ideological demands but by the presence of the tragic.

The essays that follow, by Colin Jager and Michael Saler, investigate the significance of fiction for faith. What does it mean when an individual or a culture embraces the preface, "It is as if..."? Jager's essay, set against the background of religious tumult in the England and Scotland of the eighteenth century, explores the cultural logic of belief in the domains of politics, Scriptural interpretation, philosophy, science, and literature. This is not a story of secularization; rather, it is a story of the transformation of faith to a fictionalist faith, and the contested seepage of that faith, finally, into the novel. While the realist novel of the early nineteenth century would seem to be the least enchanted, Jager argues just the opposite. Saler finds in three writers of the 1930s, Braudel, Auerbach, and Tolkien, an embrace of factionalism, of the "as if," that cut across the divide between fiction and history. In the face of the tragic, World War, these authors told

sweeping, rhetorically compelling stories that served as a counterpoint to the faith in nation around them, ready to boil over. Their writing expressed a secular faith, and it elicited secular faith from its audience.

In the final essay of this volume, Adam Webb brings a global perspective to his reflections on the possibility of religious pluralism. The religious pluralism he ponders, and advocates, is not the flaccid show-and-tell that often goes by this label. Rather, it involves a full embrace of the richness of religious tradition while at the same time calling attention to the shared struggle of thick traditions against the encroachment of secular liberal modernity. Webb's essay could be read as a refusal of the choice: religious *or* secular faith. Religions *needs* secular faith, which Webb elaborates as a commitment to the cultivation of character, in order to survive their encounter with the ideology of secularism -- and to fight back.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> An expanded version of this collection, with additional essays by Jean Comaroff, Edward J. Blum, and Melvin Rogers, is forthcoming from Cascade Books.

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