

Religion Beyond Belief

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Faith is not belief. Faith is the optative limb of belief. I believe things that I know to be true. I have faith in things for which I have no grounds for belief. Belief is calm or even indifferent in the face of what it takes for granted. Faith is agonistic, because it is the work of belief, or the striving to believe.

This is why we would do well to acknowledge something like the return of religion in the manner suggested by Peter Sloterdijk, who argues that religion has only ever been the machinery and motivation for projects of ascetological self-transformation (Sloterdijk 2013, 83-106). We are seeing today, not a return of religion from its brief exile in secularism, the merest historical hiccup, as it now begins to seem, but the vehement abandonment by religion of the trappings of belief-systems. The adherents of different religions believe many different kinds of thing, which may be the subject of sober appraisal and comparative study. But they all have faith in the same thing, namely the necessity for belief in incredible things, the name for this necessity being faith. Faith is not the accessory of religion, as may once have seemed to be the case. Rather, religions are increasingly being revealed as the arbitrary contents and variable apparatus of faith-operations. This helps to make sense of the otherwise unaccountable fact that the dramatis personae of religion should be so unaccountably concerned with the quality of our faith in them. There is no religion that in fact proclaims the existence of Bertrand Russell's sacred teapot twinkling about the sun in an elliptical orbit (Russell 1997, 547-8), but such a religion would begin to flicker into being as soon as somebody were to experience and assert the need to believe in it, which is to say, the need to overcome their reasonable doubts as to its existence.

Belief is a belief in the things of the world, which means one can only ever believe things on the whole, and temporarily, in the absence of contrary evidence. Faith is the belief in one's belief about things in the world, and so is absolute, and immunised from the mutability of appearances, which only ever deepen the need for faith. This is not the difference between a scientific and a religious disposition. The scientist has belief in gravity, magnetism and mathematics, but will often have deliriously unshakeable faith in the superiority of his belief-systems. As J.S. Clegg puts it, 'Faith is inverted terror' (Clegg 1979, 229), or a kind of belligerent hope.

Obviously, the words faith and belief undergo considerable cross-contamination. When the father of the diabolised child cries out ‘I believe: help thou my unbelief’ - Πιστεύω; βοήθει μου τῇ ἀπιστίᾳ - (Mark 9.4), then he is really asking for help with his faith, which always includes a reluctance or inability to believe, and so derives its absoluteness from its incompleteness. Perhaps the real gulf, secreted in the tiny fissure that separates belief and faith, is indicated in the strange blank in English where the indicative verb from faith should be. You can actively believe, or trust, but you can only ‘have faith’. Having to have faith, rather than being able to ‘faith’, means that one can never in fact have it fully in one’s grasp. One will always have to stand apart from one’s faith, which is the object of an action and not the action itself. The interior dehiscence of faith tells us everything about its dynamic of need. So there will always be pathos as well as agony in faith, where there need be neither in belief. In fact, to have faith means not to have it, or not fully, otherwise there would be no need to have faith. This means that having faith and needing faith are the same thing, for what one has in faith is the need for faith.

Faith is coercive in a way that belief is not, or need not be. I believe that water evaporates in sunlight and that magnets attract ferrous materials, but I cannot be said to have faith in these things precisely because I do not have any meaningful doubts about them. This means that I do not feel any duty or pressure to believe the things which I believe, and the bringing forward of different kinds of evidence or logical consideration may well weaken my belief. But to have faith in something is always to feel the force of a need for faith in the face of potentially erosive considerations. The insufficiency of faith is the source of all the force it exerts. Having faith means needing to have faith in your faith. The defect of faith, the fact that it may be seen as ‘distorted, sickly belief’ (Clegg 1979 225), is the source of all its efficacy and infectious allure.

‘Religion’, in the world of mass-mediated cross-contamination, is the assertion of faith, the need to assert one’s faith in faith. Increasingly, it is a credence not only without credentials, but without credenda, faith beyond any articles of faith. What is being everywhere asserted, sometimes through the vehicle of religious affiliation, but not always, is the need for faith, the needfulness in faith. And, as Samuel Beckett suggests, in a strange essay written in French in 1938, ‘Les Deux Besoins’, the need for faith may come to be something like the faith in need. The ‘two needs’ that Beckett distinguishes are the satiable and the insatiable. Satiable needs are those around which most humans are orientated - the need for sustenance, sleep, salary, sex, respect and so on. But these are all substitutes and sedatives for a

greater need, of which ‘the hosts of the blessed and sane (les innombrables béats et sains d’esprit)’ are unaware.

C’est à l’exclusion de grand besoin, sur lui si j’ose dire, qu’ils vaquent aux petits. D’où cette vie toute en marge de son principe, cette vie faite de décisions, de satisfactions, de réponses, de menus besoins assassinés, cette vie de plante à la croisée, de choux pensant et même bien pensant, la seule vie possible pour ceux qui se voient dans la nécessité d’en mener une, c’est à dire la seule vie possible.

Besoin de quoi ? Besoin d’avoir besoin.

It is for the blotting out of the prime need, and even, if I may say so, based on it, that they busy themselves with little ones. Hence this life on the rim of its essence, this life formed from decisions, satisfactions, responses, tiny needs seen off, the life of a plant at the carfax, of a thinking, even a well-intentioned cabbage, the only life possible for those who find themselves needing to lead one, that is, the only possible life.

Need of what? The need to have need. (Beckett 1983, 55; my translation)

Beckett grandiosely identifies ‘the artist’ as impelled by this need, empty and enormous at once: ‘the artist sets about the question, puts himself in question, has resort to questions, to rhetorical questions with no question of oratory’ (‘l’artiste se met à la question, se met en question, se résout en questions, en questions rhétoriques sans fonction oratoire’, Beckett 1983, 56). But, as with so many of the dark and secret prerogatives that modernist artists have previously reserved for themselves, this privilege of the grand need is now being laid claim to across mass-mediated existence.

Faith must be subject to repeated assertion. Many, and possibly most, of the things I believe, I do not fully know that I believe. What is more, I know that, once subject to inspection, I may turn out not fully to believe what I seem to. But it is impossible to have faith in something without affirming, or feeling the need to affirm, that faith. Indeed, one may feel that the point of affirming faith is to solidify one’s faith in the power of affirmation itself. That seems to be why it is not enough to have a creed, credence or credendum. What matters most is that there is the *credo*, the ‘I-believe’ of belief, its instant and instance of being affirmed, and the being of its affirmation, sometimes, as in the triumphant Tertullianic *credo quia absurdum*, in the teeth of reasonable belief-conditions. If there is a need for faith, it is because of the need in faith.

And then there is also the militant demand that accompanies need for companions in one's need, to make up and make up for one's fideistic neediness by participating in it. It is the fact that the articles of faith can only become so through their articulation which ensures that religion is not merely subject to mediation: it is mediation itself, and the need that mediation both prevails against and perpetuates. Gutenberg seemed once to threaten the authority of religion: Gates has assured its continuance. Intensifications of mediation naturally arise from conditions of stress, such as epidemic, economic crisis and armed conflict. But under such conditions of stress, it is never the credenda, or articles of faith that matter, it is the assertion of fidelity to the act of believing in common.

Michel Serres's final book, completed days before his death, represents the culmination of a move sustained over twenty years of writing, to bring theology, and especially Catholic theology, together with epistemics and information theory. The book begins by asking the question 'Is the spiritual world evoked by religion just one among many others ... or does it, on account of its universal distribution in all cultures and its temporal longevity, constitute the matrix from which all other forms of the virtual emerge?' (Serres 2019, 12; my translation). The answer given throughout this book is an audacious, unyielding, and ultimately monotonous amen. The book offers an arresting and sinuously elaborated argument for seeing monotheistic religion as cognate with the abstraction of mathematics in bringing about an intersection - a volcanic 'hot spot' is Serres's metaphor - of the real and the virtual, the natural and the transcendent. The whole of the first section of *Relire le relié* is a rapturous restatement of the incarnational principle of the *Verbum caro factum est*, the Word become Flesh, that has recurred through twenty years of Serres's writing to describe this intersection of dimensions. Thereafter the creation of the 'relié', the integrated or bound-together, is ascribed wholly to the work of religion, conceived no longer as suggestive analogy for the binding of the real and the rational, but as its origin and literal instantiation.

Because this is Michel Serres, there are still electric leaps and forks of thought. But this is against the rather uniform and lowering background of a determination to construe Christianity as the ultimately unifying system. Like most of the books Serres has produced in the last twenty years, this is in large part an anthology of earlier themes and preoccupations: the role of the media, the anthropological function of sacrifice, the problem of violence, the evolution of knowledge. But everything is suffused in the fug of sanctity, squeezed through the sieve of his new-found piety, with

meditations on Biblical episodes like the Nativity, the woman taken in adultery, or Peter denying Christ, doing the work previously done through argument and analysis. The great, accusatory declaration which blares defiantly through so many of Serres's books is that the libido of belonging is the source of all the evil in the world (Serres 2003, 141). The libido of belonging, as opposed to the condition of belonging, is the longing for belonging, and the longing to belong to that condition of shared longing. Belonging is always in fact constituted through the libido of longing, because one can never truly and absolutely belong to anything except through the exercise of what Sartre calls 'bad faith', though. And, insofar as, according to Sartre, 'bad faith is *faïth*' (Sartre 1984, 67), perhaps all faith participates in bad faith. The religious drive for belonging, which is so rapidly outstripping forms of merely credential adherence, modulates in *Relire le relié* to the milk-and-water wish-fulfilment of 'Jesus inaugurates a way of living in common in which grace and love dissolve all forms of belonging' (Serres 2019, 165). The final words of the book dissolve into mystical rapture, impassioned, but empty of all but passion, and so ultimately more a fragrance than an affirmation:

The saints propagate peace. Can we hope that, in their multitude, they will finally open a new era of history, a new humanity? Better even than that: in the mystical ecstasy, present and active in all religions, and so universal, the presence of God or the divine fills those who experience it with a supreme joy, perfect, peaceful, the redemption of all Evil, full of grace. (Serres 2019, 243)

In a perverse way, Serres is right to reassert this convergence of religion and mediation, a theme of his work that has been incipient since the insistence of his *Angels* (1995) that communication can only be understood by recourse to angelology. But what is lost in the flimsy fatigue of Serres's devoutly-wished consummation is precisely the force of the ravenous non-fulfilment that characterises mediated faith. In understanding the dangerous force of new forms of mass-mediated fideisms, and the pandemic contagion of the need to believe, in what Peter Sloterdijk calls the 'hysterical matrix of liquefied religious convictions', such that 'what counts in the spiritual world is the law of the survival of those most capable of conviction' (Sloterdijk 196, 223), we must learn to reckon with the simultaneous emptying out of religious content and zealous intensification of religious force that this evacuation allows. This is precisely because stripping the act of professing faith, or 'faïthing' as we ought to be able to say, of all foundation, makes it more mobile and virulent than ever before.

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