

# **Christian Atheism and Religious Fictionalism**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this thesis, I aim to explore what contributions to recent debates about the role of religious discourses vis-a-vis materialist philosophical systems can be made by religious fictionalism. First, I discuss the rise of Christian Atheism among Protestant theologians in the latter half of the past century and compare it to the uses of religious materials as present in the works of Alain Badiou and François Laruelle. I then proceed to discuss various forms of religious fictionalism, suggesting possible ways of strengthening the position by means of incorporation of some Continental philosophical concepts. Following this, I place this discussion in a broader context, indicating the role religious fictionalism can play in broader debates about the viability of non-theistic religion, and the implications it may have for the study of religion.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
I. Historical and conceptual background.....	1
II. The order of the thesis.....	4
<b>1. Theology, Fictions, and Philosophical Uses of Religion</b> .....	8
1.1. Death of God theology.....	9
1.2. Continental Materialism.....	13
I. François Laruelle.....	13
II. Alain Badiou.....	15
1.3. Limits of reinterpretation.....	19
1.4. Conclusion.....	21
<b>2. Religious Fictionalism</b> .....	24
2.1. Antecedents.....	25
2.2. Limits of ‘religion’.....	28
2.3. Fictions and their uses.....	29
2.4. Preferability of fictions and the criterion of community.....	32
2.5. Alternative fictionalisms.....	34
I. Hyperstition.....	35
II. Meillassoux’s ‘aleatory fictionalism’.....	39
<b>3. Fictionalism in Broader Context</b> .....	42
3.1. Non-theistic religion in general.....	42
3.2. Fictionalist religions.....	44
3.3. Fictionalism and definitions of ‘religion’.....	49
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	53
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	55

# Introduction

## I. Historical and conceptual background

As the past 30 years of political and social history show relatively clearly, the rumours of the demise of religion have been greatly exaggerated (Smart, 1999). That being said, cultural and intellectual transformations in the WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich and Democratic; Jones, 2010) world have led to a progressive weakening of the metaphysical underpinnings which grounded and guaranteed intellectual respectability to religious discourses in the pre-modern period. A contemporary observer may therefore argue that there are two seemingly opposed religion-related processes currently operative in those parts of the world which have been affected by the development of scientific, philosophical and scientific achievements of Modernity. There is, on the one hand, a revival of religious forms of life in some sections of modern Western societies, as borne out by sociological research (Bogomilova, 2004). On the other hand, there is also the loss of 'traditional' metaphysical grounding for religious discourses in other sections of the intellectual world, which can be attributed to the development of scientific thinking and theory in general (insofar as it formulates its own conceptual scheme which may not be consistent with established theological ontologies), and in particular to the establishment of knowledge-acquisition procedures (otherwise known popularly as 'the scientific method') which attribute a provisional character to substantive truth-propositions (thus minimising the claim of certain religious propositions to be absolute and definitive in their formulation of theological truths) and

assume an explanatory chain which rejects the need for agencies and entities which are said to be supra-natural or otherwise discontinuous with the natural world (Gellner 1991).

This has largely led to a growing retrenchment, on the part of both the religious and the secular elements in Western societies, in what are by now traditional mutual critiques of those two ‘sides’ of this issue of religion’s role in the shaping of cognitive mechanisms and truth-acquisition procedures. Something of an irony in the conflict between various forms of Evangelical Christian Creationism and New Atheist Scientism, a particularly illustrative example of the polarisation of discourse on religion in the Anglophone West, is that even the terms of the debate, and the fundamentalist position itself (much more than it would likely be willing to admit, were it not oblivious to its own philosophical presuppositions), could be argued to be deeply shaped by the heritage of the Enlightenment and the development of Modern intellectual culture (Spohn, 2001).

Looking at the debates and discourses prevalent in today’s conversations about religion in the West, one would be willing to say that the religious and the non-religious worlds (or the secular and the non-secular worlds, to invert this classification) are as strongly opposed to each other as ever, except the socio-political stakes in this debate have grown significantly higher, with an increase in populist movements often referring to some form of religious identification as an important political marker. Gellner (op.cit.) frames this as a battle between religious fundamentalism and Enlightenment rationalism, between two fundamental cognitive procedures or ways of thinking about the world (with some attempts by postmodern relativism to join in the fight). It is in this contentious battleground that something like the possibility of non-theistic form of religion, drawing on traditional ‘Western’ philosophical and theological resources, has begun to be asked about with particular focus since at least the 1960s. Again, the problem driving this reflection has been that insofar as philosophical developments in the making since the

Enlightenment make it impossible for many people to hold to a theistic position, intellectually necessary for Western (primarily Christian) thinkers to abandon theism in favour of something within a conceivable range of non-theism, if not straightforward atheism (Vahanian 2008).

In addition to the problem of the cognitive dimension of religious belief, the problem of evil became a particularly strongly felt reality, with the rise of mass warfare and the horrors of the Holocaust. This need to re-envision religion in light of scientific advances and moral horrors brought about in the 20<sup>th</sup> century does not, however, by itself entail a wholesale abandonment of the religious heritage of the West, and the preservation of as much of religious culture may be at least a moral obligation. This, for example, has been a crucial paradox in the Shoah theology movement – on the one hand, it has been argued that Shoah (Holocaust) makes the belief in a Classical Theistic vision of God untenable (insofar as the historical magnitude of suffering is irreconcilable with the notion of an all-powerful, omnibenevolent divinity actively engaged in the course of human history), with some thinkers espousing atheist views (Katz, 2007). On the other hand, Shoah presents one particularly forcefully with a host of reasons for why the moral obligation to hold onto Jewish religious life – as part of the wider Jewish cultural life – is pressing for reasons other than the acceptance of the proposition that a theistic God exists (Solomon, 1997). Thus, Reconstructionist and Humanistic branches of Judaism have been embracing of simultaneous commitment to religious practice and a lack of belief in a theistic form of divinity.

Among many important problems in contemporary debates about the philosophical respectability of religion is the role of religion in formulation of philosophical thought, and conversely – the role of philosophy in shaping the parameters within which religious discourse seeks to make itself more than simply comprehensible to rational analysis. It is a problem of how does religious discourse allow itself to be reinterpreted in philosophical terms, in terms broader

than its own limited domain. This issue appears to me as warranting a closer look – what is it to be done, theoretically speaking, in a situation where both a religious discourse and a philosophical discourse critical of some of the apparently most important parts of that religious discourse both exert equal claim on the conceptual system of a thinker? What are some justifiable ways of adhering to both the philosophical truth and to what apparently is a religious fiction, but one which is intimately connected with the very same philosophical truth by way of being an effective part in the discovery of this truth? What is a useful way of thinking about the ability of fictions not just to serve as useful for some reasons irrelevant to the truth of the propositions in which they are expressed, but as partly responsible for the discovery of philosophical truths?

## II. The order of the thesis

In this thesis, I will describe and analyse some of the insights of select thinkers working in the Death of God (or Christian Atheist) theology movement, discussing the questions it puts forward to philosophy of religion and philosophical theology, and the ways in which it invites the contemporary philosopher of religion, in a particularly forceful (if not unprecedented) manner, to rethink aspects of philosophical uses of theological materials. Can religious materials otherwise dependent on a realist, theistic concept of God be removed from the metaphysical grounding within which they were traditionally placed, while still retaining functions conducive to truth? Is there a theoretically justifiable way for a 'post-metaphysical' or 'post-theological' subject to embody a way of life informed by those religious materials?

Initially focusing on the Death of God movement and its context in the form of Radical and Liberal theologies, I will then expand this line of inquiry to include thinkers within the Continental Materialist tradition, focusing in particular on the religion-related dimensions of the

systems proposed by François Laruelle and Alain Badiou. I will explore and evaluate the ways in which Christianity has served as a source of ideas, symbols, concepts and other ‘materials’ to be used in the formation of philosophical positions which draw upon the Christian tradition, and which at the same time are committed to the use of those Christian materials outside of the traditional disciplinary (and therefore also methodological) boundaries (Smith, 2010). These different ways may be incompatible with traditional Christian theological method of approaching those materials, or they may simply re-contextualise them in novel ways. My intention here is to illuminate that part of the field of philosophy of religion which seeks not only to philosophically describe religion, but which poses the relationship between those two realms of thought as a real and momentous problem, where philosophy and theology fold into each other and speak in the same voice as often as they are antagonistic towards each other.

In the following course of the thesis, I will move towards focusing particularly on one specific (if broad) issue arising from those philosophical reinterpretations of Christianity – the problem of the apparent ability of Christianity to generate certain philosophical (existential, anthropological, political) truths, despite these truths being produced or arrived at through processes of reflection on what are ultimately fictional notions. In other words, the problem here is the following – how is it possible that Christianity consists largely of fables (Badiou 2003), but it is upon those fictions that genuine truths are built? In foregrounding the question of the place of the concept of ‘fiction’ (explicit or implicit) in the formulations (discussed in the first chapter) of philosophical reinterpretations of Christianity, I draw attention to the ways in which the designation of a discourse as fictional does not genuinely settle the question of the truth of that discourse. In order to achieve that, I discuss various forms of religious fictionalist positions, arguing for a Continental expansion of fictionalism deriving from the works of the Cybernetic



Culture Research Unit and Quentin Meillassoux. Following that, I place this discussion in a broader context of Religious Studies, discussing the importance of fiction-based religions and non-theistic religion for these considerations, as well as noting the potential of religious fictionalism for a significant reconsideration of the very notion of 'religion'.

What my discussion of this topic seeks to illustrate is that a something like a truth-oriented form of religious fictionalism is a heuristically and analytically useful perspective through which to understand the processes of reinterpretation of religious materials in philosophical ways. The Death of God theologians and the Continental Materialists, unbeknown to themselves, are best described as operating implicitly with a certain kind of fictionalism in their philosophical backgrounds.

The pairing of those two 'traditions', that of the Death of God theology movement on the one hand and of contemporary Continental Materialist philosophy on the other, appears to me as a very fruitful occasion to rethink the relationship between 'religious' and 'philosophical' forms of thought, and to interrogate the construction of those very concepts as distinct yet deeply inter-related. These two traditions discussed in this thesis represent something of a symmetrical pair, construing the relationship between religion and philosophy in terms which are very close and formed by the same historical-intellectual processes, but diverging in significant ways in their use of theological and philosophical materials.. My contention here is that both 'movements' are not limited to the substantive propositions they put forward, on the nature of the world or the nature of theory-making, formation of identities, or any other number of topics. Beyond those, they represent wider meta-level positions on the relationship between religious and philosophical thought - not exhausting the many possibilities of formulating this relationship, nor as some sort of fundamental orientations based on irreducible terms, but as illustrative examples of tendencies

or dispositions both historically located and sufficiently abstract to warrant dialogic comparison. What I suggest here, furthermore, is that while the Death of God theology movement posits atheism as the problem of religion and uses of religion in strong terms, it is in fact the Continental Materialist philosophers discussed here who offer better conceptual resources to make possible some forms of Christian religious fictionalism.

## 1. Theology, Fictions, and Philosophical Uses of Religion

In the introduction, I have briefly introduced the thinkers who argued that the cultural-intellectual transformations and historical events between the onset of the Enlightenment and the end of World War II have led to a progressive weakening of the belief that there are such non-material entities as posited by traditional Abrahamic religious discourses, while at the same time seeing the discourses themselves as deeply implicated in those transformations themselves. Positive and negative, those new cultural realities meant the attempt on the part of some to formulate explicitly atheistic forms of Abrahamic religious thought, as a way to both account for the inexistence of God and to preserve the valuable elements of religious discourse, partly responsible itself for the dissolution of philosophical theism in the eyes of some, including on the part of Marxist philosophers such as Ernst Bloch (2009). Straddling denominational and religious boundaries, such proposals have been made also among Christian thinkers (working mostly in the Continental tradition) in the latter half of the past century. Grouped together under the headings of “Death of God theology” and “radical theology”, their work sought to reconcile Christianity with developments in contemporary philosophy, allowing for a sophisticated philosophical interpretation of traditional Christian resources while also dispensing with the perceived problematic (if not altogether untenable) belief in a theistic God (Altizer 1966).

This circle of “religion-friendly non-theism” was broadened in recent times by other Continental philosophers likewise seeking to negotiate both a non-theistic (including atheistic) stance, and a commitment to the philosophical fecundity of those religious materials. François Laruelle's (2010) work on 'Christo-fictions' explores the ways in which the figure of Christ could be universalised within his project of ‘non-philosophical’ critique of philosophy. Alain Badiou

(2003), partly against the grain of his own dismissal of religion, has written about Paul of Tarsus as the originator of a fully-fledged notion of a universal political subject, and a community organised around the lived truth of emancipation in faithfulness to the event of Christ's resurrection – this achievement losing nothing of its value despite Badiou's personal disbelief in this specific theological point. Giorgio Agamben (2013, e.g.) frames his messianic political philosophy in terms deeply conversant with Christian philosophical theology and political theology (together specifically with Christianity's practical dimension.) In the following course of this chapter, I will discuss the problems raised by Death of God theology, and the ways in which Alain Badiou and François Laruelle offer valuable ways to answer the question of how can religious discourse as fiction be used in the formulation of philosophical thinking.

### 1.1. Death of God theology

Death of God theology is, in some ways, only a particularly forceful form of what could be called its 'sister tradition', the secular theology movement, and an argument can be made that the former is simply a type of the latter. Both are committed to reinterpreting the Christian theological tradition, as well as the traditions of Christian practice, in light of the advancements in natural sciences and the humanities, as well as cultural transformation, in particular the rise of postmodern thought (Crockett, 2011, p.10). One may even place both on a wider (and somewhat older) scale of Liberal (Protestant) theology, in that both can be argued prioritise modern advances in the human sciences as providing a constantly improving epistemic framework within which to understand the purported central message of Christianity, even though some commentators have linked the movement also to the (explicitly anti-Liberal-theology) movement of Neo-Orthodoxy

as inaugurated by Karl Barth (Hamilton, 1965) and many treatments of this movement prefer to seek some affinity with liberation theology instead (e.g. Pinnock, 2014).

Where the radical nature of the Death of God theology movement lies is in its willingness to concede completely the truth of the assertion that God does not exist as the most intellectually rigorous and accurate description of the world as it is, while at the same time remaining committed to remaining within the tradition of Christian theological discourse (Hamilton, *op.cit.*) - while at the same time claiming that Christianity is not just a passive victim of this transformation in post-Enlightenment Western intellectual culture, to be discarded in proportion to the rejection of ontologies historically preferred in Western theological thinking. Rather, the Death of God movement stands for the position that it is in fact Christianity itself which culminates in an atheist and materialist position (*ibid.*), and a political perspective which shares many preoccupations with a Marxist/leftist political orientation (Pinnock, *op.cit.*).

Here, I would argue, is what distinguishes it from the broader secular and liberal theology milieu, the thinkers of which would still adhere to some form of realist, non-materialist understanding of at least the notion of God, even as they might, like Rudolph Bultmann (1962) argue for the need to dispense with (or demythologise) the traditional poetic, metaphorical accretions which have too long clouded Christian theology and which, formulated as they were in a pre-modern intellectual framework, are effectively counterproductive in the post-Enlightenment secular modernity, obscuring the real, existential import of the Christian message. In other words, the secular/liberal theologies of the 20th century would argue that the progress in human sciences (philosophy included) requires a rethinking of Christianity in terms of the secular culture which came to surround it in the Western world, while still retaining some extent of realist, non-materialist notions of God at the very least – theological language may be in need of scaling down

of its traditional claim to describe metaphysical realities, but there are still some supernatural entities (God at the very least) which can be successfully referred to by the religious discourse.

As such, the secular-liberal tradition effectively accomplishes a kind of compromise with its perceived philosophical interlocutors, or even just a kind of defence at the last moment of the triumphant march of Enlightenment thought. Christianity is preserved, but the area where a realist notion of God is applicable has shrunk in size considerably. In a situation like this, it is possible to preserve the general sense in which a religious discourse is truth-producing; the scope of it is smaller, but it does not suffer a mortal wound. On the other hand, the Death of God theology movement implies something more radical, a more thoroughgoing disassembly of the fundamental metaphysics which have governed the history of philosophical theology since Late Antiquity (Hamilton, 1961). The Death of God is, in a significant sense, a kind of wound to the very possibility of the view that religious discourse is fundamentally capable of producing truths.

Poetic as this language may be, the situation being metaphorically described as a wound, it is not entirely coincidental that Thomas J.J. Altizer's (2003) recent theologico-philosophical work is, in fact, on Nothingness, and illustrates well the concerns and methods of the Death of God theology tradition. Despite some theological antecedents which Altizer mentions, there is not in fact any particularly strong religious precedent for preoccupation with this problem, save perhaps obliquely by some mystical traditions (op.cit, p.xi). The problem is framed more in terms of the philosophical and poetic concerns of the author, rather than as something fundamentally important for Christian theology as a historical tradition. At the same time, for Altizer as for other Death of God theologians, it is Christian thought which offers uniquely appropriate discourse to think the death God, and other problems of modernity (Altizer, 1966). But the place of theology is not at all

a given, but needs to be negotiated again precisely because of the same transformations which it is so uniquely placed to probe and explain (Altizer, op.cit.)

It can be therefore argued that there are two main things occurring in the Death of God theology movement and its treatment of Christian intellectual heritage. The first of those is a somewhat surprising extent to which entirely secular philosophical materials are used to formulate narratives in the radical theology tradition. At the same time, there is clearly a sense in which traditional Christian theology (philosophical and otherwise) forms a kind of indispensable background for the progressive secularisation and 'atheisation' of Western thought over the past centuries, and so also for the kind of theology discussed here which seeks to explicitly formulate itself on the premise that those secularising processes embody a historical process of realisation of certain truths about the world and human condition. It is thus a background both in the sense of being part of the origin of secularisation and radical theology, and in the sense of remaining an interlocutor for Death of God theology.

An supporting argument for the secularising philosophical implications of orthodox Christian doctrine, one very much consonant with the Death of God theology in its assessment of its role in the secularization process despite an opposite evaluation of the problem, has been offered by French Orientalist and scholar of Islamic philosophy, Henry Corbin. Representing a school of thought radically opposite to the Death of God theology movement, Corbin's theology presented a generously ecumenical mixture of Lutheran Biblical hermeneutics and Ismaili Shia metaphysical theory (Cheetham, 2003). In positing strongly the need for theology to be deeply committed to the transcendence of God, he stands in nearly the opposite spectrum of Christian thought in comparison to the Death of God theologians, committed as they are to developing a theology focused on immanence (Altizer, 1966). What Corbin sought as a great problem to the preservation

of transcendence in the West is the very doctrine of the incarnation of God in Jesus, in that by ‘drawing down’ God into historical time, in making the revelation of God a historical event, it has effectively sacralised history and the secular time according to which this history and all of its events are measured (Cheetham, op.cit.). Christianity itself can therefore be held responsible for the introduction of the secular into itself, and the progressive shedding of specifically theological and material content by Western cultural discourses can from this point of view be seen as merely a more extensive realization of this dynamic inaugurated by Christian doctrine itself.

## 1.2. Continental Materialism

### I. François Laruelle

In this context, the works of Alain Badiou and François Laruelle appear as unusual conversation partners for Christian theology, and to those two thinkers I now turn. There is some amount of irony in putting them together as exemplars of a similar principle, considering Laruelle's staunch opposition to Badiou's philosophical project as - in effect, if not by design - deeply inimical to the values of democracy of thought and the thinking subject's freedom to engage philosophy without subjugation to restrictive meta-philosophical positions (Laruelle 2013). Laruelle's own theoretical project is in English translation termed non-philosophy, but despite slight revolutionary overtones in the original (*sans-philosophie*, 'without-philosophy', a nod perhaps to the *sans-culottes*, 'without-culottes', a radical wing of the French Revolution, as played on by Vahanian, 2006) and a sense of negation in the translation, it is best understood as (and is alternatively termed) non-standard philosophy, which Laruelle likens to the relations between Euclidean and non-euclidean geometry (Laruelle 2003). What Laruelle means by this is that what he aims to articulate is a specific form of engagement with philosophical materials, one which



modifies the fundamental axioms on which Laruelle claims traditional philosophy is based. Much like non-Euclidean geometry rejecting a basic geometrical axiom of the non-meeting of infinite parallel lines but still remaining within the bounds of geometry as such, Laruelle's non-philosophy can be seen as simply an articulation of the principles (and consequences) of a non-standard meta-philosophical theory. The particular axiom which Laruelle believes is fundamental to most philosophical thought, and which he rejects, is the 'principle of sufficient philosophy' (Smith, 2013). What this means is that philosophy claims for itself a position of oversight above all forms of thought above all domains of the world, that it considers itself to be uniquely qualified to establish the proper theoretical conditions for other disciplines, and that it effectively universalises its scope and method as uniquely adequate to think the relations between the subject and the world (ibid.). In the original French, this principle has two similar formulations, both connoting a sense of arrogance and self-satisfaction on the part of philosophy (Blake 2012).

What is quite striking (and not focused on nearly as often as it could) is that Laruelle consistently suggests 'fictions' as a useful category through which to conceptualise the method of theoretical production proper to his non-philosophical project. When discussing philosophy of art through the lens of photography, the non-philosophical response to philosophical art-theory practice is termed 'photo-fictions' (Laruelle 2015). When discussing mysticism, here the call is for 'mystic-fictions' and similar formulations as ways in which one can reconfigure one's way of thinking about the world and therefore have something like an experience of pure (but immanent) being, in ways which would have deep existential (and even political) implications (Dubilet 2015). Laruelle's more in-depth discussion of the possibilities for non-philosophical interpretation as available in religious materials calls those reinterpretations 'Christo-fictions' (Laruelle 2010). Exactly what form should those fictions take is not necessarily entirely clear; Laruelle's project is

almost entirely meta-philosophical and purely abstract, the thinker remarking once that he should disown his work if ever shown "an example of an example" (Brassier 2003). Still, he suggests elsewhere that non-philosophy in practice uses 'philo-fictions', which are to philosophy what science-fiction is to science (Smith, 2016). Despite the somewhat general terms in which Laruelle describes his ideas, there are still clear preferences visible in his use of religious materials – namely, his preferred religious tradition is Gnosticism, which he considers to be not substantively a purveyor of particularly fecund religious concepts, but as an inherently heretical and critical form of Christian thought, for which reason it is also the form of Christian discourse most closely similar to his own philosophical project (ibid.)

Laruelle's interest in Christianity leads him to consider the figure of Christ as something like a generic name for the very humanity of human beings, a basic form of subjectivity, released from concepts and identifications which would cloud this basic reality of humanity (Laruelle 2010). As indicated above, throughout his work, the ways in which those figures and concepts derived from his favoured sources are to be used are called fictions, and Laruelle calls those engaged with non-philosophical projects to modify (or 'mutate') the narratives and conceptual structures in order to formulate more liberatory and more immanent ways of thinking about the world, free from the arrogance implied by the principle of sufficient philosophy (ibid.).

## II. Alain Badiou

It would be far outside the scope of this thesis to discuss in depth all the interconnections between philosophical and religious or theological sources and concepts which Badiou uses in the formulation of his very ambitious project. What for Badiou is at stake in his work is nothing less than a re-founding of the basis for philosophy in a mathematicised ontology (Phelps, 2013, p.14),

and then spelling out the practical dimensions which follow from the person seeking to orient themselves in the world using Badiou's concept of truth procedures (op.cit., p.87-89).

It is an important first point to note that the question of the death of God forms an important part of the conceptual background of Badiou's work. What this means for Badiou is not simply that the intellectual transformations in Western thought have brought about the end of a certain metaphysical form of philosophical theology, true as it may be, but more importantly, that the possibility has been removed of an experience of life and meaning as rooted in a transcendental reality, and as experienced personally and powerfully by a person constituted as a subject in that encounter (op.cit., pp.4-6). The development of philosophical theology and a robust metaphysical understanding of God has, in fact, been fundamentally contrary to the kind of thinking about God as inaugurated by Badiou's favourite, Paul of Tarsus (Badiou, 2003). In Badiouian terms, the development of a metaphysical doctrine of God has effectively emptied the notion of God out of its ability to effect radical subjectification of the person in relation to God; the more abstract the God, the more philosophically circumscribed, the less God was to play a role in the life of a believer, less able to be a demand on the person and to make possible a radical transformation of an individual into a subject of truth (Pheps, *ibid.*).

Thus Christianity, as a complex network of discourses (theological, philosophical – even anti-philosophical, in the sense of a tradition of deep and radical critique of the claims of philosophy) is partly complicit in the orchestration of its own demise. That transformation in Western intellectual culture which is designated by the name of the death of God brings about an experience of being in the world different than a basic kind of atheism. What is experienced by a modern Western thinker is not just an 'absence of experience of God', but the 'experience of the absence of God' (*ibid.*). One could put in the following terms - so much of Western philosophical

thinking has been so deeply enmeshed with the notion of God, both in terms of metaphysics and beyond, that the death of God shakes this entire large cultural structure, requiring a deep rethinking of the very fundamental building blocks of the philosophical enterprise. This dissipation of religiosity is so thorough that Badiou refuses to consider contemporary fundamentalist movements as in any particularly meaningful way a form of religiosity, describing them rather as political systems which use religious imagery and narratives with no real 'religious' intent (Badiou, 2003). This sense of an end of an entire philosophical tradition is what moves Badiou to embark on his project to formulate his own radical ontology, as a much needed attempt to fund the philosophical enterprise on new conceptual ground. Again, the details of Badiou's fundamental ontology are not crucially important for the argument of this thesis; the importance of Badiou's philosophy lies, in my opinion, rather in two of its aspects: 1) in that Badiou proposes a staunchly materialist ontology, one which avowedly denies reality and explanatory power to religious thought in his earlier period, but which then 2) turns to religion to find in it ample philosophical material, to be re-categorised and reinterpreted, and able to expand the horizons of both religious discourse and of materialist philosophy, even as theology is considered in terms of fiction.

That religious materials, specifically those which are considered to be 'fables' (Badiou 2003, p.4), should have such an expansive power is in some ways unexpected in terms of Badiou's earlier philosophical work. The new ontological ground, and the consequences it has for what counts as properly philosophical modes of thought, is established partly against theology and theological modes of thought. In discussing those thinkers in the Western canon who would otherwise be considered theological, Badiou is aware that there is something perhaps a little bit unexpected about basically ignoring the category of 'religiousness' and reading figures such as

Kierkegaard, Pascal and even Paul of Tarsus in a way which simply does not utilise this category as crucial to the philosophical uses of their thought (op.cit, p.5).

This complicated relationship of philosophy to theology in general, and of Badiou's specific philosophical project to Christian thought, can perhaps then be characterised as at least on one level a kind of turn away from religion. But as soon as this fundamental mathematics-oriented ontology becomes fleshed out, Badiou launches into what may be characterised as a turn to religion (Phelps, op.cit.). His seminal and creative work on Paul of Tarsus starts with an adamant insistence that what matters to the contemporary philosopher is not at all Paul as a religious figure, but rather as primarily a thinker, a true theoretician, of universality and of the subject being constituted in his or her particularity in a way which problematizes discourses prevalent in Paul's time (Badiou 2003).

The crucial point in Badiou's analysis of Paul is that it is the Resurrection which allows for Paul to develop the concept of a universal political subject, but that this truth is made possible by the insistence on an event which has not, as far as Badiou believes, occurred (op.cit.) That Paul would, on the basis of misapprehension of reality, develop some interesting discourse on the basis of that misapprehension, or have some incidentally correct things to say about certain things despite being fundamentally wrong – this would be an interesting topic for a historian of religion, but that is not what is at stake here. Rather, the real claim in Badiou's work here is that an utter *fiction* has allowed Paul to develop a profoundly *true* discourse about the nature of universal political subjectivity. And from that initial fiction there flows a discourse which Badiou finds very illuminative of not just the fact that the political subject can be universal, but also some of the more detailed notions, such as Paul's insistence on the importance of the Son (and of the 'filial' nature

of the ethical/political subject) after what amounts to a dismissal of the Father after the act of the sending of the Son (ibid.).

### 1.3. Limits of reinterpretation

The degree to which non-theistic religion is a justifiable possibility is effectively what is explicitly at stake in the Death of God theology movement. The problem encountered, at least in the first instance, by the Continental Materialist thinkers is arguably best understood as that of accounting for the power of religious discourse, symbols, concepts to effectuate philosophical truth, despite those narratives and conceptual structures positing as fundamental to their project entities and events which are inadmissible (as impossible) in the materialist framework. In Badiou's and Laruelle's work, as much as it is for Thomas Altizer, William Hamilton or Gabriel Vahanian, there is a number of shared preoccupations, coalescing around the basic problem of the extent to which traditional religious discourses can be used in a post-metaphysical philosophy.

It is important to note that not all post-metaphysical philosophies are alike, and that the same processes which make an atheistic position preferable in the view of some thinkers are also opening up certain previously unthought-of theological possibilities in the perspective of others. Gianni Vattimo (2013), for example, finds that the dissolution of traditional metaphysical theology, and of traditional onto-theological way of thinking (to use Heidegger's language) in general, is precisely the moment where faith in the existence of some kind of being which responds to the name of God is again possible. In this view, the death of God would be an illusion, a deconstruction of a badly-wrought simulacrum of the Deity, which – thanks in large part to Heidegger – we now know is not the kind of entity to *be*, or at least not to be in such a way as to

be liable to die. In distinction to this, the Death of God movement and Continental materialists provide a good example of how religious discourse can be reinterpreted in a situation of the definite inexistence of God.

The problem of the kinds of reinterpretations which are possible under a radically altered ontology hinges, to my mind, on the precise nature of what kind of religious materials are to be used in this philosophical reinterpretation. Religion as a lived reality, theoretical as well as practical (if the difference is to be upheld), is a multidimensional phenomenon; a classic theory of religion, that of Ninian Smart (1989), counts seven of those dimensions: ritual, mythological, doctrinal, ethical, social, experiential and material. The dimensions may overlap, sharing elements between two or more dimensions – doctrinal components of a religious systems can be to some degree coextensive with mythological ones (e.g. where the doctrine of creation of some entity is phrased in terms of a narrative of that creation). One can argue that, for us as Western and as inheritors of Protestant-Catholic polemics which gave prominence to a text- and doctrine-oriented understanding of religion (first a self-understanding, then secularised into text-privileging theories of religions), the text and the concept are pre-eminent in our experience and theory of religion. Concepts are, in any case, arguably more clearly defined and more immediately reinterpretable in abstract terms (or at least applicable in domains other than the original context) than texts. The open-ended nature of Christian texts is borne out by the history of intra-Christian debate; to move a text from a ‘theological register’ to a ‘philosophical register’ may in fact compound the number of interpretative choices which will have to be made in order to ‘secularise’ a text. This depends, to a large extent, on the hermeneutic methods employed by the reader of those religious resources (precisely the question of which parts of the text refer to what kinds of entities, for example) and on the philosophical accounting for those resources on the part of the potential non-theistic

religious practitioner – are they best understood by means of feminist critique, or Marxist class critique, or perhaps through the lenses of existentialist thought?

The problem is not easily resolved by moving away from the texts to some other part of the religious phenomenon. There are problems of what is essential or epiphenomenal to religion, of what is more inherently religious and what is a social reality in which religiousness ‘resides’ and is expressed, without being reducible to religion as such. An attentiveness not just to the precise religious sources, but also to the multiform formulations of ‘religion’ as such, may help one avoid the pitfalls otherwise awaiting those theoreticians who forget that definitions of religion are construed with certain implicit philosophical presuppositions, often undisclosed to the person providing the definition and biased towards particular hermeneutic philosophical decisions.

#### 1.4. Conclusion

One might argue that what Death of God theology privileges as its source material is not so much those kinds of surface-level elements of religion. Rather, in its choice of concepts with which to proceed in theological reasoning, a large part of its work depends on and elaborates not so much particular substantive theological propositions, but on what are the perceived philosophical (or in other words, more abstract, less clearly traditional) conceptual structures operative in Christianity. The religion itself is understood more in terms of a dynamic process of progressive thought, of some abstract and formal principles which guide the process of thinking, rather than in terms of any substantive narratives, symbols or definite concepts.

One aspect of the uses of theological materials on the part of materialist philosophical thinkers and movements which makes is particularly interesting is that this sort of borrowing



problematizes both foundationalist and coherentist theories of knowledge, or at least of formulation of consistent theoretical structures. If Christian theology offers to the materialist reader some truth, if there are some Christian propositions which can be restated differently but which do pronounce some sort of truth, then to the degree that they can be said to do so, it stands to reason that there are other statements which form the framework within which those particular Christian theological statements can be discovered to be true. In other words, there is a chain of justification, by virtue of which those statements can be reasonably said to be true. This seems to be largely the case for Christian theological reasoning, barring the possibility of direct mystical insight – and even then not without problems, since the mystical traditions within Christianity are often epistemologically minimalist and even skeptical, in the sense of reticence towards the notion of there being any propositional knowledge to be gained from a mystical experience, and preferring to characterise this experience as a kind of 'unknowing' (Yadav, 2016). In speaking of purported realities beyond direct, universal (or universally accessible) experience, they rely on the process of transmission, reflection and clarification, or at least textual justification.

This, however, is where interpretations from outside of this framework encounter the problem of justification. For a Christian thinker, a Christian theological statement can be said to be true by virtue of its coherence with or of its being founded on other theological statements considered to be true. To use Gellner's distinction, one can say that the theological tradition offers both substantive truths, and a procedure or methodology of arriving at and justifying other substantive propositions. For a thinker outside of this tradition, this chain of justification is not operative.

The reading strategies which I discuss in this chapter provide important contributions to the debates about the viability of religious fictionalism, in that part of their formulation (sometimes

more significantly than in other cases) is an attentiveness to the way in which discourses and narratives which can be called ‘fictional’ are an important part of establishing what truth does (or can) religion speak. In this way, they are emphasising (or leading one to emphasise) what I would call a truth-conducive nature of fictions – the ability of fictional religious material to precipitate what, in the mind of the interpreter, is a genuine discovery of a truth.

In the case of Badiou’s thought (constructivist with respect to truth), it may be less of a propositional truth, and more of a ‘truth-practice’ which aims to perform some of the possibilities of the subject, rather than just simply describe the person or the world she inhabits. Those religious materials which allow for, or even lead to, such disclosures of truth are therefore – in the theoretical formulations discussed in this thesis – effective despite being considered fictional. In this way, the recent Continental materialist theological and philosophical reformulations of Christian intellectual heritage offers ample reasons for reconsidering fictionalist positions. Religious fictionalism therefore offers a fruitful perspective from which to evaluate the ways in which religious resources can be used by non-theistic thinkers, and when pressed far enough, to problematize some of the boundary-making between religion, philosophy, theology etc., even the very category of ‘religion’ itself.

## 2. Religious Fictionalism

As it has been argued in the previous chapter, the problem of the relationship between religious and philosophical concepts, ideas, symbols etc. rests largely, for the thinkers discussed above, on the problem of the relationship between truths and fictions. To restate the problem briefly - in the formulation of both Continental Materialist and Radical Theology positions use is made of religious language and religion-derived conceptual (and/or symbolic) structures, and this use proceeds by processes of abstraction and reinterpretation of those religious materials. This leads to the formulation of ideas, conceptual structures etc. which are then perceivedly secular, removed from the immediate theological context in which they were initially formulated, and applicable within philosophical discourse without being tied to the truth-claims of other elements of the original religious tradition. But that process of reinterpretation (even 'purification' perhaps?) arguably implies that there is a certain degree of truth already 'in' the religious source materials, existing simultaneously with a degree of fiction (e.g. ethical truth expressed in the context of metaphysical doctrine).

To give an example: a religious narrative or doctrine may ostensibly speak of certain purported metaphysical realities, but fail to successfully describe reality – e.g. the Catholic doctrine of Trinity aiming to offer a realist account of the personal and multiplicitous nature of God, but failing to do so in absence of God. And yet, as some have suggested (Grenz, 2000, p.67), this doctrine may be viewed as referring successfully to truths in a different domain – e.g., speaking rather a certain truth about certain anthropological realities of living in communion with others,

where the Trinity is can be viewed as rather a metaphor for how fundamental relationality is for the experience of being human. Holding that relationality is fundamental to being human does not require one to use the Trinity as a fictional device which describes relationality and emphasises its importance by elevating it to Divinity itself. However, if this truth of relationality is arrived at by the means of the doctrine of the Trinity in such a way that the mediation of the doctrine made possible the realisation of the anthropological truth, then it would seem warranted to say that to some degree, the fiction of the Trinity (fiction, for it fails to describe the metaphysical realities it ostensibly seeks to describe) already held within it the anthropological truth.

## 2.1. Antecedents

Fictionalism is an umbrella term which designates a number of diverse positions in epistemology and philosophy of language, positions which consider that some discourses, in some instances or occasion, may be best understood as fiction, while also affirming that those fictions are useful for some purposes and therefore should not be dismissed as ‘just fictions’ (Eklund, 2015). A classic formulation of this position can be found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Hans Vaihinger, who brought together a number of preceding fiction theoreticians to argue that much of human discourse in general consists of fictions, that is, concepts and propositions which are unlike the reality they seek to describe, but are for some purposes useful to hold as guideposts to navigating the world (Fine 1993). There are considerable differences between different positions classified under the category of fictionalism, and it would be beyond the scope of this thesis to engage all of those various forms. Some variants of fictionalism, like instrumentalism (Eklund, op.cit.) which contends that all religious language is implicitly but perhaps undisclosedly intended as fictionalist by religious speakers themselves (that speakers merely pretend to say something

about word), are also beyond the scope of this thesis, due to their implausibility. The imputation of some underlying and undisclosed epistemology to all persons who appear to intend their religious discourse in a realist fashion seems slightly too speculative.

Specifically religious forms of fictionalism are not without venerable historical antecedents, coming from within religious traditions themselves as well as from (a relative) outside. A classic example of something like a fictionalist position with respect to religious language is the distinction, present in Judaism and Christianity alike, between different levels of textual meaning (Villeneuve, 2016). One possible list of those levels of meaning would, for example, be: literal, analogical or metaphorical (where the text refers to something else that its ostensible, literal meaning, by virtue of simile), typological (where the text refers one person or event to another person or event), moral (where the text illustrates a moral lesson even if the apparent surface meaning of the narrative is concerned not with ethics as such).

In some respects the Jewish hermeneutic framework uses a more sophisticated and nuanced scheme, or at least one more clearly suited to the interpretation of texts, in that the literal level of meaning (*peshat*) designates a level of meaning *according to the literary genre and form (the letter in arguably a stricter sense) of the text* (Lancaster, 2003, p.37). In other words - by Jewish hermeneutical standards, it is possible to interpret a piece of Biblical poetry literally, which means to interpret the poem in keeping with the genre of the poem, without imputing any historical reality to the events described. By contrast, one could argue that in terms of the language used in Christianity (and in wider Western culture, as extension of this tradition by virtue of its historical importance in shaping secular hermeneutics), one is more likely to say that to interpret something literally is to interpret it as happening in a physical and historical sense. To illustrate the difference, imagine a rabbi and a pastor, both of whom hold a high theology of Biblical inspiration (one where

a supernatural agency is involved in the formulation of the Biblical text), and whose hermeneutic framework includes the notion of the literal sense. In conversation, both agree that the book of Bereshit/Genesis ought to be interpreted literally (not exclusively so, but inclusively of that level). Despite this agreement, both religious leaders may have radically different ideas about whether the text even seeks to describe any detail of the physical process of the development of the universe. The point here is not just that there are theologically justified diversity of meanings and reference domains which can be attributed to texts, and that different religious traditions may have different notions about how the internal diversity of an interpretative framework should look like. It is also to point out that the crucial term (the literal) in many contemporary debates about the truth of religious discourse can in fact be understood in significantly divergent ways.

For the sake of the argument here, I take fictionalism in the sense relevant to the subject matter as the position that 1) a certain discourse D is best understood as a kind of fiction, and that 2) this fiction and the use thereof have attached to them certain positive value(s). Here I wish to depart from Hans Vaihinger's fictionalist theory, in that Vaihinger seems to put a too definite of a break between the real and fictions (Fine, op.cit.), whereas it would seem to me as more reasonable to allow that fictions may not be completely unlike the real. This second part of this definition, broad as it may be in order to allow a wide range of attributions of value, I consider to be important in allowing one to distinguish between fictionalism and other kinds of anti-realism or epistemic scepticism, and as more directly pointing out that fictions in fictionalist sense are considered not in term of error theories. It seems more appropriate to say that rather than considering fictions as solely and completely erroneous, fictionalism implies that there is some positive value (for example, pragmatic, instrumental use-value) which explains and/or justifies the existence and engagement with those fictions.

## 2.2. Limits of 'religion'

The first basic problem, as far as I would see the issue, which a religious fictionalist ought to address, is the question of why would religious discourses be singled out as a category of discourses to be interpreted in a fictionalist way. The category of 'religion' as such has a long and complex history, one in which deeply embedded is a variety of political, social and cultural factors shaping the category (Stack et al., 2015). Even in the field of religious studies, arguably coming into its own as a separate discipline precisely in the moment of a critical realisation that essentialist concepts of religion are better complemented by a wider and more socio-historically sensitive theories of religion, some voices have advocate for the abandonment of the concept of 'religion' altogether (Smith, 1991). If the concept of 'religion' is admitted as an adequate analytic category for the understanding of some cultural phenomena, there still remains a question of which of the wide range of cultural materials and structures (beliefs, practices, institutions etc.) which share a family resemblance between each other are to be placed in the category of 'religion', and which should be placed elsewhere (especially, even though this is a different consideration, if the category is exclusive).

This may not necessarily be fully settled by singling out the purported supernatural elements in religious discourse as the material to be interpreted as fiction. This category of elements is, for reasons which are quite clear, the prime target for 'fictionalisation' by the Death of God theologians and Continental Materialists. There are, however, other kinds of realities (moral or historical, for example) which religious discourses speak of, and a robust religious fictionalist position would account for that internal diversification of religious materials inside a discourse.

On my definition of the scope and limits of fictionalism, as outlined in the beginning of this section, there is a degree of implicit positive valorisation of the discourse interpreted in a fictionalist way, at the same time as there is as limits are placed on its ability to describe its objects. Why this matters for religious fictionalism is that the broader consequences of this treatment of religious discourses as a category may be a kind of privileging of this category against other categories of discourse, a privileging which may be seen for other reasons as problematic. If, for example, the value of a fictional discourse lies in its social utility, then one may argue that there are very real criteria for establishing the usefulness of particular practices, behaviours etc. Declaring a religious discourse with a blanket statement as socially useful does not sufficiently distinguish between aspects of the discourse which may have beneficial social effects, and those which have problematic effects.

### 2.3. Fictions and their uses

I believe that one of the more concise and to-the-point formulations of contemporary Analytic fictionalism has been developed by Eshleman (2010) in conversation with and partly in response on the pages of *Religious Studies* to Cordry (2010). Eshleman's formulation of fictionalist theory of religion can be summarised as follows: religious discourses fail to refer to purported transcendental beings which they propose, but despite this, they retain the character of useful fictions which allow for the expression of ideals embodied in this religious discourse, and are useful in helping one to embody this ideal in community with others.

It would appear to me that Eshleman is perhaps slightly hasty in settling the issue of the truth of religious language by opting for an error theory of religious discourse (Eshleman, *op.cit*, p.92). The distinction he makes is between assertions about non-existent God (assertions which



are false) and non-asserting (but rather expressive or instrumental) elements in a religious discourse which are for that reason not false. It would seem to me that it is entirely possible to consider this a neat distinction, if religious discourse were very attentive to using very careful language according to those different (assertive, expressive and instrumental) purposes. However, it seems more accurate to say that in the realities of actual performance of religious language, any given statement or expression of religious discourse may embody more than one of those different functions which Eshleman distinguishes. Furthermore, an expression of religious ideal may be in fact dependent in its formulation or justification on a metaphysical assertion; or, a metaphysical assertion may include in it an expression of some values. And beyond this, a religious discourse may assert non-metaphysical truths; are those immediately to be considered false (and therefore fictional) if those assertions are linked with metaphysical truths? What if a metaphysical assertion embodies a true assertion about non-metaphysical realities? The point here is not to dispute Eshleman's distinctions, which are relatively neat categories by means of which to distinguish various uses of religious discourse, but rather to suggest that these distinctions may not necessarily overlap with different possible categorisations of religious discourse in terms of its ability to embody some forms of truth-conducive materials.

My critique here is that Eshleman extends his (negative) judgment on the truth-value of religious language further than the internal diversity of religious discourses would justify. If it is not the case that there is any such entity as would correspond to the theological notion of God, then religious discourse about God is, indeed, erroneous in terms of the ontological state of affairs it seeks to (but fails to) describe. It is not the case, however, that religious discourse is exclusively about God. Setting aside the immense diversity of religions, it is not the case even in the specific case of Christianity. Various forms of Christian theological discourse seek to refer to historical

and non-supernatural entities and events, both purported (like the resurrection of Jesus insofar as it is considered to be an event occurring to a material person and in history) by standards of modern historical and Biblical studies, and actual (like the millenarian preaching missions of Jesus and Paul). The historicity of the persons and events has not historically been without contestation, but if evidence of their existence is admitted, then the Christian religious discourse is intimately tied with historical realities, and the relationship between history and metaphysics within that discourse needs to be given more conscious elaboration.

In other words, a theological discourse can - and the Christian theological discourse does - refer to various different classes of entities, forming a unified language about a mixture of referents, both fictional and (by perfectly agreeable evidentiary standards) real. The criteria by which one distinguishes between real and fictional entities, and thus ascribes fictionality to some of the entities referred to in religious discourses, are the same criteria by which one is bound to accept the reality of some parts of religious discourses (at least for the reason that religions are real historical phenomena, and are not without self-reflective about their own status as perfectly real and tangible, regardless of whether they may be more mysterious phenomena which they otherwise prefer to focus on and in light of which the practitioners interpret the experiential realities).

One may thus argue that it may not be possible to be a 'pure religious fictionalist' in the sense of ascribing a global fictional status to all parts of religious discourses. In this way, the question of the truth of religious discourse is opened up again for the religious fictionalist. The realisation of the complexities of reference in religious discourses does not invalidate the religious fictionalist position, but it does force it to consider again not just that some parts of religious discourses are best understood in realist terms, but that part of a sufficiently developed fictionalist

position would be to classify which parts of a religious discourse should be placed in which category, and to account for the relationship between those differently categorised parts.

One could respond to this by saying that there are indeed non-fictional parts of a religious discourse, but that by virtue of the construction of the theological tradition in which they are presented, those non-fictional elements are interpreted in light of fictional parts. It is that re-description of the non-fictional in light of the fictional (say, the concept of God) which makes the non-fictional elements cohere with the fictional ones, and that it is only that re-description which makes a discourse properly religious. To give an example: one could argue that it is a historical fact that in the Late Antique (or Early Medieval) period in the Arabian Peninsula there appeared a leader claiming to proclaim a message from God, but this is a historical discourse, about which one can be perfectly realist. Those historical facts become part of religious discourse by virtue of being reinterpreted in relation to the notion of God, which is a fiction. The same facts can be subject to many different discourses, and therefore the discourse which seeks to interpret them through the lens of the posited (but fictitious) existence of God is often termed to be specifically religious or theological. One may therefore argue that religious discourse is religious not on the basis of the subject matter (which may be in fact largely historical), but rather on the centrality and interpretative power it gives to the fictional religious elements in the overall internally diverse system.

#### 2.4. Preferability of fictions and the criterion of community

Another aspect of religious fictionalism which bears some focus is the question of the preferability of fictions. What are the grounds on which to distinguish which fictions are preferable over others? If all religious systems postulating divinity equally fail to refer to any such reality

(which is not there in the world), then it would not be a question of minimizing the amount of fictional material as far as the metaphysical propositions are concerned. That in itself would be an interesting criterion – perhaps the preferable fiction would be the ‘thinnest’ one, a religious system which includes as much true (in a realist sense) propositional content and as little fictional content as possible. In this way, perhaps a form of Liberal Protestantism is preferable, from a religious fictionalist’s point of view, to a form of Folk Catholicism. A religious fictionalist subscribing to a minimal, ‘thin’ fiction would have the advantage (under some criteria) of their worldview being minimally fictionalist and maximally realist. On the other hand, if ‘fiction’ is a valuable category to begin with, then minimalizing fictional material in one’s worldview would not be necessarily a positive decision. In this way, a religious fictionalist perspective on non-theistic religion raises the ‘formal’ problem of the ‘amount’ of fictions preferable in one’s religious system.

In addition to this, there is also a more ‘substantive’ problem of which fictions are to be preferred over other fictions. A common argument (if not an assumption) in the literature is a pragmatic one – insofar as there is value in a religious form of life, it is derived to a large extent from the communal aspect of religion, and so that fiction is of particular value which can be practiced communally by the religious fictionalist. This means that in the West, the primary choice for such a communal form of life will likely be Christianity. But this does not resolve the problem of whether Christianity as a fiction is inherently more preferable to, say, Korean Shamanism as a fiction. The latter may be less accessible, geographically as well as culturally, but unless this is an explicit criterion, it does not resolve the question of on what grounds are certain fictions to be preferred over others. Eshleman (op.cit.) identifies this communal criterion as important, and one can argue that the desire to be part of a community is a good reason to engage with a religious discourse as a fictionalist, in that it allows for cultural continuity between one’s culture of

upbringing and one's current state, thus making possible a deeper interpretation of one's cultural heritage in a setting which makes it possible to realise the uses of religious fictions more fully than an individual effort.

## 2.5. Alternative fictionalisms

One might argue that the strength (or at least a measure of cleverness) of the theological and philosophical reinterpretations of Christianity outlined in the previous chapter lies partly in the fact that those formulations largely side-step the problems with setting the boundaries between discourses and categories implied in a fully-fledged form of a specifically religious fictionalist position. I would argue that in this way, those reinterpretations do warrant the designation of religious fictionalism, even if they may not explicitly deal with all the details which a self-consciously religious fictionalist position ought to account for.

A corollary of this evaluation – that the thinkers discussed in the first chapter can be described as fictionalist, or at least approximating a fictionalist position – is that a self-conscious adoption of a religious fictionalist position might present the thinker adopting it with a more detailed set of questions about the nature of their on engagement with religious materials, and a clearer view on the mechanics of the relationship between religion, fictional and the possible referents of those fictions. In other words, religious fictionalism can operate as an heuristic tool useful to point of more detailed issues arising from treating religious discourses as types of fiction.

I now turn to the work of CCRU and of Quentin Meillassoux in order to describe two possible additional dimensions to religious fictionalism, which I term 'proleptic fictionalism' and 'aleatory fictionalism' respectively.

## I. Hyperstition

An interesting new articulation of the role of fictions as able to lead to the discovery of (or even production of) truth, and therefore a theory important for the kind of fictionalist reflection on religion which I am advocating in this thesis, has been proposed in recent years by the now-defunct group of University of Warwick academics, centred around the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit led by the feminist thinker Sadie Plant and (now largely infamous, due to his political philosophy development) philosopher Nick Land. In its collaborative work, the CCRU proposed the concept of ‘hyperstition’, which can perhaps be described as a narrative or a complex idea which speaks of an object in the real world without there existing any referent for it, but which by its creation and re-articulations, brings about the formation of some objects which start to correspond to this idea (CCRU, 2015). Important here is that agency is attributed to the process and the hyperstitional object themselves, rather than to agents which may deliberately decide to create such entities in the world as would correspond to the idea. This theory has also clear reference to religion; as CCRU puts it,

*“According to the tenets of Hyperstition, there is no difference between a universe, a religion, and a hoax. All involve an engineering of manifestation, or practical fiction, that is ultimately unworthy of belief. Nothing is true, because everything is under production.”*  
(op.cit.)

Implicit in this perspective are certain ontological and epistemological commitments which take postmodern relativism to a radical extent. In common with some of the more popular iterations of postmodern reflection, there is certainly a considerable amount of hype around this concept (hype being accounted for by CCRU as in fact one of the principal means of the hyperstitional self-production), especially in philosophically-oriented artistic circles (where the concept is, by design, indeed most at home). In any case, what is important in this notion is the emphasis it places

on the temporal aspect of cultural production and realisation of a hyperstitional idea. In CCRU's formulation, a hyperstition is presented as acting 'retroactively', from the future into the past, but this need not be taken as a statement about the ontology of cultural production. Rather, one can consider it as meaning that the way a fictional concept may, through cultural production inspired by this concept, find itself as referring to something in the real world at a later date, by virtue of the production of the referents of this concept. To impute the notion of retroactivity is almost a stylistic choice here, or at least a matter of perspective; if a concept can be said to direct the development of cultural production, then it can in some sense be said that it exists 'ahead' of the real products of the cultural process. With the appropriate literary sensibility, one may therefore say that the concept is somehow real 'in the future', whereas any of its expressions are only progressively realising themselves.

Linguistic experiments in perspective aside, what in this notion of hyperstition matters for the sake of possible contribution to religious fictionalism is that it points out the temporal aspect of fictions. It suggests what is effectively a simple but rather insightful idea: that an element of religious discourse, even though fictional at one time, can – through the process of cultural production which it guides – come to designate something in the real world at a later time. Furthermore, one may even argue that substantial parts of religious discourses are aimed precisely at bringing about the realisation of ideas and concepts which otherwise fail to refer to anything in the world. Granted, if a piece of religious discourse speaks as if a concept already does refer to a specific state of affairs in the world, then this may be less philosophically rigorous than prefacing this with qualifications and using the appropriate tense in the formulation of relevant sentences. But it does not affect whether the process of realisation can occur or not; in fact, to speak in *proslepsis* is both an established stylistic choice, and is likely (depending on the subject matter) to

better motivate the person hearing such a poetic description to consider the possibility of working towards what is being posited.

The key here is the concept of *proslepsis*, that is, of relating to a future event in a way as if it has (or is) already happening. The collapsing of the temporal distinction between the future realisation and the present form of description is a matter of language, but not of the conceptual distinction between those two. Proslepsis has, in fact, been used in philosophy of religion in reference to secular-philosophical reinterpretations of various Messianic concepts in 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy, in the tradition of Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida (Riedl, 2016), where it designates such thinking as proceeds from the expectation and possibilities of the future, and the impact this potential future may already by virtue at least of its possibility exercise on the present. The notion of hyperstition allows us to formulate a parallel track to a future-oriented fictionalism. One can argue that the real gist of a ‘hyperstitional fictionalism’ would be precisely this attentiveness to the temporal differences between religious discourse in the present and its referents. Positing and accounting for the temporal aspect of the relationship between fictions and truths in religious discourse – and emphasising this element of the fictionalist theory – would, it seems to me, be a relatively innovative way of formulating religious fictionalist theory.

As an aside, it is also interesting, from the point of view of philosophy of religion, that its philosophical heterodoxy is mirrored also in CCRU’s choice of religious inspirations and references. These are drawn largely from what Partridge (2005) terms “occulture”, that is, a network of ideas, practices, texts and other cultural objects which constitute a ‘second stream’ of Western religious culture, insofar as they were often forcibly excluded by organisations and movements of orthodox orientation, or otherwise subject to other various mechanisms of exclusion from the mainstream of theological reflection, including deliberate self-positioning as alternatives



and forms of resistance against the perceived mainstream. The boundaries are often porous and contentious, some of those cultural objects crossing into – at different times and places – different categories. That CCRU explicitly invokes the category of religion as exemplifying hyperstitional processes, but then proceeds to use primarily occultural elements in the elaboration of relevant theory, suggest that perhaps not all religions are equally hyperstitional; one might venture to say that hyperstitional fictionalism is particularly well-suited to the development of significantly new forms of religious thought (which is the choice taken by the CCRU itself). Fiction-based religions, of which a more extensive treatment will be offered in the third chapter, tend to create original symbolic systems and narratives rather than to rely on pre-existing religious materials, laden as they are with a significant amount of cultural baggage.

Another interesting aspect of CCRU's formulation of hyperstition theory, and – from the point of view of a fictionalist engagement with religious traditions – of considerable importance to the question of the dispositions of the subject towards the truth-value of theological propositions, is CCRU's insistence that hyperstition operates without belief (even going as far as to say that unbelief is a constitutive part of a hyperstitional phenomenon). That is to say, a complex idea which due to the hyperstitional process becomes 'real', is nonetheless initially not 'real', in the sense that it does not refer to anything real in the world outside of the idea itself. The process of realisation only makes the idea real at a later date, but until it acquires this reality, it is a fiction, and fiction in a fairly conservative sense. Where the relative originality of CCRU's formulation rests is in the insistence that actors which bring about the realisation of this fiction not only do not need to believe in any strong sense in the idea (in either a doxastic or non-doxastic way), but that belief is in fact somewhat obstructive of the full realisation of a hyperstition, and that cultural reproduction without belief is as capable of bringing about the hyperstitional realisation process

as a belief in either the value (CCRU, op.cit.). Insofar as the idea fails to refer to anything in the world, it is only a model for the emergence of some phenomenon in the world, and requires no belief. Rather, the process of cultural engagement with the idea can bring about this emergence, through the idea being progressively performed regardless of one's approach to the problem of belief or disbelief.

## II. Meillassoux's 'aleatory fictionalism'

The hypersitional fictionalist position resonates in interesting ways with another example of a creative rethinking of the problem of theism in contemporary philosophy, as developed by French thinker Quentin Meillassoux. To summarise the argument briefly – according to Meillassoux, God does not exist; the problem of evil (or, as Meillassoux would call it, the problem of the spectres, that is, people who have suffered particularly unjust death) is sufficient evidence against the existence of any entity or process which would fulfil the moral standards constitutive of a meaningful definition of 'God'; however, Meillassoux's ontology proposes that any entity may come into existence at any moment, and so it is possible for an entity to arise and Meillassoux's definition of God as 'that which gives the spectres the possibility of being something other than a spectre' (2008). One is therefore allowed, for moral reasons, to hope for (and even expect) the future coming of this morally right state of affairs, and of any entity which can fulfil those moral requirements.

This is, admittedly, rooted in a somewhat non-standard ontology. Meillassoux argues that reality at its most fundamental level is best described as a kind of 'hyper-chaos'. All actual entities are purely contingent, and so are any processes by which those entities come into and remain in existence. This means that any event or transformation of entities may happen in the world, and

that there is no stable underlying process or force which would guarantee the stability of the world. This allows Meillassoux to speculate about the possibility of the coming into existence of a genuinely God-like entity. In other words, given the radical contingency of all existence (what Meillassoux terms ‘the necessity of contingency’), a power which will bring justice to the world may come to exist, therefore one can in a sense believe in this arising, and (since it has been philosophically anticipated) the consequences of such an event can be explored in thought and praxis. Meillassoux proposes a fourfold typology of basic orientations towards the question of God’s existence, playing with the double meaning implied in different uses of this term. One may say that one believes in God or disbelieves in God as a way of describing what one considers to be the metaphysical reality (or lack thereof) behind the term ‘God’. One may also disbelieve in God in the sense of accepting God’s existence but rejecting God as unwilling to effect the transformations in the world which would make for a just state of affairs. Out of the possible options, it is the option which states that ‘I believe in God because God does not exist’ (but may start to, and – ethically speaking – should exist) which is his pick (Stephans 2013).

The relevance of this scheme for fictionalism is that, like the concept of hyperstition, it allows for simultaneously admitting the inexistence of the desired entity and the possibility of its future coming. In this way, it also embodies a proleptic approach to the problem of the truth-fiction relationship in religious discourse. What Meillassoux’s example illustrates is that one can preserve some form of religious practice (for the philosopher proposes *divinology*, the discourse of the possible coming God, which distinguishes itself from theology more by virtue of its subject than by some fundamental methodological principle), inclusive of a theistic position (as the coming entity may in fact resemble some forms of established philosophical articulations of a theistic God in all aspects other than the origin).

This, however, is achieved only at the cost of sacrificing an ontology which would make root the regularities in the universe in something other than hyperchaos and absolute contingency. However, one need not take on the entirety of Meillassoux's ontology to agree with the point that chance and the occurrence of unforeseen (even undetermined, free, unprecedented) events are part of the ontological structure of the world, and that one can formulate some form of praxis on the basis of this possibility that chance may bring about positive states of affairs (or that chance is, in itself, a positive and valuable phenomenon), as Meillassoux does in *The Number and the Siren* (2012). It seems to me that this aleatory worldview can be incorporated in interesting ways into a religious fictionalist positions, in that it foregrounds two interesting notions: First is the temporal distinction between the present inexistence of God and God's possible emergence. Secondly, Meillassoux emphasises the aleatory character of the emergence of desirable religious realities (that is, there are moral reasons to hope for the emergence of certain desirable states of affairs in the world, and while there is no assurance of this emergence, there remains a possibility of it). Along those lines, one can argue that the concept of the Messianic Age, a Judeo-Christian theological idea of a certain future historical period of justice, is a fiction in the sense that its precise formulations fail to refer to any entities. However, one may hold the myth or fiction of the Messianic Age to be a useful narrative which reminds one of the possibility of a more just state of affairs coming into being, and this possibility itself (the chance of this emergence) can be already celebrated in the present.

### 3. Fictionalism in Broader Context

#### 3.1. Non-theistic religion in general

Can there be such a thing as a non-theistic religion? Is a philosophically coherent non-theistic form of religion possible? Most forms of Buddhism operate as an intellectual and ritual structure which cannot be properly described as reliant on a theistic conception of God (Herman 1989). This is not to say that Buddhists are forbidden, by virtue of the system as such, to hold as true propositions which postulate the existence of some entity which would respond to or approximate a theistic conception of God. A great many of Buddhist schools do quite easily incorporate, into both theory and practice, the figures of supernatural individuals and forces, equivalent (or nearly so) to cosmic gods, angels and divinised humans familiar from Western theological systems – for example, the role of Buddha Amida is one of a supernatural being capable of granting his devotees heavenly post-mortem existence in the supernatural realm of Pure Land, with strong parallels to Luthernism (Ingram, 2013, pp.66-67). Some of the theories are sufficiently developed to warrant a comparison even to classical Western philosophical perspectives on God. (Smart, 1999). However, most forms of Buddhism do not, as a feature of the theoretical and practical system, either depend on the notion of an omnimax personalist God, nor would consider the existence of such entity as a particularly fruitful topic for theoretical reflection, while not barring the belief in God (Grant, 2009). Similar considerations hold true also for Confucianism and Jainism (Long 2009); the metaphysical structures postulated by those traditions differ from those in Buddhist philosophy, and so the precise place of non-theism in relation to ritual or

religious practice differs in those traditions, but it is still the case that in these traditions one finds a ritual-performing community with certain ethical and metaphysical commitments which do not entail the espousal of a theistic notion of God.

This question, however, requires a more complex answer when asked in a Western philosophical and theological context. For the purpose of my argument, I consider as ‘Western’ that intellectual milieu which has Abrahamic religious heritage and Classical philosophical heritage of Greco-Roman Antiquity as its two principal formative cultural elements. Geographically speaking, this includes Europe, the Americas, North Africa and the Middle East. Despite their differences, the mainstream cultures of those locales all emerged as a result a mixture between religions termed (not without some contestation, but popularly) as Abrahamic religions on the one hand, and Hellenic philosophy (principally Platonism and Aristotelianism) on the other – this is the case for both the historically Christian and the historically Islamic world (Fakhry, 1994). To European readers, this is more clearly visible in the case of those intellectual cultures which were formed under the socio-cultural conditions of ‘Christendom’, as evidenced e.g. in François Laruelle’s (2014) genealogy of Western intellectual history as fundamentally framed by ‘Greek myth’ and ‘Jewish law’, but the same intellectual and influences (although in different permutations) are to be found within Arabic- and Farsi-speaking cultures, and as such there is a cultural continuity of a kind sufficiently general to allow for a common designation of ‘Western’. Philosophical theology has, in this context, been dominated by a theistic concept of God. Religion, though a concept differently construed in different frameworks, has depended – at least in mainstream formulations – entirely on theistic notions of God, problematised as they might have been by philosophical speculations which sought to reconcile theological commitments and expanded philosophical notions of divinity (Corbin, 1976). This prevalence of theism is why the

tentative proposals for non-theistic forms of Western religious traditions stand out as an exciting contribution to the landscape of contemporary philosophy of religion.

What the Death of God theology movement asks of contemporary thinkers in philosophical theology and philosophy of religion, and what the Continental thinkers from Badiou through Laruelle and CCRU to Meillassoux suggest as a possible answer, is effectively that it is possible to envision such a form of religiosity as would exist within an ontological and epistemic framework consistent with modern naturalistic philosophical systems, prevalent as they are in public discourse in the Western world. The Death of God theology movement itself, and to some extent also its fellow travellers in the secular theology movement such as Bishop Robertson, would argue that it is incumbent upon us to consider this possibility seriously, and to develop interpretations of Christianity which answer to those transformations in intellectual culture. A number of notions and pre-judgments are implied in this suggestion: that Modern developments in philosophy are fundamentally correct (a proposition which seems not quite as settled as some Christian Atheist thinkers may think, given the diversity of the field); that Western culture is largely unified by its assent to those developments; in other words, that the secularisation thesis is more or less correct, and that it describes a process with ultimately desirable effects. These are presupposition as philosophical as they are sociological and dependent on a number of extra-philosophical factors, problematizing such constructions of theological and political thought as would relegate them to some more purely intellectual domain.

### 3.2. Fictionalist religions

As discussed before, some forms of religious fictionalism offer an attractive position which would be able to reconcile the double commitment to atheistic metaphysics on the one hand, and

to the use of Christian theological materials as useful guides for navigating one's life as a subject, including the pursuit of those truths of which those fictions may speak. The previous chapters spoke of the degree to which something like the possibility of Christian religious fictionalism begins to arise in some theological and philosophical circles, and some of the theoretical resources which could be used in its development. But the sustainability of fictionalist religiosity, and of fictionalist religiosity which does not retreat to the realm of pure fictional narration but which seeks to use those in search for relation to the real world, is far from being a purely hypothetical question.

Largely unknown and insufficiently theorised outside of professional Religious Studies circles, an arguably entirely new type of religion has developed in the 20th century North Atlantic cultural milieu, a type which brings fictionalist theories of religion out of the realm of more purely hypothetical theory and puts them to test in terms of their practical viability in sustaining religious forms of life. This new type has been given different names - 'fiction-based religions' (Davidsen, 2012), 'invented religions' (Cusack, 2010) and 'hyper-real religions' (Possamai, 2012) being the most common designations. These different terms embody different analytic perspectives on the exact nature of the phenomenon at hand - namely, religious systems which developed on the basis of works recognised to be fictional by both adherents of and outsiders to those religious systems. Some of the more popular and significant movements of this kind include the Church of the SubGenius, derived from a parody of organised religion and featuring an idiosyncratic mixture of some more established alternative, countercultural elements on the one hand, and a more original, peculiar mythology around a central fictional figure (Kirby, 2012); Discordianism, founded in the 1950s and focusing on the worship of Eris, the Greek goddess of discord, as put forward in the founding texts embodying an original mythological narration (Mäkelä and Petsche, 2013); Jediism,



which bases itself on the Star Wars movie cycle and which has since obtained some forms of legal recognition as an officially recognised practiced religion (Davidsen, 2011). Until recently, those religious systems have received little scholarly attention, and have more readily been met with scorn and derision in public media.

These religions are of natural prime interest to a religious fictionalist, in that they are explicitly fictionalist in their meta-level self-perception themselves. This is, at the very least, a more welcoming milieu for a religious fictionalist, as it removes the problem of participating in the same religious systems with people of realist meta-level self-understanding of their religious discourse. There is, however, considerable space for argument about how exactly do those movements relate to the problem of fictions, and what would be a proper theoretical accounting for their uses of fiction – hence the different generic designations depending on the analytic perspective favoured by the thinkers studying them.

One in particular stands out as arguably relevant directly to the problem of religious fictionalism and its relation to truth. In a recent important collection of essays on those fiction-based religions, edited by Adam Possamai (2012), the religions discussed are grouped under the heading of 'hyper-real religion'. The concept of the hyper-real as used in that collection is derived from Baudrillard's critique of contemporary culture as preoccupied no longer with establishing a connection between persons and reality, but rather with the relations between culturally constructed signs. In Baudrillard's critique (Baudrillard, 1994), the postmodern person is presented as no longer interested primarily in learning about and forming narratives about the real world, the world external and antecedent to cultural production; rather, the contemporary person is preoccupied primarily with the narratives themselves, their elements and consistency and relation between different cultural elements irrespective of their precise relation to what is outside of

cultural construction. Previously formed and judged in their relation to that which is outside and before cultural construction (the real), signs and cultural products start to be treated as a domain of its own, irrespective of its relation to the real. The signs and cultural products are not without a reality of their own - they are as much material (at least by virtue of their transmission) as the real itself; but their domain is attributed more independence than it's warranted, and so it becomes 'hyper-real' - in some ways 'above' the real, in some ways part of the real, but also considerably severed from it. Made independent of what they originally designated, they become what Baudrillard terms 'simulacra' (op.cit.)

Baudrillard himself gives an illustration of this process (and, to some extent, an aetiology of it) by describing the rise of *iconodoulia* (reverence for images) in Late Antique and Early Medieval Christianity. According to this narrative (ibid.), early in Christian theology there was a tension between the direct worship of God's own Self and the worship of God as mediated through images of Jesus. The iconoclastic party (those who opposed the use of pictorial representation in worship) considered the mediation by images to be unjustified, as it introduces an entity between God and the worshippers, and so the act of worship may be directed at God, but is in fact first received by another entity. The iconodule (image-reverencing) party argued that icons in fact make present the being represented in the icon, and are worthy recipients of acts of worship by virtue not of themselves, but of the persons represented on them. What the iconodule party did not realise, however, was that despite directing attention away from the icon itself to the person represented, they have at the same time affirmed the icon itself as an object of attention and practical focus. Once mediation as such was affirmed, the medium began to receive more attention and focus than that which was intended to be mediated. To worship Jesus and to revere the saints became in practice coterminous with the worship and reverence towards the icons which represented them,

and theology has since focused accordingly more on its own narratives and those material expressions, than on the referents of those narratives and objects. The use of 'Christian media' fashioned out the practical and theoretical basis for later Western turn away from that which was mediated towards the media themselves (ibid.).

It is debatable whether Christian theology of icons is the best (or even, genealogically speaking, a particularly early) example of what would become in the late modern period a turn to the hyper-real. The point, however, is that one can likely find hyper-real dimension to established religious traditions as much as to new religious movements. But if hyper-real religiosity is a real phenomenon, then it embodies some of the least worthwhile elements of fictionalism (considered as a range of positions); still, it does embody a fictionalist philosophy as part of its own self-understanding.

What I mean here is that a hyper-real religiosity can be construed as a way of practicing religious forms of engagement with fictions in such a way that the fictions themselves are treated as the main objects of engagement (Possamai, 2012). Why this is undesirable is that, as described in the previous chapters, Badiou and Laruelle are just two examples of the possibility of sophisticated ways to consider fiction as a guide to some form of truth, that is, to think it in relation to truth, rather than in simply expressivist terms, and certainly as more than an object of religious focus in itself. In any case, whether truth-conducive or expressive or performing some other useful function, religious fictions can be used to enhance one's relationship with the world and other people inhabiting it – whether by allowing an experience of ideal-guided community (Eshleman, 2010), or by serving as a template for existential and political self-understanding of a subject (Laruelle 2010).

It is in this context and against those possibilities that hyper-real religiosity appears as a kind of absorption in the regime of signs and cultural productions, a ‘defanged’ mode of engagement with fictions, where the fictions lose their potential to offer something beyond the fictions themselves. Some fiction-based religions can be said to have avoided this problem. One can make a historical argument that fiction-based forms of religiosity have been instrumental in creating the right conditions for the emergence of non-fiction based forms of religiosity, or at least that they have had some role in shaping the emergence of nonfiction-based forms of religion in significant ways. As Davidsen (2012) discusses, early Tolkien-oriented forms of ritual practice have served as what one could describe as a significant early step in the direction of alternative and experimental spiritual practice, which in turn has allowed the participants to inquire more deeply about the sources of Tolkienian mythopoetic work, forming early local examples of what has later been termed the Neo-Pagan movement. The move from fiction-based to non-fiction-based religion need not be followed by the Christian religious fictionalist; the important aspect of this is rather that a religious fictionalist practice need not be lost in the regime of simulacra, but can remain committed to the notion that the signs of which a fiction consists do contain in them the ability to translate into insights about the Real.

### 3.3. Fictionalism and definitions of ‘religion’

Of the possible contributions of religious fictionalism to philosophy of religion, the last I would like to consider is its potential to allow for a more nuanced formulations of definitions of religion. As fiction-based religions illustrate, religious fictionalism is an interesting perspective from which to evaluate classic definitions of religion as offered by established writers in other religion-related field. It offers an interesting example problematizing some of those definitions at

a fundamental level, thus allowing for a contribution on the part of philosophy of religion to as fundamental part of the field of Religious Studies as the problem of definitions of religion.

For example, one classic definition of religion has been offered by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), who argues that religion is 1) a system of signs and symbols which 2) seeks to provide a general account of the world and of desired behaviour in the world, thus 3) producing certain moods and motivations in the religious person, by 4) endowing the signs, symbols and models with a particular aura of reality, making 5) the moods and motivations feel uniquely realistic. Immediately, one can notice an emphasis on the notion of ‘realism’ as important to the formulations of religious views. That is to say, the religious system is – in this definition – supposed to offer a realist discourse about the world, and thus endow the non-propositional elements of religion with a feeling of connection to the real. The definition itself is not necessarily realist – and neither is it necessarily anti-realist; it simply doesn’t address the question of whether religious discourse really refers to real metaphysical entities or not (op.cit.). Rather, it suggests that religious practitioners *intend* their discourse to be realist, and that the realism of religious discourse is for the practitioner an important quality of the discourse.

I would consider this definition to be particularly valuable, in that it accounts both for the model-making quality of religion – without, at the same time, positing the scale which the models need to reach or the areas which need to be accounted for, thus allowing for a model-making flexibility (and therefore possibly for the incommensurability of some religious systems compared to others). In other words, implied in this definition is the idea that the wide range of human experience of the world can be ‘divided’ into many different possible narratives and structures, and that not all religions follow the same *schemata* in that process. This definition also accounts for the normative dimension (what Geertz calls “models for”, likewise possessed with a similar

flexibility; op.cit), as well as its affective dimension (in that there are certain affective and attitudinal elements to the religious experience, and as part of religion they become more specific than, for example, in the case of art). Hence Geertz's definition accounts for the traditional truth-claiming character of most religious systems (of particular interest, of course, to a philosopher seeking to establish whether there is a difference between a very elaborate aesthetic and a religious system), without at the same time settling the issue of whether they are successful in this attempt or not.

However, a religious fictionalist position immediately questions the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> point of Geertz's definition, while technically speaking abiding by the points 1-3 of the same. The most distinct difference from the Geertzean definition is on point 4 – a religious fictionalist will likely not claim that his or her preferred religious fiction has a uniquely realistic character. They might, however, claim that this fiction is uniquely adequate to account – in a fictional way – for real phenomena in the world. In this way, a religious fictionalist could claim that the models presented by their religion of choice lack realism, but that they refer uniquely well to things which are endowed with reality (a kind of second-order realism). This position would mirror that of Paul Ricoeur's views on literature as offering a fictional narrative which helps one understand better the realities in one's life, a temporary model through which one can focus more clearly on some of the possibilities for action in one's own life (Simms, 2003).

To ask how religious fictionalism would fit in Geertz's definition of religion leads one to pose also a question about the 5<sup>th</sup> point of the definition. This point posits that endowing religious models of and for the world with an aura of realism will likewise endow the moods and motivations with a similar realistic character. A closer philosophical look would, however, suggest that this entailment may not always hold. It may be true in some (perhaps even the vast majority of) cases

that realist models will result in realist affective states and attitudes. On the other hand, it may be that realist affective states and attitudes may not follow from realist models, or that they may follow from non-realist models. This relationship between realist models and realist affective or attitudinal states is problematized particularly strongly by fictionalism, as a fictionalist may be committed to espousing non-realist models of the world or of religion-positing realities, while also considering her affective or attitudinal states as possessing a realist character. After all, one may be a fictionalist about religious discourse but not about the mental or affective states which are tied in with this discourse. What I mean here is that, for example, one can argue that using God-language about certain future events (of the kind of ‘God will...’, ‘God wants us to... in the future’ or similar) makes a narrative fictional, since/if there is no God who wills and wants certain events (in addition to the event described not yet occurring). At the same time, this narrative may elicit strong feelings or other mental and emotional states, which can furthermore be understood as ‘feeling uniquely realistic’ in the sense not just that they are obviously present, but in the sense that they are deeply tied with certain

## Conclusion

As seen in the first chapter, there is a palpable sense in which Christian Atheism has a tendency to evacuate its own theological discourse out of much traditional theological content. From the point of view of a realist philosophical theory underlying one's theological discourse (a realist meta-theology), this is fully understandable – formerly accepted notions, concepts and narratives have been, in the Death of God theology perspective, largely undermined by scientific and other cultural changes since the Enlightenment. The breakdown of the notion of God and of the metaphysics which made the belief in such a supernatural entity possible mean that other elements of the religious discourse are also in doubt. Still, this breakdown has been perceived largely as due to the message and force of Christian theology itself. It was precisely their fidelity to Christianity which has led the Death of God thinkers to adopt an increasingly secularised discourses and an atheist ontology.

Conversely, they have found Christian thought to be uniquely able to account for the problem of the inexistence of God, and the transformations in culture which the Death of God signifies. Between those two lines of thought, between those two conclusions and results, there formed a problem of how to reconcile them, of finding a useful perspective according to which reinterpret traditional Christian theological ideas and narratives in a situation where a significant portion of the Christian story is best described as fiction. Against this backdrop, contemporary Continental thinkers offer like Laruelle and Badiou offer to a critical reader of theology some strategies by which to interpret the theological materials in ways both consistent with atheist



ontology and a commitment to the importance of religious materials for contemporary thought, strategies which are surprisingly heavily dependent on explicitly religious materials. For both Badiou and Laruelle, in their different respective ways, religion as fiction has been far from a problem; rather, fiction forms an important part of their analysis and use of religion.

For this reason, one can argue that between the Death of God theologians on the one hand, and the Continental Materialist thinkers such as Laruelle and Badiou on the other, there formed a space for a renewed interest in religious fictionalist positions. Precisely because fiction is for them important in the formulation of truth (for Badiou – as the possibility of the true discourse of universal political subjectivity; for Laruelle – as the favoured means by which one can arrive at a more immanent and fundamental understanding of one's self, and to formulate better models of thought and life), it is important for those interested in religious fictionalism to engage the Continental philosophical positions I have explored in this thesis.

The formulation of a sophisticated and robust religious fictionalism, one capable of articulating a wide range of possible uses of fiction, requires an intent look at a number of issues involved in fleshing out a nuanced position, as discussed here. However, religious fictionalism offers a genuinely exciting contribution to the landscape of contemporary philosophy of religion, one possessed of both explanatory power and the ability to form an important part of a more sophisticated engagement with the intellectual history of humankind.

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