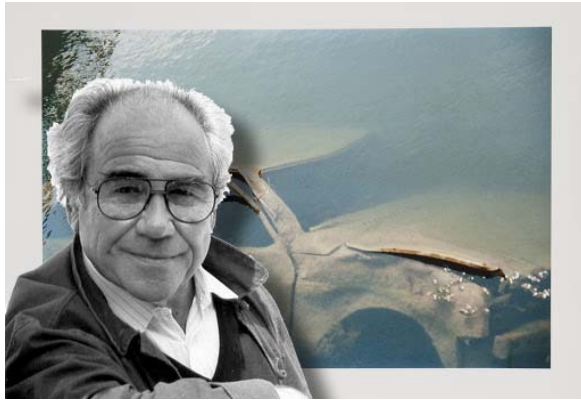


Baudrillard, Religion and a Hermeneutics of Suspicion Denied

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Abstract

This paper explores an approach to the question of Baudrillard and religion via the Ricoeurian hermeneutics of suspicion. It elaborates on the deliberately ambiguous term 'hermeneutics of suspicion denied', parsed as either as a '(hermeneutics of suspicion) denied' or a 'hermeneutics of (suspicion denied)'. The former is considered as the naive religionist's position, i.e. a rejection of Continental philosophy, while the latter uses that tradition against itself in a knowing denial of suspicion. When performing this move on the Baudrillardian canon – including his photographs – it leaves a space for religion inflected by the rejection of totalising structures. Other possibilities also open up, the most promising of which is perhaps a religious practice of the quotidian relating to Baudrillard's 'singularities' as contextualised through the Buddhist concept of 'tathata' and Mauss's 'gift'.

Keywords: Baudrillard, hermeneutics of suspicion, Ricoeur, Continental philosophy, singularity, negative theology, tathata, gift, Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Foucault.

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Introduction

'We are all postmodern now' is effectively the principal but unstated allegation of Baudrillard and other contemporary philosophers. 'Postmodern' is the frame of mind, as summed up by Lyotard (1984, xxiv), of incredulity towards metanarratives, meaning that modernism – in itself an incredulity towards myth – has been exposed as a set of systematisations that are hegemonic and serve only to perpetuate the power of the ruling classes. We have allegedly all undertaken, then, firstly a modernist journey away from superstition and myth to a rationalist *incredulity* towards superstition and myth; and secondly a journey of postmodernism away from this rationality and totalising metanarrative to *incredulity* towards those rational systems themselves. We have liberated ourselves from our liberation. We are therefore left with nothing, because this must be – as we are Westerners – a linear

once-and-for-all progression, a teleology of nihilism from which we recover only in the meaningless play of fragments, meaningless as a whole that is, but possibly consoling in the individual Baudrillardian 'singularity' of these fragments, consoling because in the fragments of the banal the banality of the totality can be momentarily banished. A child grips my thumb, I notice a shepherd's purse flower by the hedge, my car breaks down and suddenly life takes charge of me instead of the other way round. In such moments, there is possibly, just possibly, an opening for what used to be called 'religion'.

This is the essence of our debate on Baudrillard and theology. He pursues what Ricoeur calls a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' or what others call more simply a nihilism, even an 'unmitigated counsel of despair' (Walters 2012, 63). The endpoint of this interpretive philosophical journey may be nihilistic or despairing from some points of view, but perhaps it opens up new possibilities. Are they religious? The very language of Baudrillard appears to occupy a universe far removed from theology, so we have to be cautious. Even at a technical level his 'singularity' is a term with a radically different meaning from the technological 'singularity' of the accelerationist philosophers. Nevertheless it is possible to identify four strategies for parsing the Baudrillardian canon for religious significance, all deriving in some way from the suspension, denial, or reversal of the hermeneutics of suspicion.

Ricoeur and the hermeneutics of suspicion

Hermeneutics is the interpretation of texts which include both overt speech and acts, and subtler signifiers and signs. Hermeneutics can also be understood as the practice of interpreting signs emanating from various agents so as to discover the *motives* behind these emanations. If the practice is one of the intentional and relentless discovery of hostile or repressive motives then it may be called a hermeneutics of suspicion. For example the agents of global capitalism, government, education, religion and medicine can all be impugned with counter-emancipatory motives in a hermeneutics itself alleged to have an emancipatory function.

Ricoeur (1970, 26) neatly outlines the fundamental problem of a hermeneutics of suspicion when he calls it a 'very specific philosophy which subordinates the entire problem of truth and error to the expression of the will to power.' In physics, by contrast, the problem of truth and error is resolved exclusively by recourse to empirical methods, though this statement may trigger suspicion that the agents of science are making a false claim in order to justify their profession. Clearly this 'very specific philosophy' as Ricoeur calls it has potentially universal application.

Ricoeur also says this:

The contrary of suspicion, I will say bluntly, is faith. What faith? No longer, to be sure, the first faith of the simple soul, but rather the second faith of one who has engaged in hermeneutics, faith that has undergone criticism, *post-critical faith*. (1970, 28, emphasis added.)

The concept of a post-critical faith will be central here and can be contrasted with a pre-critical faith. Both, it will be argued, involve a suspension of suspicion, but the first belongs to a hermeneutics of (suspicion denied), while the second belongs to a (hermeneutics of suspicion) denied. We can see contemporary theology as a form of Ricoeur's post-critical faith because its sophistication places it far from 'the first faith of the simple soul'. It becomes a hermeneutics of the denial of suspicion then, as opposed to the mere denial of the hermeneutics of suspicion.

Ricoeur's posits three 'masters of suspicion': Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, though the latter operates a suspicion that is perhaps too contrarian, too exuberant in mood and too extravagant in its reach – 'philosophising with a hammer' – to quite fit the pattern of the other masters. Nietzsche offers no emancipatory system for the masses, indeed his superman concept requires the corollary, the 'underman' (*untermensch*), a purely denigratory term for the common man. Nietzsche's loathing for the proletariat is expressed in such phrases as 'the many-too-many', 'the superfluous', 'the flies of the marketplace' and 'the bungled and botched' (King 2007, 149). Nietzsche does not exhibit the kind of glowering suspicion exercised by Marx and Freud – which ranges from inhibitory to paralysing of faith – but rather in his inversion of values simply transfers faith to new totalising systems, exemplified in the shining ranks of the 'supermen' led by Zarathustra as the new prophet. Hence for our purposes we will substitute the work of Michel Foucault as a better example of a hermeneutics of suspicion allied to a seemingly emancipatory impulse, though noting that he took Nietzsche as a crucial influence (Foucault 2000, 5).

No universal postmodern "we"

A question that needs to be asked of any text is what is its audience. Postmodernism as a set of texts may act as a meaning generator and so convey different meanings to different audiences but a more sober evaluation of it suggests it is a set of texts that seeks to convert. In reading them one either becomes a postmodernist and audience for these texts or one rejects postmodernism and its texts. It is probably as rare for the serious reader of postmodern texts to escape conversion to its codifications as it is for the non-reader to discover them independently. The non-reader of postmodern texts – the vast bulk of humanity – is declared by postmodernist philosophers as living in a postmodernist era, if only by default. This stance effectively ignores the codes by which this majority live and which often incline them to accept religion in a pre-critical manner. *You* may be postmodern, *I* am not, is however a completely legitimate position and describes the cultural loca-

tion of millions of citizens in the developed world. However, with Ricoeur, we are interested in how those 'converted' by the texts of postmodernism – and the prevailing hermeneutics of suspicion within them – may find escape clauses by which they can engage in what we can call a post-critical religion. It is true of course that Ricoeur's original triumvirate are more modern than postmodern but their 'suspicion' is central to postmodernism, as Lyotard hints at in the term 'incredulity'.

(Hermeneutics of suspicion) denied v. hermeneutics of (suspicion denied)

A healthy scepticism towards all apparently benign forces is perhaps vital to survival. Uncritical acceptance of all signs emanating from agents of the market or state would imply nothing more than a lack of discernment. But, as Ricoeur appears to be saying, such suspicion directed at the structures of power, if total, rules out all other approaches to the problem of truth and error. If applied to religion it rules out religion itself. When is the priest lying? Always, according to this system. Hence for a post-critical religion to emerge in any form we must construct a hermeneutics of the denial of suspicion. We can consider this 'hermeneutics of (suspicion denied)' in two forms: firstly in the negative where we suspiciously interpret signs of suspicion, and secondly in the positive where we interpret a set of signs arising from the knowing and post-critical suspension of suspicion.

Religion as a hermeneutics of trust

First we need to elaborate a little on Ricoeur's notion that the contrary of suspicion is faith. We might call faith a hermeneutics of *trust* where this trust may arise in either a pre-critical or a post-critical manner. In a pre-critical movement of faith doubt has not yet arisen, though we have to be clear what this doubt might be directed at. The naive pre-critical religionist may lack all doubt concerning the deity, yet hold the 'world' as fallen and so doubt it comprehensively – the position of the Manichaeans. The post-critical religionist on the other hand has extended doubt not only to the 'world' but to the deity as originator of that world. Hence a post-critical hermeneutics of trust requires either a return to the idea of the 'world' as fallen – rather unlikely considering the deeply engaged nature of contemporary theology – or to discover in the 'world' signs of the unfallen. To arrive at this post-critical place we must first pass through the critical phase which means grappling with the hermeneutics of suspicion as originally presented by the 'masters' of suspicion as selected here. We can then investigate its specific form in Baudrillard.

Turning on the masters

To direct suspicion at the suspicion of the masters of suspicion is a difficult move. While Baudrillard is certainly post-Marxist he is at the same time definitely not pre-Marxist. The ideas of Marx have evolved rather than been repudiated through later thinkers, and anyway to contemplate Marx's repudiation is tantamount to arraignment of the 'king', as Marx once pointed out regarding any attempt to repudiate philosophy itself (Marx and Engels, 1972, 13). The same is true to some extent for Nietzsche, Freud and Foucault. But let us attempt the unthinkable and see where it takes us.

Ricoeur (1970, 33) considers Marx, Nietzsche and Freud to have in common detected within us a 'false consciousness', one that has arisen only in recent times and which is contrasted to an authentic consciousness that existed at some remote earlier time – in a golden era or prelapsarian state. However we may suspect that those who claim to have discovered truths unknown to the rest of us are effectively accusing us – potentially their sycophants or acolytes – of false consciousness in a bid for an elevated status as the destroyers of what is false in consciousness and the providers of what is true. All philosophers, scientists, priests and politicians can be understood as making such a claim and in seeing this we have begun to turn the tools of suspicion on the originators of suspicion, starting with the central suspicion that their project is essentially a patrician one. Where a thinker like John Stuart Mill (2008, 373-375) openly agonises about the threat that the rise of the masses pose to property and hence to his patrician status – this threat arising through universal suffrage – we may accuse many of the masters of suspicion of hiding their counter-emancipatory lifestyle – often including academic status and generous state pension – behind apparently pro-emancipatory theory. We can therefore accuse the masters of suspicion of hiding what Mill was honest enough to make plain, a fear of the loss of power. After all, only hegemonic power ensures that academics earn more than janitors.

In the case of Marx his suspicion appears to be impeccably directed in the service of universal emancipation, and when he says that the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism (Marx and Engels 1976, 175) it certainly strikes us as true in its historical context. However this suggests that one possible starting place in the turning of suspicion on Marx's suspicion is by suspecting Marxism of being a religion. Kolakowski, for example, observes that Marx's influence is down to 'prophetic, fantastic and irrational elements' in his thought and 'In this sense Marxism performs the function of a religion, and its efficacy is of a religious character. But it is a caricature and a bogus form of religion, since it presents its temporal eschatology as a scientific system, which religious mythologies do not purport to be.' (Kolakowski 2008, 1208) We might observe with Kolakowski that the teleology of Marxism as a religion has an end-time quality about it where Marx and his followers are

always looking for the signs of imminent destruction of the bourgeois world. Marx's reaction to the Great Exhibition of 1851 is typical:

With this exhibition, the bourgeoisie of the world has erected in the modern Rome its Pantheon, where, with self-satisfied pride, it exhibits the gods which it has made for itself. ... The bourgeoisie is celebrating this, its greatest festival, at a moment when the collapse of its social order in all its splendour is imminent, a collapse which will demonstrate more forcefully than ever how the forces which it has created have outgrown its control. (Marx and Engels, 1850)

Just as those convinced of the Rapture see in every natural disaster and man-made crisis sure signs of the End Time, so do the Marxist see every natural disaster – e.g. potato blight as 'the first symptom that the roots of existing society were rotten' (Marx and Engels, 1850) – and every commercial crisis – as harbingers of the collapse of the capitalist order. The welcoming of all such destruction also has a strongly reactionary element to it – all the developments in banking, railways, agriculture and industry have one deplorable quality in common: they are *new*.

We can also consider Marx's thought as a form of vanguardism. As a prophet of the new religion only he and a select few can see the utter destruction of Babel's capitalist-industrial tower to come, and it is the duty of the common man and woman to trust implicitly in these teleological narratives because after the destruction will come the end of the realm of necessity. But behind the emancipatory rhetoric we are entitled to suspect self-elevation in the preacher.

If we were to suppose for one moment that this simple exercise in suspicion were to demolish the edifice of Marxism, we can ask what space for religion then opens up? It would at a stroke remove one of the major impetuses to atheism in Western culture, but at the same time the collapse of the teleological Marxian edifice would also bring down the teleological religious edifice. The collapse of Marxism as vanguardism brings down the priesthood of all religions perhaps leaving space for a priestless religion, such as the Quakers.

Freud too can easily be accused of creating a new type of priesthood, that of the psychoanalyst. Freud is clear that religion is an illusion with no future, but his suspicion of religion is more thorough than Marx's because all teleology – all future better worlds – are ruled out. His priesthood merely helps one adjust to the eternal madness of the prevailing inhibitory social structure. It is harder therefore to direct Freud's own suspicion at Freud because he appears to have already done that – the analyst is the wounded healer only one step ahead of the patient, as one gloss has it. But some routes remain open, for example through Freud's characterisation of religion as a the narcissism of minor difference (King 2007, 7). Is not the history of psychoanalysis riven by exactly such minor differences? With schools and schis-

matics to make any religion proud? Clearly, if Marxian atheism is one cornerstone of the Western rejection of religion, then Freudian atheism is another. Hence we need to press the parallels between priesthoods by further examining the objections that Freud raises to religion. For example, if he suspects religion of being a crutch for the weak-minded, then let us suspect in turn that psychoanalysis is the same. But his central idea, that religion is an attempt to master the Oedipus complex, is fatally undermined if we turn this back on Freud in a shamelessly *ad hominem* move and suspect that his own personal sickness is not in fact universal; the vast majority of men do not fall in love with their mothers or want to kill their fathers. This anti-Oedipal suspicion then ironically opens up a space again for the 'Father', or rather for all metaphors of something lying outside the human which engenders the world of the human – the Old Testament 'Word', the Plotinian 'One', the transcendentalists' 'Absolute', the Neoplatonists' 'Cosmos', the Gnostic 'Demiurge' and so on.

In Foucault one could argue that the hermeneutics of suspicion reaches a peak beyond which it is impossible to go. In Ricoeur's terms no philosophy could more subordinate 'the entire problem of truth and error to the expression of the will to power.' For Marx power relations are those of institutions or societal groupings and can be overthrown; for Freud they are of the psyche and can at least be mitigated. Emancipatory solutions are offered, though it has to be said that Freud's are less optimistic or teleological than Marx's. But in Foucault power is totally dispersed, so both individuals and organisations are to be understood as expressions of this dispersed power rather than the other way round. Power is 'a productive network that runs through the whole social body' (Foucault 2000, 120). Although offered as emancipatory, Foucault's analysis is even more pessimistic than Freud's. Neither does it seem to hark back to a prelapsarian state, rather its suspicion is endemic and endless, a hermeneutics where only one kind of sign is sought assiduously within all human relationships: that of deceptive power exercised over self with negative intent. It is a vanguardism where followers are permitted to seek no other signs in their search for truth, such as signs of love, friendship, generosity, community, interdependence or the sacred, and as such we find its suspicion turned on Foucault by the suspicion of Baudrillard, as we shall see. To borrow a term from Levinas we might well assess Foucault's suspicion as totalising. As such it must be quarantined as we do all totalising systems – including that of classical monotheism – but in being so placed it opens a space for religion usefully tinged perhaps with scepticism to all forms of power.

Cultural conservatism

What happens when suspicion is directed at the 'new', as we saw in the case of Marx, to a lesser extent with Freud, though not necessarily in Foucault? When the signs of the new are consistently read with suspicion we properly call this reaction-

ary, though when the new is consistently contrasted with an earlier golden age or accepted canon of culture and behaviour we might also call it lapsarian, i.e. having its motivation based in a hankering after some golden era. The key early figure exhibiting these traits in Western philosophy is Plato, especially in *The Republic* and *The Laws*. Although politically Plato is not entirely lapsarian – he projects a better future under the ‘philosopher kings’ – his approach to culture is entirely reactionary. We can understand Plato as the progenitor of all cultural conservatives, protectors of the ‘canon’, as in more contemporary figures like Harold Bloom, Allan Bloom and the late F. R. Leavis. During the working life of Baudrillard there emerged a fierce debate over popular culture, the ‘dumbing down’ of television and the arts where the self-appointed conservators of taste have largely lost the argument against ‘the new’. The cultural conservatives are now on the receiving end of suspicion, expressed for example by Stefan Szczelkun (1993, 83). ‘Good taste is the framework of values which the dominant group uses to keep itself on top. Rather than just an expression or celebration of superiority, it is an active agent of repression.’ Such suspicion can also be directed at the masters of suspicion: all signs of cultural conservatism can be read as mere patricianism.

Baudrillard as evolved master of suspicion

With these preliminaries in mind let us turn to Baudrillard as inheritor of suspicion and possibly one who elaborates it even beyond Foucault. If later Continental philosophy develops the glowering suspicion of Marx and Freud into a generalised ‘incredulity’ then Baudrillard goes beyond the indignation of incredulity to the bread-and-circuses stage of universal fakery. In one of his key texts *Simulacra and Simulation* the term ‘simulacra’ extends its original meaning (as images or representations of real-world objects or events) to become signs that have either no real-world referent in the first place or where that referent is lost. It is still the case however that the simulacra of the modern and postmodern era are enslaving, hiding as they do oppressive power structures, but we note that for simulacra to have increasingly replaced the real in Baudrillard’s thinking there must have been an earlier prelapsarian condition. The central suspicion exercised by Baudrillard is clear however: all signs now point only to themselves and so we are eternally stranded in the hyperreal.

The tenor of Baudrillard’s suspicion is different to that of Marx, Freud and Foucault, though just as totalising; it is neither angry nor insistent that emancipation is at hand if only our false consciousness were somehow rectified. In other words Baudrillard has quite abandoned the teleology of Marx. If the teleologies of religion have collapsed under the weight of totalising suspicion, then, quietly, this much at least has also to be abandoned in Marx. Instead the Baudrillardian universe becomes a shiny plastic one devoid of referents, and even if we mourn their passing we are not galvanised into revolution because that too would be shiny, plastic and

devoid of referent. Artefacts of the resistance against the structures of oppression are now merely co-opted into an advertising campaign, a pout on a catwalk, a spectacle: all referentless. Suspicion has evolved now to hold within it no shred of emancipatory vision.

Baudrillard and the suspicion of suspicion

So how do we turn Baudrillard's suspicion on itself? Are there any toe-holds in the shiny plastic cliff-face of referentless signs and purposeless consumption? Baudrillard himself suggests one move in a polemic he directs at Foucault, starting: 'Foucault's writing is perfect in that the very movement of the text gives an admirable account of what it proposes ...' (Baudrillard 2007, 29) The essence of Baudrillard's attack on Foucault is that he is guilty of what he alleges, i.e. that the work is 'also a discourse of power'. Though Baudrillard languages this differently it effectively points out a patrician impulse in these allegedly emancipatory texts, which is one of pontification – literally providing the 'bridge' over which the acolyte must pass to 'truth' – and is hence a self-elevating discourse of power. If we now turn Baudrillard's move on Foucault against Baudrillard's own canon, we might now construct the following: 'Baudrillard's writing is perfect in that its text admirably comprises the simulacrum he attacks in that it is equally a discourse devoid of referent.' This move is only an opening gambit however so let us look at some specifics, starting with Baudrillard's views on culture.

We note the first loss that Baudrillard mourns in *Simulacra and Simulation* as victim of the triumph of the simulacra is that of God, while the second is that of the Lascaux cave paintings where visitors now only see a reproduction (1994, 4-10). Martin Geoffroy (2012, 24) points out 'For Baudrillard, popular culture is nothing more than a form of alienation and cannot be a source of inspiration at any metaphorical level.' Baudrillard says in his work on art:

The illusion of desire has been lost in the ambient pornography and contemporary art has lost the desire of illusion. In porn, nothing is left to desire. ... The same is true for art, which has also lost the desire for illusion, and instead raises everything to aesthetic banality, becoming *transaesthetic*. (2005, 25)

But can Baudrillard's critique of the hyper-real be read as the reactionary hermeneutics of a cultural conservative steeped in the long tradition back to Plato? Has Baudrillard taken upon himself to interpret the signs of consumer culture, not in the service of genuine liberation, but in the service of the classical white male European canon? Is he to consumer culture what Marx was to the Great Exhibition? Baudrillard's repeated assertion that the desert of the real is a wrong turn, a regrettable progression from a time when the real was properly real, can be considered as a form of lapsarianism. In terms of authenticity it seems that Baudrillard's

gold standard is informed by Mauss's *The Gift* – or at least the spontaneity implicit in its thesis – while everywhere in Baudrillard's writings we find a distaste for popular culture as a precession of referent-less signs under the weight of which he thinks we are all drowning. We detect neither of these traits in Foucault for example; his suspicion is directed equally at all periods of history, and when he does obliquely acknowledge Mauss (2000, 41) he merely observes that in 'primitive' societies the exchange of goods and signs contrasts with that of the medieval period where exchange is of goods, signs and weapons. In his meditations on Velázquez (2002) and Magritte (1983) we see no cultural conservatism either, indeed he seems to largely suspend suspicion in the realm of fine art, quite unlike Baudrillard.

We now turn to an oddity in Baudrillard's thought where we are entitled to suspicion on entirely different grounds. Early in *Simulacra and Simulation* Baudrillard says that iconoclasts – whose 'millennial quarrel is still with us today' as he acutely observes – are afraid of images, icons, signs:

This is precisely because they predicted this omnipotence of simulacra, the faculty simulacra have of effacing God from the conscience of man, and the destructive, annihilating truth that they allow to appear – that deep down God never existed, that only the simulacrum ever existed, even that God himself was never anything but his own simulacrum – from this came their urge to destroy the images. ... One can see that the iconoclasts, whom one accuses of disdain and negating images, were those who accorded them their true value, in contrast to the iconolaters who only saw reflections in them and were content to venerate a filigree God. (Baudrillard 1994, 4)

One may object to this firstly because the iconoclasts of the early Christian era – who learned it from the Jews – could not have predicted any such 'omnipotence' (or rather omnipresence) of signs as Baudrillard suggests we have in the modern era. The antagonism of the Church Fathers was directed at the past where Nature religions had since time immemorial erected symbols – Freud's 'totems' for example – of the sacred. The new monotheisms defined themselves most powerfully in opposition to the nature and goddess religions, as a careful reading of the Old Testament shows (Stone 1976). Secondly, the much later iconoclasts of the Reformation reinvented this earlier zeal for destruction of images as a weapon against Catholicism. Thirdly, it had nothing to do with a fear that God did not exist, because that idea arose later and only slowly through the Enlightenment period. Hence we can interpret such passages in Baudrillard as a culturally received and unexamined prejudice against iconolatry that is entirely parochial to the Western monotheisms, only recently challenged, by for example, Karen Armstrong (1994, p.64), and elaborated on in (King 2007, 85-86).

What Baudrillard most usefully does for us however is flag up the central problem of idolatry in all three monotheisms. As far back as 1757 David Hume understood

this when he expressed his appreciation of Judaism and Islam for their greater determination in rooting out idolatry than in Christianity (1990, section VIII). The religious problem here is one of the anthropomorphism of what is sacred, most notably God. A less sophisticated religionist needs more concrete concepts, hence the images of deities in polytheism and the coalescing of these into a single image of God in monotheism. Baudrillard is by definition a sophisticated thinker and in approaching questions of religion he cannot perhaps help recoil from any iconography of God, or as he calls it the 'simulacrum of divinity'.

Let us sum up where we have arrived in this brief exercise of turning the central suspicion of Baudrillard upon his own oeuvre. Firstly, we can interpret his work as a discourse of power because he has elevated himself priest to our false consciousness. Secondly, we can declare his work as reactionary patricianism because he finds contemporary cultural productions inferior to those of some golden age. Thirdly, Baudrillard has not directed suspicion towards his culturally received hostility towards idolatry because he cannot suspend his central suspicion that all signs are now referentless, and always were in the case of religion.

This pursuit in the negative of a hermeneutics of (suspicion denied) obviously leaves us with only a negative however: that Baudrillard must therefore also be wrong about religion. We must not doubt that there is some value in this approach for the post-critical religionist. If suspicion of the master demolishes the master then the space left behind has a characteristic lacunarity. Hence if real-world referents, including God, creep back cautiously into the site vacated by Baudrillard, then specifically they are not to be approached by the iconography of anthropomorphism.

The considerable intellectual investment made in acquiring proficiency in Continental philosophy in general, and specifically in Baudrillard's canon, leaves us is an inflected void where religion emerges perhaps in a pluralistic, non-hierarchical and anti-anthropomorphic fashion but with little else to shape it, were we to approach this with a negative hermeneutics. We now turn therefore to more positive readings of Baudrillard where we arrive at a hermeneutics of the denial of suspicion with possibly more specific religious potential.

Baudrillard and the negative theology

In a major work assessing the implications for theology of Baudrillard's work, James Walters concludes:

And now we have ventured to speculate whether the sweeping away of so much of what was considered real is not the terrifying annihilation of theology

but the possibility of a new dawn in which the divine might be perceived as the true reality that overcomes the Real. (2012, 144)

Walters effectively disempowers Baudrillard's suspicion of the real by pushing it forward rather than reversing it. In this analysis, sweeping away the real does not leave us stranded in the eternal hyper-real but cognisant instead that the real was always already 'maya' – illusion – behind which stands the divine. Walters begins his investigation by saying: '... what I am not attempting in this book is a systematic refutation of Baudrillard's atheistic and nihilistic thought ... I am more concerned to see what possibilities his rampant hermeneutics of suspicion might open up for the theologian.' (2012, 6) Elsewhere Walters says that 'Baudrillard also opens up ways of thinking about God that need not be so 'cancerous' (2012, 56). Walters is not so much pursuing the denial of the hermeneutics of suspicion but interested rather in the parallel between Baudrillard's hermeneutics of suspicion and the negative theology: '... one of the core arguments of this book is that Baudrillard's nihilism frequently takes on an apophatic character that makes room for a new kind of believing, a new kind of excess.' Walters (2012,79)

An apophatic theology – or negative theology – is one which seeks to describe God in negative terms, where in contrast cataphatic theology uses positive terms. 'Negative' here does not mean disparaging or critical but relates to the problem of anthropomorphism. The less said about God, particularly using human terms, the better. Continental philosophy and the negative theology already have some points of contact, for example in Derrida's 'Violence and Metaphysics' (King 2009, 209) and in the work of Luce Irigaray (Priest 2003). But for Walters there is an obstacle to a theological reading of Baudrillard. Walters is certainly in agreement with him that we live less authentically now but he does not agree that we are 'stranded in the present' as Sartre so vividly painted for us in *Nausea* (King 2007, 19-21) and which Baudrillard reiterates in his own terms, as Walters points out:

Baudrillard contends that there is no sense in our world today that we are 'going anywhere' since we lack a conception of history as a narrative ending in culmination, be that annihilation or consummation. 'For us', he writes, 'the mirror of history, the continuity of history is shattered; we live in an instant and disincarnate currentness'. This has enormous theological implications since the idea of time as a meaningful linear journey that will reach some kind of endpoint is a central concept in the Abrahamic Faiths. (2012, 81)

Walters takes this as a challenge when he reflects: 'Perhaps the most important question running through his later work is to ask what it means for a society to have given up on teleology or eschatology' (2012, 81). He cites Baudrillard again: "[T]aken at the level of meaning, the world is pretty disappointing, but each detail of the world, taken in its singularity, is perfect." (Walters, 2012, 123) It is the details which Walters hopes will rescue us in the 'plane crash' of postmodernity. As the

fragments escape the totalising systems of our capitalist hyper-real world Walters sees in their eschatological incompleteness a postmodern hope for theology, and in Baudrillard's radical thought a form of prayer (2012, 128). More, Walters sees this as a form of mysticism though perhaps a 'weak' one (2012, 138-139). He now comes to the idea of the negative theology: 'Baudrillard's language of nihilism is particularly reminiscent of John of the Cross' abandonment of self into "nothing" since God is nothing (i.e. no thing).' (2012, 141) Walters concludes:

In embracing Baudrillard's rejection of modernity's conceptions of reality, today's theology must engage with a *realism beyond the real*, seeking to identify God within the singularities and events that disrupt the self-referentiality of the virtual. (2012, 143)

We come again to the central problem here of the sign which either has no referent or has lost it and how this concept of the hyper-real relates to religion, specifically to the negative theology. But is the relationship anything more than superficial? For the acknowledged masters of the negative theology such as Dionysius, Meister Eckhart and St John of the Cross, the point of abandoning all signs is not, as Baudrillard claims, to acknowledge the absence of the referent, God, but to remove obstacles to the unmediated apprehension of this referent. One might also argue that the inner movement towards the apophatic position is a movement of increased trust rather than of increased suspicion. The purpose of the hermeneutics of suspicion is at least nominally an emancipatory one – an emancipation from human structures of power. But St John of the Cross was not at all interested in such limited forms of emancipation; instead he pursued his negations to remove him from the distractions that separated him from his 'lover', God. In Eckhart it was detachment that forced God to him – a different dynamic but same goal – and in which suspicion directed at temporal power was entirely absent; he was in fact an embodiment of considerable temporal power as senior church administrator. Derrida's point, made in 'Violence and Metaphysics' stands perhaps: 'This negative theology is still a theology and, in its literality at least, it is concerned with liberating and acknowledging the ineffable transcendence of an infinite existent.' (Derrida 1978, 183) This is far from the language and intent of Baudrillard one might say: there is no 'existent' for him behind the referential chain beginning with the sign 'God'.

Baudrillard and hyper-real religion

Geoffroy (2012) presents another possible strategy for assessing a potential Baudrillardian contribution to religion, this time through the concept of 'hyper-real religion'. Hyper-real religions are those that draw on contemporary fiction and are largely pursued through social media. If a hermeneutics of suspicion is emancipatory of traditional hierarchical religion it can certainly be argued that it leaves the

space for new democratic religious forms, which might also include what are conventionally termed 'new religions' or the New Age in addition to hyper-real religions.

However, there are two possible objections to the idea that Baudrillard's work assists in this. Firstly the idea of signs with non-existent referents is shown to fail when examined from a Hindu perspective (Scheifinger, 2012). The adoption by Hinduism of hyper-real forms through television, for example, changes nothing over observing the same forms in a temple because offerings are made in front of the TV set and garlands draped over it just as with an effigy of the deity in a temple. The referent, if it was regarded as existing before the hyper-real emerges, exists just as much afterwards.

Secondly, the question we are posing is what Baudrillard's thought offers to the *post*-critical religionist. Though scholars are sensitive to the accusation that hyper-real religions lack the gravitas of established religions and defend their validity in various ways, it must be obvious that examples such as Jediism, Matrixism and Raelianism are to some extent the domain of the pre-critical mind and therefore belong to a different sub-culture far removed from one receptive to Baudrillard, who anyway effectively rejected Matrixism (King 2016, 201).

Baudrillard, his photography, and the irruption of the real

While it may be useful to negate Baudrillard's suspicion to create anti-anthropomorphic inflected spaces for faith to flourish, or to argue for a parallel with his hermeneutics of suspicion as a negative theology, or make a different parallel with hyper-real religions, a fourth option arises pointed to at length by Walters but perhaps better contextualised using Eastern religious ideas and leading to rather different outcomes. If eschatology has failed us – as Walters is concerned about – and Baudrillard is right that we are in some way now stranded in an ahistorical consumerist desert, then perhaps the answer lies in a religious impulse centred around the entirely quotidian. We can look to Buddhism, Taoism and to some extent Shinto to provide us with religious discourses of the everyday, against which Baudrillard's thought – and also his photography – suddenly gains traction.

Walters (2012, 120-131) draws us to Baudrillard's notion of the 'desert of the real' and the nature of real deserts as stimulus to mystical thought, and it is here that the parallel with the negative theology might have worked better if it was a negative theology that retained what we might term a *world-curiosity* and which is made difficult in Christianity because of its Gnostic and Manichaeic heritage. When we walk out of the front door stripped of all our aims and structures, in a mood curious of the small things of the world, it matters little whether it is a cultural or

literal desert: it is the everyday thing that speak to us 'in their singularity'. As we saw earlier Baudrillard puts it like this: 'Taken at the level of meaning, the world is pretty disappointing, but each detail of the world, taken in its singularity, is perfect.' We have been presented with systems of meaning: religion, science, philosophy, politics, art, and all turn out to be disappointing, perhaps because each is totalising, hegemonic and incapable of integration with each other. But to turn suddenly and find the world perfect in its details is a significant and possibly profound move. Take for example Baudrillard's photographs of a wrecked car just submerged in a river, or of water cascading off slabs on a watercourse. The images refuse both meaning and aesthetics, intentionally, yet are 'perfect' to Baudrillard. The photographs are singularities because they cannot be incorporated into any system.

Western religion gives us little insight into this as in any way religious however, where Eastern religion is more helpful. In a well-known essay by T. D. Suzuki, a promoter of Zen in the West, he reflects on a haiku by Basho describing the *nazuna* (shepherd's purse) flower:

When I look carefully
I see the nazuna blooming
by the hedge!

Suzuki suggests that the intensity of feeling invoked in Basho by this common wildflower is conveyed, not by rapturous phrases and vivid metaphor, but by the simple device of the exclamation mark, or rather its equivalent in Japanese. He says '... when one's mind is poetically or mystically or religiously opened, one feels as Basho did that even in every blade of wild grass there is something really transcending all venal, base human feelings, which lifts one to a realm equal in its splendor to that of the Pure Land.' 'Pure Land' here would equate to various elevated terms in Christian tradition, perhaps 'salvation' for example, and hence Suzuki is saying that the feeling in encountering this common natural object is a religious one. He contrasts Basho's poem to one by Tennyson:

Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies; –
Hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower – but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

Suzuki criticises Tennyson for plucking the flower instead of simply being present for it: 'Quite differently from the Oriental poet, he does not leave the flower alone. He must tear it away from the crannied wall, "root and all," which means that the plant must die. He does not, apparently, care for its destiny; his curiosity must be

satisfied. As some medical scientists do, he would vivisect the flower.’ (Fromm et al 1961, 1-10)

Let us imagine Baudrillard taking a walk like Basho, though he is not a seventeenth century Japanese nature poet and hence more likely to be in an urban technologised environment, and anyway rejects parallels between his work and Eastern thought, just as he rejects parallels between his hyperreality and the Matrix. We are not talking now about philosophers/poets in their professional capacity but in their suspension of all professional obligations and -isms. Baudrillard spots a submerged wreck of a car in a river. In being present for its singularity he has momentarily suspended suspicion. He does not suspect this object – any more than he would a shepherd’s purse flower – of being part of a repressive system. The unexpected or counter-intellectual has taken place, a moment in which Baudrillard drops out of the ‘simulacrum’ of postmodern capitalist banality and into the realm of the ‘gift’. He has transformed the encountered object or experience into one of perfection through the denial of suspicion, and so it becomes a gift that is not part of the mechanical system of exchange mediated by money.

This is not quite yet a hermeneutics of the denial of suspicion, merely chance happenings strung together. A hermeneutics in the religious sense is a spiritual practice, or worldview, which is deliberately cultivated, whereas Baudrillard arrives here perhaps more by the exhaustion of his otherwise endemic suspicion. Basho deliberately cultivates his receptivity to Nature, while the Zen thinker Suzuki goes much further in making the awareness of everyday things a spiritual practice, using formal techniques such as zazen – sitting meditation – and informal use of the spontaneous – hence Zen koans and interventions of the unexpected. What Suzuki inherits from Buddhism and Taoism, and which is rather unknown to the West, is an entire religious discourse of *tathata*, ‘suchness’. It is ‘suchness’ that Baudrillard is perhaps responding to in his photography and more importantly in his notion of the ‘singularity’. Hence if the momentary or accidental abandonment of suspicion in moments of spontaneous discovery of the everyday becomes an ongoing religious practice we then have a positive hermeneutics proper of the denial of suspicion. At its heart is a world-curiosity but one we must, with Suzuki, sharply distinguish from the harshness of the scientific curiosity that would turn the living flower into a dead one in an attempt to know God.

Turning to a filmic equivalent of the wildflower, but perhaps more appropriate to Baudrillard, we may contemplate the famous white plastic bag blown about by cold winter gusts in the film *American Beauty* and which prompts a panegyric from a youngster otherwise engulfed by consumerist capitalist simulacra (King 2014, 24). Nothing can be more banal than this plastic bag but it becomes a gift to the young man, an irruption of the real, one like Mauss’s gift that requires no immediate payment in coin but imposes a spiritual obligation on its recipient to give at some time, some place, some thing in return. This perhaps is the gift we may take from

Baudrillard as a spiritual practice: a hermeneutics of the quotidian, arrived at through the progressive denial of all things systematic and systematising, including even of the programmatic requirement for political revolution or its religious equivalent, the eschaton (salvation).

Conclusions

In seeking support for the emergence of a post-critical faith we have parsed the Baudrillardian universe in four different ways. The first route involves the demolition of suspicion through more suspicion. While this might demolish Baudrillard it leaves a space for religion with an anti-anthropomorphic and anti-eschatological inflection. The second route is via the initially promising parallel between Baudrillardian thought and the negative theology, but this rather collapses on a closer reading of the practitioners of the historic negative theology. The third route, of seeking support in Baudrillard for the so-called hyper-real religions, founders on a dissonance between the critical tenor of Baudrillard's thought and the somewhat pre-critical texture of the hyper-real faith communities. Finally a fourth option, seeking in Baudrillard's 'singularity' a faith of the quotidian, looks the most promising, but does require contextualising through Eastern religious forms.

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