

# Book Review: The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology

by Blog Admin

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*The return to religion is seen by some as the dominant cliché of contemporary theory. Somehow, the secular age seems to have been replaced by a new era, where political action flows directly from metaphysical conflict. **The Faith of the Faithless** asks how we might respond. Should we defend a version of secularism and quietly accept the slide into a form of theism – or is there another way? **Russell Sandberg** urges readers to explore Critchley's experiments for themselves, concluding that it remains an important, bold and intriguing book.*



**The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology. Simon Critchley. Verso. February 2012.**

At the time of writing, four UK cases concerning religious freedom are currently before the European Court of Human Rights at Strasbourg. Two of these cases, [Eweida and Chaplin](#), concern the wearing of religious symbols at work while the other two, [Ladele and McFarlane](#), concern the extent to which religious believers can discriminate on grounds of sexual orientation. All four cases underscore a trend which has come to the foreground in the opening decade of the twenty-first century: the resurgence in interest in, and controversy surrounding, the role of religion in the public life.

This trend has prompted academics in a range of disciplines to pay increased attention to religion. In the UK, the Arts and Humanities and Economic and Social Research Councils have funded the prolific 'Religion and Society' Research Programme, which has commissioned research from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds with total funding of £12.3 million. Meanwhile, global scholars of repute such as Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor have come to focus their research on questions concerning religion, questions which were previously seen as being outdated.

The same shift of focus can be found in the work of [Simon Critchley](#), a Professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research and at the University of Essex, Colchester. Critchley notes that readers may consider the fact that he has written a book on questions of religion and faith as odd given that he has previously asserted that "philosophy begins in disappointment, notably religious disappointment – that is to say, crudely stated, the death of God" (p. 18).

However, Critchley asserts that nothing in his new book contradicts this claim given that the conception of faith which he is concerned with here is not "a matter of belief in the existence of some metaphysical reality like God". Rather, as the title of the book makes clear, Critchley's conception of faith, is the "faith of the faithless". And it is this faith of the faithless which the book attempts to sketch from a historical, philosophical and theological perspective.

It is difficult, however, to say much more about *The Faith of the Faithless* due to the book's important subtitle. As Critchley points out, the chapters are intended to be "a series of essays in the sense of an "assay" or experiment" (p. 20). It would be churlish, therefore, to reveal the outcome of the experiments in this review. Readers would benefit from their own unspoilt close reading of Critchley's experiments.

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However, as a taster for those experiments, it is possible to reveal a little bit more about the concept of the faith of the faithless and Critchley's objective. Critchley draws upon the the works of Oscar Wilde, not only to provide an ingenious pun (Wilde Christianity) but also to address how such a faith of the faithless may bind people together in association. His question is "how we speak of religion – as that force which can bind human beings together in association – without God" (p. 20). Drawing from Wilde's *De Profundis*, Critchley describes how the faith derives from internal rather than external stimuli. As he puts it, "This faith of the faithless cannot have for its object anything external to the self or subject, any external, divine command, any transcendental reality", it is rather "a work of collective self-creation where I am smithy of my own soul and where we must all be soul-smiths, as it were" (p. 6). Drawing upon his own work Critchley regards this as an example of dividualism rather than individualism. He writes of how the self is shaped and divided by the nature of conscience. As he expresses it:

*"The infinite ethical demand allows us to become the subjects of which we are capable of being by dividing us from ourselves, by forcing us to lie in accordance with an asymmetrical and unfulfilable demand – say the demand to be Christ-like – whilst knowing that we are all too human."*

The force that brings about the faith of the faithless is what Wilde referred to the "sordid necessity of living for others". As Critchley observes while people can free themselves of "the limiting externalism of conventional morality, established law and the metaphysics of traditional religion, it seems that we will never be free of that "sordid necessity" of living for others (p. 7).

From these foundations, Critchley develops and refines his idea of the faith of the faithless drawing upon thinkers such as Rousseau, Schmitt and critiques of St Paul's political theology. However, for this elucidation, readers will need to follow the experiments in the book for themselves. The incentive for doing so is Critchley's claim that the faith of the faithless not only underscores how faith is not necessarily theistic but also "reveals the true nature of faith" (p.18).

Critchley observes that talk of the return of religion has become perhaps the dominant cliché of contemporary theory. He notes that this is due to a political reality dominated by the fact of a religious war: "Somehow we seem to have passed from a secular age ... to a new situation in which political action seems to flow directly from metaphysical conflict". Critchley points out that there are typically two responses to this new political reality: either to defend a version of secularism or quietly accept the slide into some form of theism. He observes that *The Faith of the Faithless* seeks to reject such an either/or option and develop a third response given that "neither traditional theism nor evangelical atheism will suffice" (p. 19).

Whether readers are convinced by Critchley's faith of the faithless will be a matter for them but given the topicality and complexities of the issues addressed, observation of Critchley's experiments is fully recommended. This important, bold and intriguing book deserves to be on the bookcases of those who study religion from a range of disciplinary perspectives.

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**Dr Russell Sandberg** is lecturer in law at Cardiff University where he researches at the Centre for Law and Religion. He is author of *Law and Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), co-author of *Religion and Law in the United Kingdom* (Kluwer Law International, The Netherlands 2011) and co-editor of *Law and Religion: New Horizons* (Leuven, Peeters 2010). He is currently working on a monograph on religion, law and society for Cambridge University Press and is co-editing a volume on religion and legal pluralism for Ashgate. [Read more reviews by Russell.](#)

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