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October 7, 2012: The Nature of Religion

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Title: The Nature of Religion

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10/7/2012—Simon Critchley is chair of philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York. He has written a new book, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology*, which is a serious contribution to the question of the content of secularism. Critchley is responding, says the book jacket, to the “return to religion”. Apparently, his response is going to be a kind of religion for nonbelievers in the traditional religions. So far so good. I would describe *Hallowed Secularism* in somewhat similar terms. (Except for the part about the return to religion, which I don’t see and seems irrelevant anyway). I am just now reading the book, which is slow going because Critchley is a real philosopher. (Now there is a distinction from me). But since one’s beginning point is one’s endpoint (Heidegger wrote that somewhere), I am alert to the starting point of Critchley’s understanding of religion. Here it is, after he tells the sad story of Oscar Wilde’s life in prison and after getting out. Wilde proclaims a sensuous religion, an aesthetic fidelity to “What one can touch and look at.” (from the book). Then Critchley interprets the implications of Wilde’s understanding. “It is the phrase ‘Everything to be true must become a religion’ that is most striking. What might ‘true’ mean? ...I think he was using ‘true’ in a manner close to its root meaning of ‘being true to,’ an act of fidelity that is kept alive in the German word *treu*: loyal or faithful. ...What is true, then, is an experience of faith, and this is as true for agnostics and atheists as it is for theists. Those who cannot believe still require religious truth and a framework of ritual in which they can believe.” This is an important paragraph in which Critchley is to an extent challenging Heidegger’s distinction between religion, which is premised on faith, and philosophy, which is not. (Or at least Critchley is claiming that philosophy is not really a full life). But is religion equivalent to faith? Heidegger also critiqued his own definition by adding that faith that does not question is not faith but indifference. At the very least, shouldn’t religion be thought of as the experience of the struggle toward faith? And upon what would that struggle be based, if not understanding? (Yes, I hear echoes of Anselm here also). In *Basic Questions of Philosophy*, Heidegger unfolds truth as grounded not on faith but on unconcealment. If religious truth is based on a kind of knowledge, then one still has a link—a shared life—between believer and unbeliever, but of a different kind from a link to faith.