



Godless Intellectuals? The Intellectual Pursuit of the Sacred Reinvented by Alexander Tristan Riley

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through careful examination of writing about depression (particularly, though not exclusively, of French psychiatrists and psychoanalysts), including a detailed discussion of antidepressants and biological understandings.

It is impossible to do justice in a short review to the wealth of ideas and insights contained in this book, including some brilliant and illuminating aphorisms and oppositions, and *The Weariness of the Self* repays careful study. For the Anglo-Saxon reader the inclusion of the French material is especially welcome, though the book also draws on a good range of other material. The attention given to psychoanalytic ideas is also welcome, since there has been a tendency, post DSM-III, to disregard them. However, I was not myself entirely convinced by Ehrenberg's own thesis of depression as a "weariness of self." This idea differs from the more usual view of depression as a pathology of sadness and misery, particularly linked to loss—a view that he criticizes briefly in the new preface. If we examine the DSM's current delineation of major depressive disorder—an exercise he does not attempt—there are some symptoms, including fatigue, that fit his analysis, others far less so, suggesting that while Ehrenberg's ideas may contribute to the understanding of depression, they are not the whole story.

The preface, written especially for the English edition, mainly deals with three important texts that have appeared since the book was first published—David A. Karp's *Speaking of Sadness* (Oxford University Press, 1996), Emily Martin's *Bipolar Expeditions* (Princeton University Press, 2009), and Allan V. Horwitz and Jerome C. Wakefield's *The Loss of Sadness* (Oxford University Press, 2007). Though interesting it would, I think, have been better placed at the end of the book when the reader was already familiar with Ehrenberg's own argument. Overall, however, *The Weariness of the Self* makes an important contribution to the understanding of depression and illuminates the changing ways of thinking about it.

Godless Intellectuals? The Intellectual Pursuit of the Sacred Reinvented.
By Alexander Tristan Riley. New York: Berghahn Books, 2010. Pp. ix+298. \$95.00.

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As sociologists, we hardly need to be reminded that most of us are among small minority of people in the world who no longer believe in God, and who therefore prefer secular and scientific explanations for how the world works over religious and cosmic ones. Rarely though do we distinguish clearly between what we or others profess, say, or actually do regarding sacred matters. Not every confession of faith is believed in, and apparently

secular actions or sacrilegious thoughts may actually express a profound appreciation for divine forces or transcendent powers. *Godless Intellectuals? The Intellectual Pursuit of the Sacred Reinvented*, the title of Alexander Tristan Riley's book, poses a question that its subtitle already answers, and that the contents elaborate on through a case study of French intellectuals in the 20th century, from Durkheim to Deleuze. Rejecting institutionalized religion, these philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, and cultural theorists sought to express and enact the sacred as *experience*—in the etymological (Latin) sense, as a “trial, proof, or test” of the limits of existence, or more dramatically, as an “experiment, danger, or peril” concerning what is beyond or beneath the merely material (p. 35). Riley's account assumes that “the cultural sociology of intellectuals must be about the reconstruction of the narratives that make up their life-works” (p. 36). Through a close scrutiny of an impressive archive of unpublished, untranslated, or relatively unappreciated materials, he conducts his own experiment or test by probing the scholarly journals, personal correspondence, social networks, educational institutions, and contextualizing political events that provided the scenes and settings for this uniquely “intellectual” experience of the sacred.

Although the book's subject is the development of “the Durkheimians,” it employs a Weberian historical narrative of rationalization and re-enchantment and a Weberian analytical framework that locates the key figures in terms of a grid of asceticism and mysticism (p. 198). The ascetic strain is inaugurated by Durkheim, of course, whose career and circle of devoted students found conceptual focus in a variety of “interaction ritual sites”: the *Année Sociologique*, his lecture courses at the École Normale Supérieure, and numerous personal contacts and intellectual collaborations. In response to the Dreyfus Affair, to educational reforms, and to World War I, Durkheim and his disciples sought to redefine the political role of the intellectual habitus, or calling. Having read Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges and William Robertson Smith in the mid-1890s, Durkheim came to think of modernity's “cult of the individual” as part of a civic religion “in which man is at once believer and God” (p. 69). Combining ritual and totemic elements of the Jewish rabbinate, Catholic monasticism, and Protestant asceticism, he joined forces with his nephew Marcel Mauss and their collaborators Robert Herz and Henri Hubert in an attempt to discover and recover the reverence, devotion, and discipline that would restore the morale (*esprit de corps*) of modern societies. As Hubert expressed this holy mission in a letter to Mauss, “We will be influential less by the perfection of our work . . . than by the need, the desire, *the sacred fire of organized work that will emanate from us*” (p. 189).

As is evident from lyrical words like these, the mystical strains of Durkheimian thought were already welling up among this younger generation. Perhaps the most illuminating feature of Riley's narrative consists in his discussion of those unheralded circulating ideas and pedagogical mentorships after the world wars that transformed Durkheimism into a trans-

gressive enterprise for analyzing and creating new experiences of sacred effervescence (p. 206). In ways that both complemented and undermined Durkheim's authority, marginal figures in the French university system such as Lucien Herr and Sylvain Lévi served as inspiring "masters of ceremonies" for the careers and ideas of Hubert, Herz, and Mauss, while powerful intellects such as Henri Bergson and Alexandre Kojève provided key impetus for the formation of the Collège de Sociologie, a group loosely organized around Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, and Michel Leiris. Here the institutional scene shifts to the École Pratique des Hautes Études (particularly the sections on the religious and social sciences), and the scriptural medium centers on the journal *Critique*. Incorporating lessons from their teachers on the sacred and profane practices of sacrifice and gift giving, and responding to changes in intellectual fashions, populist and avant-garde aesthetic movements, and political events, the group around Bataille came to see itself as a "vessel" (rather than a "tool") of orgiastic excess and cultural transgression by working both within and against the obscenities of the times.

The boldness of Riley's argument—at least for North American readers—consists in presenting the "poststructuralists" (most of whom would have rejected or qualified such a label) as *heirs to the tradition of mystic Durkheimianism* (chaps. 5–6, 11–12). The personal and career paths of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean Baudrillard (the last is the odd one out, as the only one with a sociology post) intersected in the new universities at Nanterre and Vincennes, were shaped decisively by the events of May 1968, and found direction from such older thinkers as Louis Althusser, Georges Canguilhem, and Roland Barthes. As the leading disciplinary alignments shifted from the social sciences to the humanities, so does Riley's narrative turn from institutional analysis to psychobiography as we move from the lecture hall and seminar room to the cafes and bedrooms of the Paris literati. Whatever the setting, respect for the sacred continued to infuse a reinvented conception of the engaged intellectual, if only as a limit to be transgressed through confrontations with Absolute Otherness: in madness (Foucault), intensities (Deleuze), dangerous supplements (Derrida), and deadly counter-gifts (Baudrillard). Riley notes that where Durkheim recognized the crisis of the 20th century and confidently offered clear solutions, the responses of the following generation was ultimately *tragic* (p. 174). To complete this line of argument, we might say that if in tragedy the subject "enacts or stages" the Absolute while in comedy the subject "is or becomes" the Absolute (as Alenka Zupancic puts it in *The Odd One In* [MIT Press, 2008], p. 27), then perhaps the legacy of poststructuralism will have been to return the subject of thought to the limits of laughter.