

On Becoming-Secular: Gilles Deleuze and the Death of God

MARIE CHABBERT

University of Oxford

Abstract. Gilles Deleuze is not traditionally thought of as a philosopher of religion, and for good reasons. Throughout his works, Deleuze repeatedly stresses that he is a ‘peacefully godless philosopher’, someone for whom God’s inexistence or death is not a problem but rather a given. In this article, I wish to draw attention to Deleuze’s engagement with Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God in *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*), and suggest that the latter can be of crucial use in understanding problems and issues relating to the so-called secular age. Deleuze’s ‘tranquil’ atheism has indeed little to do with mainstream atheism. In fact, it even challenges the main tenets of Western secularism. As such, I argue that Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche’s thought opens new horizons which cannot be described as postsecular, but rather correspond to a becoming-secular.

In *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?* (*What is Philosophy?*), philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari remark, not without half-veiled exasperation, that many of their contemporaries still lament over the death of God. ‘On s’étonne’, they write, ‘que tant de philosophes encore prennent au tragique la mort de Dieu. L’athéisme n’est pas un drame, mais la sérénité du philosophe et l’acquis de la philosophie’.¹ For Deleuze and Guattari, the death of God should appear unproblematic to modern-day thinkers insofar as it was achieved more than a hundred years ago. As Deleuze suggests in ‘Sur la mort de l’homme et le surhomme’ (‘On the Death of Man and Superman’), while forces external to man were traditionally thought of in terms of *infinity* and thereby sustained an idea of God, the nineteenth century marked the emergence in philosophy

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1991), p. 89. ‘It is amazing that so many philosophers still take the death of God as tragic. Atheism is not a drama but the philosopher’s serenity and philosophy’s achievement’, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 92. Here Deleuze and Guattari probably refer to thinkers of the so-called theological turn of French phenomenology, including Paul Ricœur, Jean-Louis Chrétien and Jean-Luc Marion. See Dominique Janicaud, *Le Tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* (Combas: Éditions de l’éclat, 1991).

of forces of *finitude* external to man, such as Life, Labour, and Language.² That which in human existence and the world used to be thought of in infinite terms, referring to a transcendent God, started to be perceived in finite terms. Thus God died in Western philosophy, accelerating the development of atheism in the so-called modern West and thereby facilitating the advent of what Charles Taylor would later term the secular age.³ Accordingly, following Deleuze, the only acceptable philosophical reaction to the death of God after a century of mourning is that which he calls ‘athéisme tranquille, une philosophie pour qui [...] l’inexistence ou même la mort de Dieu ne sont pas des problèmes, mais au contraire des conditions qu’il faut considérer comme acquises’.⁴

For Deleuze, the most emblematic example of such a peacefully godless philosophy is that of Friedrich Nietzsche. Throughout his works, Deleuze repeatedly argues that Nietzsche was less concerned about God, and God’s death, than about the death of Man.⁵ As Deleuze insists in ‘Sur la mort de l’homme et le surhomme’, ‘on défigure Nietzsche quand on en fait le penseur de la mort de Dieu’.⁶ One may oppose Deleuze here and cite one of Nietzsche’s many texts which condemn God’s mastery over humanity and stage violent confrontations between the former and Dionysus or the Antichrist.⁷ These texts apparently contradict Deleuze’s argument: far from taking the death of God for granted, Nietzsche seems to actively attempt to kill a still very much living God. One could therefore wonder how Deleuze justifies his reading of Nietzsche’s approach to the death of God. Olivier Tinland rightly points out that Deleuze’s engagement with Nietzsche’s work is ‘tout sauf une étude raisonnée de la pensée de Nietzsche’,⁸ and rather consists in a Deleuzian rewriting of Nietzsche’s philosophy. Yet why would Deleuze strive to tune down Nietzsche’s interest in the death of God and align him to a supposedly peaceful form of atheism? What this paper achieves, therefore, is to unfold the main tenets of Deleuze’s ‘tranquil’ atheism by examining his engagement with the Nietzschean death of God. In so doing, I hope to lead to the recognition that Deleuze radically breaks with mainstream atheism and opens thought to new horizons which,

² Gilles Deleuze, ‘Sur la mort de l’homme et le surhomme’, in *Foucault* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2004), pp. 131–41 (p. 134).

³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Périclès et Verdi: la philosophie de François Châtelet* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1988), p. 7. ‘[T]ranquil atheism, a philosophy in which [...] the nonexistence and even the death of God are not problems, but rather conditions that should be treated as givens’, my translation.

⁵ See, for instance, *ibid.* and Deleuze, ‘Sur la mort de l’homme et le surhomme’, p. 138.

⁶ Deleuze, ‘Sur la mort de l’homme et le surhomme’, p. 138. ‘We distort Nietzsche when we make him the thinker who wrote about the death of God’, Gilles Deleuze, ‘On the Death of Man and Superman’, in *Foucault*, trans. by Seán Hand (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 124–32 (p. 129).

⁷ See, in particular, Nietzsche’s book-length attack against Christianity published in 1894, *Der Antichrist. Fluch auf das Christentum* (Berlin: Hofenberg, 2016).

⁸ Olivier Tinland, ‘Portrait de Nietzsche en anti-Hégélien: Retour sur le Nietzsche et la philosophie de Gilles Deleuze’, *Klesis Revue Philosophique* (October 2007), 31–47 (p. 31). ‘[A]ll but a reasoned study of Nietzsche’s thinking’, my translation.

as we will see, cannot be described as postsecular, but rather correspond to a becoming-secular.

The deaths of God

In *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*), his second published book and most sustained engagement with Nietzsche's work, Deleuze argues that one should speak of the *deaths* of God rather than the usual singular death of God.⁹ For Deleuze indeed, quoting a passage from Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*): 'Lorsque les dieux meurent, ils meurent toujours de plusieurs sortes de morts.'¹⁰ Chapter 5 of *Nietzsche et la philosophie* indexes these multiple deaths of God. For the purpose of this article, two of them are worth examining in more detail.

On the one hand, based on his reading of Nietzsche, Deleuze highlights that God's death was first thoroughly theorized as part of the Christian doctrine. The death of God constitutes not only the birth-act of Christianity — what distinguishes it from Judaism — but also the very heart of its dogma.¹¹ The core Christian values of love, self-sacrifice, and redemption depend on Christ's death on the cross, for it is only by exposing Himself to the possibility of His negation that Christ may resuscitate and that His sacrifice redeems humankind. Christ's death is, therefore, not a threat to the Christian God; rather the opposite, it takes part in and reinforces His moral order. As Hegel remarks on several occasions in *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (*Phenomenology of Spirit*), the Christian death of God is thus profoundly dialectical in nature, that is, it involves a movement of negation — here, death — that preserves that which it was supposed to undermine — here, God.¹²

As Deleuze however remarks, by staging for the first time the putting to death of God by humankind, Christianity opened thought to a world in which God is not.¹³ For Deleuze, the Christian dogma 'sécrite par là son propre athéisme', atheism which has now become mainstream in the so-called modern West.¹⁴ In other words, Christianity paradoxically initiated a second — atheistic — death of God. Yet, as Deleuze explains in 'Sur la mort de l'homme et le surhomme', the latter threatened to exhaust the external forces of infinity — and by extension, the higher values — that traditionally supported human existence. In the nineteenth century, thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Auguste

⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (Paris: PUF, 1983), p. 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 175. 'When gods die, they always die many kinds of deaths', Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 152. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra: Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen* (Berlin: Hofenberg, 2016), p. 214.

¹¹ Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, pp. 175–77.

¹² G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1952), p. 523; p. 531; pp. 544–46.

¹³ Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, pp. 177–78.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 177. '[S]ecretes its own atheism', *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 154. Jean-Luc Nancy extensively develops such an argument in *La Déclosion: Déconstruction du christianisme* (Paris: Galilée, 2005).

Comte, and Ludwig Feuerbach therefore modelled new values, new external forces, based on human finitude.¹⁵ Thus was born the humanistic idea of Man in Western philosophy. Yet as Deleuze rhetorically asks, ‘en mettant l’homme à la place de Dieu, supprimons-nous l’essentiel, c’est-à-dire la place?’¹⁶ According to Deleuze, the atheistic death of God merely replaced traditional theological values with humanistic ones, the God-Man with the Man-God. It *dialectically* negated the Christian God, opposed His infinity with forces of finitude, but nevertheless preserved something of His transcendence at the heart of its own structure. As Christopher Watkin suggests in *Difficult Atheism*, the atheistic death of God can thus be called ‘imitative’ insofar as it ‘merely replaces “God” with a supposedly atheistic placeholder [...], explicitly rejecting but implicitly imitating theology’s categories of thinking’.¹⁷

The death of Man

As far as Deleuze is concerned then, both the Christian *and* imitative deaths of God follow a dialectical logic and therefore always result in ‘un bizarre mélange [...] d’athéisme et de théologie’.¹⁸ Yet for Deleuze, Nietzsche’s pronouncement of the death of God has nothing to do with these two deaths. In fact, according to Deleuze, Nietzsche is much less concerned about God’s death, which was effectively achieved by the end of the nineteenth century with the advent of Man-God, than about the death of this very Man-God and, more generally, of the transcendent ‘place’ he occupies.¹⁹ Here, Deleuze meets Martin Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche’s thought in ‘Nietzsches Wort “Gott ist tot”’ (‘Nietzsche’s Word: God is Dead’).²⁰ For Heidegger, Nietzsche’s project of revaluation of values functions as a systematic denial of transcendence in favour of immanence, of all that is suprasensory in favour of that which is strictly sensory. Thus, Heidegger argues that the living God whom Nietzsche opposes throughout his works — sometimes by means of violent confrontations with its rival, Dionysus or the Antichrist — is just as much the Christian God as transcendence itself, including all higher truths and values.²¹

The parallel between Deleuze and Heidegger’s readings of Nietzsche however ends here. Unlike Deleuze indeed, Heidegger argues that Nietzsche’s project

¹⁵ Deleuze, ‘Sur la mort de l’homme et le surhomme’, p. 134; see also, Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, p. 172.

¹⁶ Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, p. 101. ‘By putting man in God’s place, do we abolish the essential, that is to say, the place?’, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, pp. 88–89.

¹⁷ Christopher Watkin, *Difficult Atheism: Post-Theological Thinking in Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy and Quentin Meillassoux* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 1–2.

¹⁸ Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, p. 210. ‘[A] bizarre mixture of [...] theology and atheism’, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 183.

¹⁹ Deleuze, ‘Sur la mort de l’homme et le surhomme’, p. 138.

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, ‘Nietzsches Wort “Gott ist tot”’, in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1977), pp. 209–68.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 216–17.

to kill Man is doomed to fail insofar as, by proceeding by means of binary oppositions, it too plays in the hands of dialectics. According to Heidegger, Nietzsche defines the sensory *by contrast with* the suprasensory, which means that, even after he denies the latter, its shadow remains within the very structure of the former.²² As Watkin elucidates in *Difficult Atheism*, 'In limiting itself to the sensory world *as opposed to* the suprasensory, the immanent *as opposed to* the transcendent, [this] residual [form of] atheism finds itself — just like imitative atheism — defined in terms of that which it seeks to escape', that is, transcendence.²³ For Heidegger, then, Nietzsche's death of Man is no different than the Christian and imitative deaths of God: by approaching immanence *negatively*, as that which is opposed to transcendence, it dialectically leaves a theological space unchallenged. God is not preserved *per se* — as with the Christian death of God — and his place is not occupied by an atheistic placeholder — as with the imitative death of God. His place is simply left empty.²⁴ Moreover, as Heidegger remarks, leaving the place empty means running the risk of a new contamination by Man-God, Reason, or any other transcendent placeholder, for 'die leere Stelle fordert [...] dazu auf, sie neu zu besetzen und den daraus entschwundenen Gott durch anderes zu ersetzen'.²⁵ As far as Heidegger is concerned, then, Nietzsche's residual atheism not only fails to destroy God's transcendent 'place', it is also complicit with filling it anew.

The (not so) immanent frame

At this point, I would like to suggest that Heidegger's critique of Nietzsche's *dialectical* engagement with the death of God also applies to secularism. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor remarks that secularism is generally understood as a political organization of society — the separation of religion from the public spheres of human reality in order to guarantee both the neutrality of the State and the freedom of cult — and as a social phenomenon — the fact that religion has lesser importance for social life.²⁶ However, Taylor argues that secularism also corresponds to a lived experience of existence and the world in terms of *immanence*.²⁷ With the progressive disengagement from Abrahamic religions and their transcendent divine in secular societies, Taylor argues, 'we come to understand our lives as taking place within a self-sufficient immanent order'.²⁸ Taylor compares this change in perspective to the closing of an 'immanent

²² Ibid., p. 209.

²³ Watkin, *Difficult Atheism*, p. 6.

²⁴ Heidegger, 'Nietzsches Wort "Gott ist tot"', p. 225.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 225. '[T]he empty space demands to be occupied anew and to have the god now vanished from it replaced by something else', Martin Heidegger, 'Nietzsche's Word: God is Dead', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. by William Lovitt (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), pp. 53–114 (p. 69).

²⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 1–2.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 3–4.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 543.

frame' over Western minds.²⁹ Just like Nietzsche's philosophy, secularism functions as a denial of transcendence in favour of immanence. Of course, in secular societies, the immanent frame is rarely hermetically closed in the way Nietzsche called for. Rather, it is kept ajar, so long as transcendence and its religious manifestations are securely contained within the private sphere. In the most part of human daily experience, then, immanence must still prevail.

In the last few decades, however, a number of anthropologists have remarked that secularism remains dialectically dependent on an idea of transcendence. On the one hand, the atheist neutrality imposed by secularism upon the public sphere tends to be colonised by transcendent placeholders, such as Reason or Man, which lead to the emergence of quasi-religious — or, to use Watkin's term, imitative — humanist or rationalist currents in many Western countries.³⁰ On the other hand, as with Nietzsche's residual atheism, secularism cultivates a binary opposition between immanence and transcendence by separating spiritual matters from earthly ones. Naturally, such a separation requires that spiritual matters be of transcendent nature, and by extension, relatively detachable from this-worldly concerns. This is how religion has been defined in social sciences for the past hundred years.³¹ Yet anthropologists such as Talal Asad, Bruce Kapferer, and Martin Holbraad have accused such definitions — and, by extension, Western secularism — of ethnocentrism, for they fail to accommodate the wide variety of immanent spiritualities found across the world and throughout history.³² Animist and perspectivist peoples, for instance, admit a sense of the sacred which is absolutely undistinguishable from this-worldly matters. Their spirituality is, therefore, incompatible with secularism. One may wish to criticize Taylor for using the term 'immanent frame' to define secularism, then. The 'frame' of secularism is only immanent insofar as it admits no *religious* transcendence. Yet it simultaneously fails to get rid of atheistic forms of transcendence, *as well as* to accommodate immanent religions. In fact, secularism proves unable to admit that something might exceed its binary categories, such as be religious *and* immanent — for immanence is, again, only defined negatively, as that which is opposed to transcendence. Secularism is thus twice dialectical: the atheist neutrality it imposes upon the public sphere is both imitative and residual. And so is Nietzsche's thought, at least according to Heidegger.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See, for instance, Bruce Kapferer, 'Anthropology: The Paradox of the Secular', *Social Anthropology*, 9.3 (2001), 323–44; Matthew Engelke, 'Christianity and the Anthropology of Secular Humanism', *Current Anthropology*, 55.10 (2014), 292–301.

³¹ See Talal Asad, 'The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category', in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 27–54.

³² See Asad, 'The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category'; Bruce Kapferer, 'Outside All Reason: Magic, Sorcery and Epistemology in Anthropology', *Social Analysis*, 46.3 (2002), 1–30; Martin Holbraad, *Truth in Motion: the Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

The eternal return of difference

Deleuze, on the other hand, makes a completely different reading of Nietzsche's death of Man. The thrust of *Nietzsche et la philosophie* is that Nietzsche's death of Man is profoundly *anti-dialectical* insofar as it affirms the ontological primacy of difference over Being-as-such.³³ As a movement of negation, dialectics indeed posits the ontological primacy of Being-as-such.

To justify this claim, Deleuze appeals to Nietzsche's pluralism. According to Deleuze, Nietzsche's thought is pluralist insofar as it approaches all that is — phenomena, organisms, and so on — as a state of forces. Of course, Deleuze acknowledges that '[I]e pluralisme a parfois des apparences dialectiques',³⁴ especially when such a pluralism relies on binary oppositions as those identified by Heidegger in Nietzsche's philosophy. The first step of dialectics — negation — does require pluralism. However, Deleuze suggests that Nietzsche's forces admit a differential element within their own structure which prevents the establishment of any fixed state of force, of any Being-as-such and, by extension, of any binary opposition between two of such beings. This differential element is that which Nietzsche calls the will-to-power, the accomplishment of which is supposed to announce the death of Man. Historically, the concept of will-to-power has been wrongly associated with a thirst for (political) power.³⁵ Yet, following Deleuze's reading, the will-to-power rather designates the creative thrust of willingness — creative insofar as, in a world where all that is reflects a state of forces, it continuously proposes new such states.³⁶ As Deleuze explains, 'la puissance est *ce qui* veut dans la volonté. La puissance est dans la volonté l'élément génétique et différentiel. C'est pourquoi la volonté de puissance est essentiellement créatrice'.³⁷ The accomplishment of the will-to-power, therefore, marks the death of Man through the advent of a most originary difference, one that precedes and indeed undermines the concept of Being-as-such on which dialectics depend.

According to Deleuze, then, Nietzsche does not simply reject transcendence by preferring its binary opposite, as Heidegger has suggested. Rather, the will-to-power prevents the establishment of any fixed identity. Transcendence, as well as its binary opposition to immanence, are rendered unthinkable. All that remains is difference-as-such, which is nothing but an eternal repetition, 'la répétition du coup de dés, la reproduction et la re-affirmation du hasard lui-même'.³⁸ This is the meaning Deleuze gives to Nietzsche's concept of the eternal

³³ Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, p. 223.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9. 'Pluralism sometimes appears to be dialectical', *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 8.

³⁵ The manipulation of Nietzsche's theses by the Nazis to accommodate their racist and bellicose worldview is most particularly to blame.

³⁶ Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, p. 7; pp. 56–59.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 96–97. Deleuze's emphasis. '[P]ower is *the one that* wills in the will. Power is the genetic and differential element in the will. This is why the will is essentially creative', *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 85.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32. '[T]he repetition of the die-throw, the reproduction and re-affirmation of chance

return. While the latter has traditionally been understood as the return of the *identical*, Deleuze describes it as the ontological expression of the will-to-power, which is not Being-as-such but rather becoming.³⁹ Here, Deleuze touches on 'la formule magique que nous cherchons tous: PLURALISME = MONISME'.⁴⁰ Deleuze's Nietzsche is neither strictly pluralist, for a singular — monist — idea of being remains within his thought in the form of becoming, nor strictly monist insofar as that which makes the unity of being is the eternal return of difference-as-such. What Deleuze finds in Nietzsche is therefore nothing but a way of — finally — approaching immanence *in itself* as the eternal return of difference-as-such, and not through its opposition with transcendence.

Becoming-secular

It will probably be clear by now that Deleuze never wished to deny Nietzsche's engagement with the death of God. He simply wanted to indicate that the latter has implications far beyond the limits of theological discourse. The Nietzschean death of God, according to Deleuze, inaugurates a most radical form of atheism, one which announces the death of Being-as-such, undermines dialectics, and therefore radically breaks with the imitative and residual forms of atheism found in modern secular societies. In fact, Deleuze argues that Nietzsche's differential immanence is 'seul principe d'un violent athéisme'.⁴¹ Is the atheism which Deleuze finds in Nietzsche *violent* or *tranquil*, then? I contend that it is both. Nietzsche's atheism is most violent insofar as it not only denies God, but undermines the ontological assumptions that supported the very concept of transcendence. In other words, Nietzsche's ontology takes the inexistence or death of God — by extension, of transcendence — for granted.⁴² As far as Deleuze is concerned, Nietzsche's atheism is *tranquil*, and this is what makes it so violent, so radically godless.

Crucially, if being secular consists of experiencing life and the world independently from any reference to transcendence, as Taylor has suggested, one may go so far as to suggest that Deleuze's Nietzsche is more secular than secularism itself.⁴³ By developing an ontology in which difference is prior to Being-as-such, Nietzsche proposes a most radical — *differential* — immanent frame, one that is not dialectically dependent on its transcendent opposite. Nietzsche's thought — as read by Deleuze — carries the seeds of a differential or tranquil secularism. I suggest that the latter would consist of a daily effort

itself', *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 28.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980), p. 31. '[T]he magic formula we all seek: PLURALISM = MONISM', Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 20.

⁴¹ Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, p. 4. '[T]he only principle of a violent atheism', *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 4.

⁴² See Deleuze, *Périclès et Verdi: la philosophie de François Châtelet*, p. 7.

⁴³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 3–4.

to affirm the ontological primacy of becoming by excavating and indeed cultivating the will-to-power deep at the heart of that which is apparently dependent on transcendence, or Being-as-such. This is the thrust of Deleuze's political thought, as developed in *Mille Plateaux* (*A Thousand Plateaus*). In the face of an existing majority, that is, a standard that comes to be defined in terms of Being-as-such, everyone — including members of this majority — should strive to creatively challenge the standard, in other words, to *become-minority* or to become as such.⁴⁴ Similarly, being most violently — or peacefully — secular would mean striving to open religion to the flux of becoming by creatively challenging its transcendence, in other words, to *become-secular*.

As discussed above in 'The (not so) immanent frame', this is arguably what a number of anthropologists have been trying to do over the past few decades. By acknowledging the inability of traditional definitions of religion to accommodate non-transcendent spirituality, anthropologists such as Kapferer and Holbraad open thought to a less essentialist, more creative understanding of religion, one that exceeds the binary opposition between transcendence and immanence.⁴⁵ Asad even goes a step further, suggesting that approaching religion as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon is, in itself, an essentialist move.⁴⁶ Not only should religion be freed from any systematic association with transcendence, as this contradicts the ethnographic reality, it should not be reduced to a fixed essence at all by means of a definition. This is also what Deleuze seems to suggest in *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, acknowledging that '[l]a religion a autant de sens qu'il y a de forces capables de s'en emparer'.⁴⁷ Depending on the actors involved and the forces at stake, a religion such as Christianity might indeed turn out to be a moralistic regime to which humanity is enslaved *or* a reserve for creativity actively fostering the will-to-power. Looking at the history of philosophy and the arts, for instance, Deleuze highlights that the idea of infinity and of a transcendent God have proven to be less of a constraint than an occasion for artists and thinkers to emancipate themselves from all codes, concepts, and forms.⁴⁸ Thinkers such as Baruch Spinoza and Henri Bergson, as well as the painter Francis Bacon, used religious themes as a starting point to promote creativity and movement. According to Deleuze, then, 'l'athéisme n'a jamais été extérieur à la religion: l'athéisme, c'est la puissance-artiste qui travaille la religion'.⁴⁹ *Becoming-secular*

⁴⁴ See Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille Plateaux*, pp. 133–35; pp. 356–58; pp. 586–88.

⁴⁵ See Kapferer, 'Outside All Reason: Magic, Sorcery and Epistemology in Anthropology'; Holbraad, *Truth in Motion: the Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination*. Other ethnographic studies refer to Deleuzian concepts, as these were deemed to better fit the ethnographic reality than traditional essentialist concepts.

⁴⁶ Asad, 'The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category', p. 129.

⁴⁷ Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, p. 165. 'Religion has as many senses as there are forces capable of taking possession of it', *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 143.

⁴⁸ Gilles Deleuze, 'Cours Vincennes 25/11/1980' (unpublished lecture, 1980) <<https://www.webdeleuze.com/textes/15>> [accessed 30 October 2018].

⁴⁹ Ibid. '[A]theism was never exterior to religion: atheism is the artistic-power at work within

would precisely consist in cultivating such an artistic-power at the heart of that which is traditionally defined as religion, thereby restoring the latter to the flux of becoming and emancipating it from all essentialist definitions and concepts.

I therefore argue that *becoming-secular* promises to be more efficient than Western secularism at guaranteeing the freedom of cult and protecting the public sphere from religious truth-claims. Indeed, by making space for immanent spirituality and opening all that is transcendent to creativity, becoming-secular allows for a coexistence of all possible forms of religiosity, whatever this might mean. Only the return of transcendence in the form of a fixed morality or truth-claim remains ethically unacceptable, for it would counter the creative movement of the will-to-power. As Deleuze stresses, quoting Nietzsche, 'seul le Dieu *moral* est réfuté'.⁵⁰ Unlike — transcendence-dependent — secularism, therefore, becoming-secular not only guarantees a genuine freedom of cult, it also protects the public sphere from religious truth-claims. By proposing an ontology that affirms the primacy of becoming over Being-as-such, then, Deleuze's Nietzsche opens thought to a most tranquil form of secularism, one which is not so much about being secular or 'postsecular', for the prefix 'post' carries a sense of overcoming and, with it, the seeds of a dialectical logic,⁵¹ but rather about *becoming-secular*.

religion', my translation.

⁵⁰ Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, p. 164. Deleuze's emphasis. '[O]nly the *moral* God is refuted', *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 214. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. by G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1967–77), 11.624, p. 92.

⁵¹ See Kristina Stoeckl, 'Defining the Postsecular' (unpublished presentation, 2011) <http://synergia-isa.ru/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/stoeckl_en.pdf> [accessed 30 October 2018].