God in Pain

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Inversions of Apocalypse

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK and BORIS GUNJEVIĆ

Boris Gunjević's chapters translated from the Croatian by Ellen Elias-Bursać

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If, once upon a time, we publicly pretended to believe while privately we were skeptics or even engaged in obscene mocking of our public beliefs, today we publicly tend to profess our skeptical, hedonistic, relaxed attitude while privately we remain haunted by beliefs

Introduction

The Mystagogy of Revolution
Boris Gunjević

The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the iniquities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who, in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children. And I will strike

down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who would attempt to poison and destroy My brothers. And you will know My name is the Lord when I lay My vengeance upon thee.

"Ezekiel 25:17"[1]

In its first version, this book was put together from unpublished material stemming from a debate on the "The Monstrosity of Christ" between Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank. After *Bog na mukama* (God in Pain) first appeared in Croatian in 2008, friends suggested we publish it in the United States. To that end Žižek offered several new essays and these changes did somewhat alter the book's concept, though not its substance. The project was conceptualized not as a polemic but as a reflection, a conversation between a philosopher and a theologian, a psychoanalyst and a priest, who, at first glance, have nothing in common.

The place where I stand and whence I write is on a border. This place—between East and West, the Balkan and the Mediterranean, Europe and Eastern Europe—offers a specific perspective on theology about which I have written elsewhere.[2] From within the ideological construct known as *transition* (nothing more than an opportunity for violence and pillage of biblical proportions under the guise of safeguarding national interests and traditional values), and from a place in which Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Muslims, and Jews have lived for centuries in suppressed conflict, I would like to speak out together with those individuals and movements violently shoved to the margin of discourse, tossed from history to its very periphery where history mocks and taunts any geog-

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1   As misquoted by Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) in the Quentin Tarantino film *Pulp Fiction* (1994).

2   Boris Gunjević and Predrag Matvejević, *Tko je tu, odavde je—Povijest milosti* (Whoever is Here, Hails from Here—a History of Charity) (Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, 2010).

raphy. There has been no lack of such heterogeneous movements and individuals in this part of the world, be they heretical Bogumils, Patarenes, Bosnian Christians, Apostolics, followers of John Wycliffe, radical Anabaptist sects, or heteroclitic movements such as the Glagolitic priests, the Hussites, Calvinists, and Lutherans, to which I myself belong. Theirs is either a theology written in their own blood or it is no theology at all. The border on which I stand, in a realm that lies "in between," has hosted and sheltered over a relatively brief period (and I say this with no small measure of pride) two serious Messianic pretenders who felt they were among their own in this psycho-geographic corner of the world. The first was Fra Dolcino, a Messiah and progenitor of the radical Franciscans known as the Apostolics, who lived in Split and Ulcinj, both cities on the Adriatic Coast. The other, better known, is Sabbatai Zevi, a convert to Islam, a Jewish Messiah, who practiced the Jewish faith in secret until his sudden death among the legendary Ulcinj pirates.

This very border area, this realm "in between," is a manifestation of the coordinate system I am setting up between two stories. The first concerns Lenin's speech to the All-Russia Congress of Transport Workers in 1921, the second Boccaccio's commentary on a dream about Dante. This book came about in a gap within the system of coordinates to be outlined by way of these two apparently unrelated stories.

I

Before he embarked on one of his typical rousing speeches, Lenin addressed the assembled transport workers with a noteworthy comment. While walking through the hall where over 1,000 Congress attendees were gathered, Lenin had spotted a placard displaying the slogan: "The reign of the workers and peasants

will last for ever." It was no surprise, Lenin remarked, that the sign had been placed "off in a corner," for the workers who had written it were, generally speaking, still confused about the fundamentals of socialism even three and a half years after the October Revolution. Following the final and decisive battle, he explained, there would no longer be a division between workers and peasants, since all classes would have by then been abolished. As long as there were classes, there would be revolution. Even if the placard had been sidelined and relegated to a corner there was still, so Lenin felt, a clear lack of understanding manifested in the slogan's in widespread use. There were few workers who understood against what, or whom, they were waging one of the last decisive battles of the revolution. This was precisely what Lenin had come to speak about before the Congress.

So what is remarkable about this introductory digression? First, Lenin failed to take in the more dangerous message on the placard. We can interpret it as a form of theological subversion. That the kingdom of workers and peasants will have no end, that their reign will be eternal, does not spring from the ontology of materialism espousing the eternal nature of matter. No, it is a clear theological formulation as described and invoked by the existence of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, one of the most important Christian documents ever written. The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed is a rule of Christian faith and practice with which the workers appear to have been familiar, and which would have come down to them from pre-Revolutionary Russia. The message on the placard makes it clear that the workers had indeed taken the Revolution the wrong way. In that, Lenin was right. He did not, however, fully understand what was wrong with their understanding.

Lenin was convinced that the transport workers needed to be told what to think and what to do if they were to serve as

an authentic proletariat for the benefit of the Revolution. It was necessary to place the philosophy of revolution in the service of a proletariat that did not understand it. This can be readily demonstrated by the most tragic moment of the Russian Revolution, the Kronstadt uprising, about which Lenin rants later in the same speech. The crushing of the uprising was nothing more than a party crackdown on those to be eliminated at all costs—those who thought differently from Lenin himself. Here Georg Lukács is surely right when he says that whatever point the theoreticians of revolutionary discourse arrive at using their intellectual powers and *spiritual labor*, the proletarian will already be there thanks to the fact that he is a member of the proletariat—assuming, of course, that he remembers his true class membership and all the consequences arising therefrom. In other words, Lukács is alerting us to the ontological superiority of the proletariat over the intellectuals, who remain at the ontic level of revolution, although one might have the opposite impression. Those workers who participate directly from start to finish in the process of production—with the help of genuine companionship, and living, as Lukács says, in a "spiritual community"—are the only ones able to fulfill the mission of mobilizing revolutionary forces in a process unmarred by intrigue, social climbing, or bureaucracy. They recognize and push aside the opportunists and scoundrels and encourage the waverers.[3] In his speech explaining to the transport workers what they ought to be thinking and doing, Lenin does quite the opposite.

Leon Trotsky saw this very early on, in an entirely different context concerning the everyday life of the proletariat. In a study

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3   Georg Lukács, *Political Writings, 1919–1929: The Question of Parliamentarianism and Other Essays*, trans. Michael McColgan (London: NLB, 1972), 69.

on aspects of everyday life,[4] Trotsky argues that the worker is trapped between vodka, the church, and the cinema. Though he sees all three as narcotics which harm the proletariat, he sets the cinema apart from the other two. Compared to going to a tavern and drinking oneself into a stupor, or attending church where the same drama is perpetually performed out of habit and monotonous ritual, Trotsky prefers the cinema, whose role is entirely different. Encountering the silver screen provides a theatricality of greater grip than that provided by the church, which seduces with a thousand years of stage experience. The cinema clothes itself in a more valuable garb than the vestments of the church and its hierarchy is more varied—it amuses, educates, and makes a powerful impression. Trotsky says that the cinema quashes every desire for religion, that it is the best way to counter tavern and church. He suggests that the cinema should be secured as an instrument for control of the working class. In other words, Trotsky feels seductive spectacle to be essential to revolutionary discourse and practice.

This, in a nutshell, is the argument against Lenin's critique of the placards at the Congress hall. Since he must explain to the transport workers what is expected of them, they are effectively purged from the revolutionary discourse, and, once purged, must be replaced by others, for without workers there can be no revolution or history. Lenin espouses a certain form of pedagogy that invariably fails and abolishes itself chiefly because it does not succeed in instilling any sort of virtue. This is the fundamental error of his whole speech to the Congress of Transport Workers, at a time when the October Revolution was still formally in process.

The Revolution did not succeed because it did not instill virtue, nor was it informed by virtue. The most general thing that can

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4   Originally published in *Pravda* July 12, 1923. Available at http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/women/life/23_07_12.htm

be said is that revolution itself is a form of virtue. Such a statement, however, is all but mystical, and therefore the only thing remaining for us is to proclaim revolutionary terror a virtue—which is obviously ridiculous. There is no reason at this point for us not to agree with Saint-Just's prophetic insight that he who does not want either revolutionary terror or virtue inevitably turns to corruption—always the consequence of a failure to choose between the first two options.

The only virtue of the revolution is in and of itself. As such it culminates in occasional ecstatic states, in orgies of pure violence that go unpunished. This too often has as its consequence an abandonment of the revolutionary ideal, by which the proletariat disqualifies itself for any number of reasons, such as a growling stomach, mediocre leaders, shenanigans within the party and bureaucracy, poor leadership among homegrown revolutionaries jockeying for position within the party nomenclature. Trotsky ascribes all this to vodka and the church.

It would seem that a proletariat without virtue strips itself of its privileges and disqualifies itself, yet at the same time revolution cannot proceed without a proletariat. Revolutionary discourse presupposes a sacrifice—and if we see this as a virtue in Lenin's revolutionary context then it is always about sacrificing others in the name of a third party—so no wonder "professional revolutionaries" resemble frustrated hedonistic nihilists. Every revolution is doomed to fail if it lacks virtue, if it has no ad hoc participative asceticism which would assume a transcending dimension, no built-in dimension of spiritual exercise, or what Michel Foucault calls "technologies of the self." Revolution without virtue is necessarily caught between a violent orgiastic lunacy and a bureaucratized statist autism.

Trotsky seems to have been right when he said that man does not live by politics alone, clearly alluding to the story of the

temptation of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, as man does not live by bread alone but by every word that issues from the mouth of God. We are therefore left with only a few options: the tavern, the church, the cinema . . . Or "The reign of the workers and peasants will last for ever." Clearly Lenin did not comprehend the implications of the transport workers' placard and hence missed the theological message lurking therein; otherwise, he would not have limited his critique to the question of class. It seems that in criticizing the placard, Lenin was displaying his own ignorance of the elemental religious references informing their perceptions and forming their habitus. In particular, that of the transport workers, who, as modern nomads, convey goods and produce to the state, linking capital, labor, and the market in what is perhaps the most intimate fashion.

This is the first story serving as a sub-text for this book.

II

The second story is Giovanni Boccaccio's and it concerns Dante Alighieri. It is far more romantic and certainly of greater significance. Taking Dante as his example, Boccaccio means to show how poetry and theology are one and the same, and, moreover, that theology is nothing more than divine poetry. By the same token, in "deconstructing" the *Decameron*, he opines that when Jesus is said to be a lion, lamb, or rock in the Gospels, this is nothing more than a poetic fiction. Furthermore, Boccaccio claims that there are statements by Jesus in the Bible which make no apparent sense if interpreted literally, and which are better understood allegorically. He concludes from this that poetry is theology, and theology poetry. Describing Dante's life and his *Comedy*, Boccaccio wishes to substantiate his important insight not only by relying on Aristotle but also by using examples from

The Divine Comedy in relation to the political and social context within which it was written.

The Divine Comedy was penned in exile, a product of Dante's nomadic life. It is therefore no wonder that the *Comedy* itself describes a journey through Hell, Paradise, and Purgatory in the company of unusual fellow travelers who have a special significance for the author. After a schism in the political party of the Whites, of which Dante was a member, and an attack from the papal vassals, referred to as the Blacks, Dante was banished from Florence in 1302, and subsequently condemned in absentia to being burned at the stake. This sentence turned Dante into a poetic and political nomad who would never return to his native city. After roaming through Europe, he reached Ravenna and there he eventually died. Boccaccio says that Dante meant to describe in the vulgate, in rhyme, all works by all people and their merits in history. This was a remarkably ambitious and complex project requiring time and labor, especially as Dante was a man whose footsteps were dogged by fate at every turn, laden with the anxiety of a bitter gall.

The *Comedy* became Dante's life work. When political opponents broke into his home (from which he had fled in haste, leaving everything behind), they found portions of his manuscript in a traveling trunk. These were preserved and handed over to the then most famous of Florentine poets, Dino Frescobaldi. Frescobaldi recognized that before him was a masterpiece, and through acquaintances had the manuscripts sent to Dante's friend the Marquis Morello Malaspina, in whose home Dante had taken shelter. The Marquis had encouraged Dante to persevere, and so he did. Boccaccio tells how Dante's death prevented him from completing his masterpiece: the last thirteen cantos were missing. Dante's friends were dismayed that God had not permitted him to live longer, so that he might complete

his extraordinary work. All hope was lost of ever recovering the final cantos.

Dante's sons, Jacopo and Piero, themselves poets, agreed to complete their father's *Comedy*. One night, eight months after Dante's death, Jacopo had an odd dream. The son asked his father whether he had finished the great work and, if so, where those final cantos were hidden. Dante answered that, yes, the work was finished, and he had stowed the manuscript in the wall of his bedroom. Jacopo went off that very night to consult with Piero Giardino, for many years a disciple of Dante's.

Having roused Giardino in the middle of the night, Jacopo could not wait. Both proceeded at once to Dante's house to search the bedroom walls. A tapestry was draped over one wall and behind it was a little door. Opening the door, the two men found the manuscripts tucked away inside, coated in mold and almost destroyed. Having found the final thirteen cantos, they passed them on to Dante's friend Cangrande della Scala, to whom Dante had given his manuscript in stages as he wrote it. According to Boccaccio, Dante dedicated the entire *Comedy* to Cangrande, while each of the three parts is thought to have been dedicated to different individuals. Furthermore, Dante had given Cangrande a hermeneutic key for interpreting the *Comedy* using a simple exegetical formula, first mentioned by Nicholas of Lyre, a contemporary of Dante's, but attributed to Augustine of Dacia. The formula—which, according to Henri de Lubac, can be found in the work *Rotulus pugillaris*, published around 1260[5]—was clearly a medieval interpretation of the Bible, handed down from the Patristics, with roots in Origen's text *Peri Archon*. It reads as follows:

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5   Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, Vol. 1, trans.
     Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 1.

Littera gesta docet,
Quid credas allegoria,
Moralis quad agas
Quo tendas anagogia.[6]

In a letter to Cangrande, Dante explains that his work is polysemic, in other words that the meaning in the *Comedy* is literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogic, and he provides as an example an interpretation of the first verse of Psalm 114. Allegory is extended metaphor and it must meet certain conditions dictated by the theological tradition if it is not to be arbitrary. Literal and allegorical meaning are in a relationship of tension in the *Comedy*. They do not merge, but neither are they separate. This is what makes the Dante of *The Divine Comedy* both an apostle and a prophet.

Dante's fellow travelers on the journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise—Virgil, Beatrice, and St. Bernard—could be deemed ecclesial nomads, with Virgil representing reason, Beatrice divine mercy, and St. Bernard love. Having passed through Hell and Purgatory, each described in pedagogical terms, Dante converses in Paradise with St. Peter on the subject of faith, with St. Jacob on hope, and with St. John on charity. From these conversations it is clear that Dante feels one cannot pass through Hell and Purgatory without the aid of theological virtues such as faith, hope, and charity. To do so, one must become an ecclesial nomad and dwell in virtue. Hence we can say that the *Comedy* is a medieval spiritual allegory depicting the nature

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6   Ibid., 271, n. 1. A free translation would read as follows: "The powerful words (gesta) of God in history are the foundation of the Christian faith. This faith seeks formulation of its own understanding in a doctrine (allegoria). True belief finds moral expression in action" ("what we should be doing"—moralia). The meaning of the fourth line, i.e. the purpose and goal of divine redemptive action, gives the answer as "faith that acts through love," and action of this kind leads us onward and upward (anagogia).

of humankind, its purification, and its renewal through the
theological virtues.

Dante often plays slyly with the political reality of his day,
scrutinizing it closely to arrive at often provocative conclusions.
This is evident from the political and spiritual topography within
which he situates the participants in his *Comedy*: we might
expect to find the heretics in Hell, for instance, but Dante up-
ends things. Pope Nicholas III, as a swindler and Simonist, is
consigned to Hell, while the Latin Averroist Siger of Brabant is
to be found in Paradise. Siger was a proponent of the so-called
theory of "double truth"—the truth of reason and the truth
of faith. Strongly influenced by Islam, this had been branded a
heresy. Yet there stands Siger in Paradise, alongside St. Bernard
who, as a priest, had blessed the Holy Crusades and the mas-
sacre of the French Cathars. In Dante's case, the heresy was more
inspirational than influential: its significance was to introduce
a political differentiation linked to a prophetic vision of social
relations.

Certainly the most important fact about the *The Divine Comedy*
is that Dante thought of it as instructional and emancipatory.
His master work was to be practical and contemplative, as every
metaphysical speculation must come down to ethical action, its
ultimate objective being an uplifting of the individual towards
God and unity with a blessed vision of the Trinity. The way
Dante speaks of the vision of God in *The Divine Comedy* is worth
remarking on. It might escape the notice of us ultramodern
readers that there is no God to be seen in Dante's Paradise. This
is the apotheosis of his poetic theology. There is no God in Para-
dise because Paradise is in God, and this is why the vision of the
Trinity matters to Dante. He intended to articulate a model for
ethical transcendence by presenting and evaluating the place of
every person in eternity. His ambitious project is of great theo-

logical import for us today. This is the second story serving as a sub-text for this book.

<div align="center">III</div>

At this point, it would be apposite to explain why, in introducing this collaborative volume, I chose not to use stories that were closer to us in time and affinity. I could have taken two less "mythological" stories that would have been more "authentic." However, all later interpretations of the stories, no matter how scholarly and professional, are rooted in the initial "myth." If we truly want to understand we must return to the origins, to see what sort of connection these stories have to us today. In other words, between Lenin's speech to the transport workers and Boccaccio's commentary on a dream, there is a coordinate system reaching through time and space within which I intend to situate my own theological vision. The cartography of that vision begins after the polemic between Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank published in *The Monstrosity of Christ*.[7] In my opinion that polemic is not yet done, though things seem to have reached a logical conclusion. We can read their debate in two equally plausible and compatible ways:

The first reading is possible with the help of Martin Luther's key—the distinction between the theology of the cross and the theology of glory. In this case, Žižek would be a materialistic theologian of the cross (after Luther himself, Jakob Böhme, G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Jacques Lacan) while Milbank might just as well be a Thomistic theologian of glory (after Augustine, theurgical Neo-Platonism, Nicholas of Cusa, Johann Georg Hamann, Félix Ravaisson, Sergius Bulgakov, G. K. Chesterton, Henri de Lubac, Olivier-Thomas Venard). Such a claim stems from Žižek's and Milbank's insistence

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7   See Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2009).

on the importance of Meister Eckhart's (proto-)"modern" work, which they both see as crucial and influential, though they interpret it in diametrically opposing ways. Milbank goes so far as to claim that Eckhart has laid the groundwork for a path to an "alternate modernism," in contrast to the path which was actually taken, in the wake of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham.

The second reading of the debate draws on Dante's distinction between tragedy and comedy: Tragedy begins softly, imperceptibly, and almost "at random," like a marvelous promise; yet it ends tragically, in violence. Comedy, conversely, begins with a cruel reality and yet ends up happier and more joyous than it began. This proposed reading involves a juxtaposition of revolutionary and theological discourse, revolution and theology. A revolution begins "softly, imperceptibly," and ends in violent tragedy, while theology, like comedy, begins with a cruel act of incarnation but ends happily in the New Jerusalem. This reading, however, is not as simple is it might seem; indeed there is much in it to criticize.

The tragic aspect of theology consists in its countless attempts to interpret the violence that runs through the New Testament, where even that joyous New-Jerusalem ending is preceded by the cosmic terror of retribution from the Anti-Christ and his legions of angels. In revolution the situation is reversed: it begins with revolutionary fervor and a joyous vision of universal transformation. Revolution is at first and in the middle borne by this enthusiasm, right up to the very end—which is invariably tragic.

My intention in the rest of this introduction is to describe my own theological trajectory using a "poetics of close observation and description" of what is "in between." I wish to situate this by probing what is "in between"—in between the theology of the cross and the theology of glory, tragedy and comedy, revolution and theology—within the paradox of a relationship of tension, for tension is considered to be a primordial theological category,

and the word "tension" suggests an intensity I hold to be crucial in my own theological inquiries. It might seem that my intention in juxtaposing Lenin and Dante is somehow to mock both the revolutionary and the theological discourse. But nothing could be further from the truth. It is in fact Žižek's own treatment of Lenin's revolutionary texts (and of Stalin's terror), and the comparison Graham Ward has drawn between John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* and *The Divine Comedy*, that make possible this paradoxical juxtaposition.[8] I wish to show that the Žižek-Milbank debate is not over because, as is true of all polemics, it ends up reducing the fundamental arguments and conclusions involved. The book must be finished but the debate cannot be closed. This becomes clearer in light of those parts of their correspondence which were not included in the book. These are fragments which demonstrate how a debate can suddenly shoot off on a different tangent. It is precisely these unpublished passages and discarded fragments—which may at first glance seem pointless—that I am interested in. After a certain amount of back-and-forth in the form of replies to the initial theses set out in the text, Milbank says the following:[9]

> My reply to the reply to the reply would be:
>   "But I don't wager on a punitive God. I wager on
> St. Paul or Origen or Gregory of Nyssa's God who

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8   When speaking of *Theology and Social Theory*, Graham Ward sees it as an epic and heroic work, insinuating that Milbank's book is a postmodern version of *The Divine Comedy*. See Graham Ward, "John Milbank's Divina Commedia," *New Blackfriars* 73 (1992): 311–18.

9   Those replies not included in the book were published later in separate articles. See John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek, and Creston Davies, *Paul's New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010); John Milbank, "Without Heaven There is Only Hell on Earth: 15 Verdicts on Žižek's Response," *Political Theology* 11:1 (2010); Slavoj Žižek, "The Atheist Wager," *Political Theology* 11:1 (2010).

will finally redeem all. Without this belief one cannot
hope that one day being will be shown to coincide
with the good. This would indeed leave one with only
'morality'—only the despairing gesture of trying to
hold back death for a time. Only an endless wrangle
about how to portion out scarce and damaged
resources. By contrast, only Christianity allows one to
hope and therefore to work for the infinite fulfillment
of all in harmony with all."

Žižek once more remarks in closing that their arguing has turned
into a succession of monologues:

Time to conclude.
    When, at the beginning of his reply to my reply,
Milbank claims that, in my previous reply, I merely
reiterated my main points, without properly engaging
with his specific arguments, my reaction is that this,
exactly, is what he is doing in his second reply—a clear
sign that our exchange exhausted its potentials. So,
since we are both reduced to reiterating our positions,
the only appropriate way for me is to conclude the
exchange.[10]

    These are portions I feel to be important, even though they
may seem to be useless, common knowledge which is always
best avoided, the common knowledge should be rearranged
and the material from which it is constructed should be reas-
sembled. This reminds me of how one might feel about being
asked to write a book about Venice, when there are at least

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10   These two exchanges appear in an e-mail from John Milbank to the author,
      September 16, 2008.

fifty books published yearly on the subject, each one touching on the Doge's Palace, St. Mark's Church, Casanova, Titian, Tintoretto, and the world travelers who have turned up there, whether intentionally or otherwise, such as Goethe, Ruskin, Wagner, or Rilke. When Predrag Matvejević was asked to write about the city he declined, of course, for this very reason. At Joseph Brodsky's prompting, the Venice town fathers responsible for culture suggested that Matvejević come to stay in the city for several weeks, and if something were to intrigue him, then that was what he should write about. In accepting this invitation, Matvejević did something I hold to be quite important, closely aligned with the way I see the role of theology in the context of the whole of the human economy of knowledge and practice.

<p style="text-align:center">IV</p>

With a subtle mental archeology, Predrag Matvejević works to make visible the forgotten facts of what makes the city what it is, buried under layers of preconceptions. He comes across a graveyard for dogs and seagulls, and peculiar plants with which even eminent botanists are unfamiliar. He describes hidden, neglected gardens; layers of rust, patina, and rock. He describes old, abandoned monasteries sinking into the canals, psychiatric asylums, stone bridges on hidden-away back streets, cracked walls from which sprout the oddest of plants used in times past to treat the vocal cords of opera singers. Matvejević also writes of gamblers, speculators, schemers, ventriloquists, fortune hunters, swindlers, quacks, and several tribes of slaves who perished aboard the Venetian galleys. He even relates the history of Venetian bread, woven into the backdrop of all of Venetian history, without which there

would have been no Venice, or its maritime fleet, politics, or architecture.[11]

One of his discoveries in particular I consider crucial: a long-neglected dump for a pottery workshop. Broken shards of pottery, fragments of what were once beautiful vases and dishes, were discarded there. These rejected pottery pieces are called *cocci*, and inventive Venetians built them into their homes and the foundations of palaces. By barge they hauled the *cocci* to the dump and then, after a time, the defective pieces would be ferried to building sites to be used as construction material. The masons mixed the pieces with mortar and sand and built them into the bridges that link the city, into the foundations of the fortresses which defended Venice. Today these fortresses can no longer defend even themselves from ruin, while the *cocci* still defy the assaults of time, damp, and patina.

These pieces of pottery with their traces of Venetian women and men, saints, angels, the Madonna, and Christ are, today, a rarity. They are precious and hard to find. What was trash five hundred years ago is now cherished in museums and private collections, front and center in fancy display cases. The fact that they are rare is what makes them so much more coveted than mass-produced ceramics. These fragments, shards, bits that can be retrieved from the mud, grass, and sand of the shore, washed by the waves of time and tossed by the sea, represent my vision of theological discourse. What we used to think of until recently as rejects and trash can serve in building social relations and the world around us in an altogether new way.

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11   See Predrag Matvejević, *The Other Venice: Secrets of the City*, trans. Russell
      Scott Valentino (London: Reaktion Books, 2007); *Mediterranean: A Cultural
      Landscape*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University
      of California Press, 1999); *Between Exile and Asylum: An Eastern Epistolary*,
      trans. Russell Scott Valentino (Budapest and New York: Central European
      University Press, 2004).

We cannot know how many exquisite *cocci* still lie buried for us to uncover. That would seem to be one of the tasks of theology. Unearthing these shards which are hundreds, even thousands, of years old and building them into the very foundations of our existence and the places that shape us is another of the tasks of theology. For it is precisely these fragments that build a new image of reality and change perception of relations, reminding us of our own fragility. It is hardly a coincidence that Antonio Negri gave one of his recent books the title *Porcelain Workshop*. As with pottery and the *cocci*, working with porcelain requires a gentle, steady, cautious hand, much like contemplation and spiritual exercises. Theology is what handles the fragile fragments of trash and rejects to create, using the Scriptures, a splendid mosaic for a king, as Irenaeus says in his discourse against Gnosticism. Although such shards were discarded as worthless, their worth is incalculable.

But here, as with every allegory, it is not simply a matter of an arbitrary opposition following no rules. Irenaeus criticized the Gnostics for a great deal, but particularly for their excessive arbitrariness in failing to be led by the "rule of the faith." Instead of fashioning a splendid mosaic of precious stones fit for a king, the Gnostics made a mosaic depicting a dog or a fox, and it was ugly. Rearranging the chapters of the Scripture as they saw fit, as if they were old wives' tales, the Gnostics altered words, phrases, and parables to suit the prophecies they themselves had concocted. To avoid straying into a populist Gnosticism and an elitism of the select, Irenaeus cautions us to resist the Gnostic system of thought, based as it is on things the prophets did not foretell, things Jesus did not teach, and things the Apostles did not say. Perfect knowledge is not elitist. It is perfect simply because it is accessible to everyone at all times while resisting the draw of populism.

Hence we embark on an adventure, collecting discarded fragments that serve as metaphors for an ecclesial practice in which par-

ticipates the apocalyptic collective we term the Church, a gathering of the radically equal. This is what Christ communicates to us through his example, his life, and his parables. This is the way of liturgical life shaped by the *logos* (the logic of *latreia*, Romans 12:1–2) which Paul put into practice in a specific way in the communities he established in Asia Minor, thereby bringing radically into question the political reality of the Roman Empire. Inasmuch as theology is a deliberation on ecclesial practice in the light of God's word, then this practice must be shaped by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, ever ready to communicate liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Furthermore, I consider theology to be the only fitting discourse which can offer incarnational resources, incarnational tools, for changing the world. The fine Slovenian poet and Christian Socialist, Edvard Kocbek, who took an active part in the national liberation movement, discussed Christianity and Communism in mid-1943 with Josip Vidmar, a self-taught Communist revolutionary.[12] Vidmar told Kocbek that Christianity had not succeeded in transforming man and the world, which is the program, requirement, and inclination of Christianity, because it had not offered "adequate incarnational resources." Vidmar felt that Communism was now needed because only it could meet the conditions required to foster man's spiritual qualities. Though this discussion might seem amusing in the middle of combat operations in Slovenia, Vidmar had something important to say—that Christianity had not furnished the necessary "incarnational resources." This is the key to the theological vision I set forth. Only theology can furnish the right incarnational resources, the tools with which to build the spiritual qualities needed to transform the perception of the individual and transform the community. The chapters that follow will discuss the incarnational tools and ecclesial practices that Christianity, one way or another, offers us.

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12   See Edvard Kocbek, *Svedočanstvo: dnevnički zapisi od 3. maja do 2. decembra 1943*, trans. Marija Mitrović (Belgrade: Narodna knjiga, 1988), 122.

and severe prohibitions. Therein resides, for Jacques Lacan, the paradoxical consequence of the experience that "God is dead":

> The Father can efficiently prohibit desire only because he is dead, and, I would add, because he himself doesn't know it—namely, that he is dead. Such is the myth that Freud proposes to the modern man as the man for whom God is dead—namely, who believes that he knows that God is dead.
>
> Why does Freud elaborate this paradox? In order to explain how, in the case of father's death, desire will be more threatening and, consequently, the interdiction more necessary and more harsh. After God is dead, nothing is anymore permitted.[1]

In order to properly understand this passage, one has to read it together with (at least) two other Lacanian theses. These dispersed statements should then be treated as pieces of a puzzle to be combined into one coherent proposition. It is only their interconnection plus the implicit reference to the Freudian dream of the father who doesn't know that he is dead that enables us to deploy Lacan's basic thesis in its entirety:

> (1) "The true formula of atheism is not *God is dead*—even by basing the origin of the function of the father upon his murder, Freud protects the father—the true formula of atheism is *God is unconscious*."[2]

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1   Jacques Lacan, *Le triomphe de la religion, précédé de Discours aux catholiques* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), 35–6.
2   Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 59.

> (2) "As you know, . . . Ivan leads [his father Karamazov] into those audacious avenues taken by the thought of the cultivated man, and in particular, he says, *if God doesn't exist . . .—If God doesn't exist*, the father says, *then everything is permitted*. Quite evidently, a naïve notion, for we analysts know full well that if God doesn't exist, then nothing at all is permitted any longer. Neurotics prove that to us every day.[3]

The modern atheist thinks he knows that God is dead; what he doesn't know is that, unconsciously, he continues to believe in God. What characterizes modernity is no longer the standard figure of the believer who secretly harbors intimate doubts about his belief and engages in transgressive fantasies. What we have today is a subject who presents himself as a tolerant hedonist dedicated to the pursuit of happiness, but whose unconscious is the site of prohibitions—what is repressed are not illicit desires or pleasures, but prohibitions themselves. "If God doesn't exist, then everything is prohibited" means that the more you perceive yourself as an atheist, the more your unconscious is dominated by prohibitions which sabotage your enjoyment. (One should not forget to supplement this thesis with its opposite: "if God exists, then everything is permitted"—is this not the most succinct definition of the religious fundamentalist's predicament? For him, God fully exists, he perceives himself as his instrument, which is why he can do whatever he wants, his acts are redeemed in advance, since they express the divine will . . .)

It is against this background that one can locate Dostoyevsky's mistake. Dostoyevsky provided the most radical version of the "If God doesn't exist, then everything is permitted" idea in "Bobok,"

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3   Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1988), 128.

his weirdest short story, which even today continues to perplex its interpreters. Is this bizarre "morbid fantasy" simply a product of the author's own mental disease? Is it a cynical sacrilege, an abominable attempt to parody the truth of the Revelation?[4] In "Bobok," an alcoholic literary man named Ivan Ivanovich is suffering from auditory hallucinations:

> I am beginning to see and hear strange things, not voices exactly, but as though someone beside me were muttering, "bobok, bobok, bobok!"
>
> What's the meaning of this bobok? I must divert my mind.
>
> I went out in search of diversion, I hit upon a funeral.

So he attends the funeral of a distant relative; remaining in the cemetery, he unexpectedly overhears the cynical, frivolous conversations of the dead:

> And how it happened I don't know, but I began to hear things of all sorts being said. At first I did not pay attention to it, but treated it with contempt. But the conversation went on. I heard muffled sounds as though the speakers' mouths were covered with a pillow, and at the same time they were distinct and very near. I came to myself, sat up and began listening attentively.

He discovers from these exchanges that human consciousness goes on for some time after the death of the physical body, lasting until total decomposition, which the deceased characters

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4   Fyodor Dostoyevsky, "Bobok," available at http://classiclit.about.com/library/bl-etexts/fdost/bl-fdost-bobok.htm

associate with the awful gurgling onomatopoeia, "bobok." One of them comments:

> The great thing is that we have two or three months more of life and then—bobok! I propose to spend these two months as agreeably as possible, and so to arrange everything on a new basis. Gentlemen! I propose to cast aside all shame.

The dead, realizing their complete freedom from earthly conditions, decide to entertain themselves by telling tales of their existence during their lives:

> . . . meanwhile I don't want us to be telling lies. That's all I care about, for that is one thing that matters. One cannot exist on the surface without lying, for life and lying are synonymous, but here we will amuse ourselves by not lying. Hang it all, the grave has some value after all! We'll all tell our stories aloud, and we won't be ashamed of anything. First of all I'll tell you about myself. I am one of the predatory kind, you know. All that was bound and held in check by rotten cords up there on the surface. Away with cords and let us spend these two months in shameless truthfulness! Let us strip and be naked!
>
> Let us be naked, let us be naked!" cried all the voices.

The terrible stench that Ivan Ivanovich smells is not the smell of the decaying corpses, but a moral stench. Then Ivan Ivanovich suddenly sneezes, and the dead fall silent; the spell is lost, we are back into ordinary reality:

> And here I suddenly sneezed. It happened suddenly
> and unintentionally, but the effect was striking: all
> became as silent as one expects it to be in a church-
> yard, it all vanished like a dream. A real silence of
> the tomb set in. I don't believe they were ashamed
> on account of my presence: they had made up their
> minds to cast off all shame! I waited five minutes—
> not a word, not a sound.

Mikhail Bakhtin saw in "Bobok" the quintessence of Dostoevsky's
art, a microcosm of his entire creative output which renders its
central motif: the idea that "everything is permitted" if there
is no God and no immortality of the soul. In the carnivalesque
underworld of life "between the two deaths," all rules and respon-
sibilities are suspended. It can be convincingly shown that Dos-
toyevsky's main source was Emanuel Swedenborg's *On Heaven,
the World of Spirits and on Hell, as They Were Seen and Heard by
Swedenborg* (translated into Russian in 1863).[5] According to
Swedenborg, after death the human soul goes through several
stages of purification of its internal content (good or evil) and
as a result finds its deserved eternal reward: paradise or hell. In
this process, which can last from a couple of days to a couple of
months, the body revives, but only in consciousness, in the guise
of a spectral corporeality:

> When in this second state spirits become visibly just
> what they had been in themselves while in the world,
> what they then did and said secretly being now made
> manifest; for they are now restrained by no outward

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5   See Ilya Vinitsky, "Where Bobok is Buried: Theosophical Roots of Dosto-
     evskii's 'Fantastic Realism'," *Slavic Review* 65:3 (Autumn, 2006): 523-543.

considerations, and therefore what they have said and
done secretly they now say and endeavor to do openly,
having no longer any fear of loss of reputation, such as
they had in the world.[6]

The undead can now cast aside all shame, act insanely, and laugh
at honesty and justice. The ethical horror of this vision is that
it displays the limit of the "truth and reconciliation" idea: What
if we have a perpetrator for whom the public confession of his
crimes not only does not give rise to any ethical catharsis in him,
but even generates an additional obscene pleasure?

The "undead" situation of the deceased is opposed to that of
the father in one of the dreams reported by Freud—the father
who goes on living (in the dreamer's unconscious) because he
doesn't know that he is dead. The deceased in Dostoyevsky's
story are fully aware that they are dead—it is this awareness that
allows them to cast away all shame. So what is the secret that the
deceased carefully conceal from every mortal? In "Bobok," we do
not hear any of the shameless truths—the specters of the dead
withdraw at the very point at which they should finally "deliver
their goods" to the listener and tell their dirty secrets. So what if
the solution is the same as that at the end of the parable of the
Door of the Law from Kafka's *The Trial*, when, at his deathbed,
the man from the country who has spent years waiting to be
admitted by the guardian, learns that the door was there only for
him? What if, in "Bobok" also, the entire spectacle of the corpses
promising to spill their dirtiest secrets is staged only to attract
and impress poor Ivan Ivanovich? In other words, what if the
spectacle of the "shameless truthfulness" of the living corpses is
only a fantasy of the listener—and of a *religious* listener, at that?

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6   Ibid., 528.

We should not forget that the scene Dostoyevsky paints is *not* that of a godless universe. What the talking corpses experience is life after (biological) death, which is in itself a proof of God's existence—*God is there, keeping them alive after death, which is why they can say everything*.

What Dostoyevsky stages is a *religious* fantasy which has nothing whatsoever to do with a truly atheist position—although he stages it to illustrate the terrifying godless universe in which "everything is permitted." So what is the compulsion that pushes the corpses to engage in the obscene sincerity of "saying it all"? The Lacanian answer is clear: *superego*—not as an ethical agency, but as the obscene injunction to enjoy. This provides the insight into what is perhaps the ultimate secret that the deceased want to keep from the narrator: their impulse to shamelessly tell all the truth is not free, the situation is not "now we can finally say (and do) all that we were prevented from saying (and doing) by the rules and constraints of our normal lives." Instead, their impulse is sustained by a cruel superego imperative: the specters *have* to do it. If, however, what the obscene undead hide from the narrator is the compulsive nature of their obscene enjoyment, and if we are dealing with a religious fantasy, then there is one more conclusion to be made: *that the "undead" are under the compulsive spell of an evil God*. Therein resides Dostoyevsky's ultimate lie: what he presents as a terrifying fantasy of a godless universe is effectively a Gnostic fantasy of an evil obscene God. A more general lesson should be drawn from this case: when religious authors condemn atheism, they all too often construct a vision of a "godless universe" which is a projection of the repressed underside of religion itself.

I have used here the term "gnosticism" in its precise meaning, as the rejection of a key feature of the Jewish-Christian universe: the *externality of truth*. There is an overwhelming argument for the intimate link between Judaism and psychoanalysis: both

focus on the traumatic encounter with the abyss of the desiring Other, with the terrifying figure of an impenetrable Other who wants something from us, without making it clear what that something is—the Jewish people's encounter with God, whose impenetrable Call throws off the rails the routine of human daily existence; the child's encounter with the enigma of the Other's (in this case, parental) enjoyment. In clear contrast to this Jewish-Christian notion of truth as relying on an external traumatic encounter (the divine Call to the Jewish people, God's call to Abraham, the inscrutable Grace—all totally incompatible with our inherent qualities, even with our innate ethics), both paganism and Gnosticism (as the reinscription of the Jewish-Christian stance back into paganism) conceive the path towards truth as an "inner journey" of spiritual self-purification, as a return to one's true Inner Self, the self's "rediscovery." Kierkegaard was right when he pointed out that the central opposition of Western spirituality is "Socrates versus Christ": the inner journey of remembrance versus rebirth through the shock of the external encounter. Within the Jewish-Christian universe, *God himself is the ultimate harasser*, the intruder who is brutally disturbing the harmony of our lives.

Traces of Gnosticism are clearly discernible even in today's cyberspace ideology: Is not the technophiliac dream of a purely virtual Self detached from its natural body, capable of floating from one contingent and temporary embodiment to another, the final scientific-technological realization of the Gnostic ideal of the Soul liberated from the decay and inertia of material reality? No wonder that the philosophy of Leibniz is one of the predominant philosophical references of the cyberspace theorists: Leibniz conceived the universe as a harmonious composite of "monads," microscopic substances each of which lives in its own self-enclosed inner space, with no windows

onto its environs. One cannot miss the uncanny resemblance between Leibniz's "monadology" and the emerging cyberspace community in which global harmony and solipsism strangely coexist. That is to say, does our immersion into cyberspace not go hand in hand with our reduction to Leibnizian monads which, although "without windows" that would open directly onto external reality, mirrors in itself the entire universe? Are we not more and more monadic in this sense, with no direct windows onto reality, interacting alone with the PC screen, encountering only virtual simulacra, and yet immersed more than ever in a global network, synchronously communicating with the entire world?

And does the space in which the (un)dead can talk without moral constraints, as imagined by Dostoyevsky, not prefigure this Gnostic-cyberspace dream? Therein resides the attraction of cybersex: since we are dealing only with virtual partners, there is no harassment. This aspect of cyberspace found its ultimate expression in a proposal to "rethink" the rights of necrophiliacs which recently resurfaced in some "radical" circles in the US. The idea was formulated that, in the same way people give permission for their organs to be used for medical purposes after their death, they should also be allowed to sign over their corpses for the enjoyment of frustrated necrophiliacs. This proposal perfectly exemplifies how the Politically Correct anti-harassment stance realizes Kierkegaard's old insight that the only good neighbor is a dead neighbor. A dead neighbor— a corpse—is the ideal sexual partner for a "tolerant" subject trying to avoid any harassment. By definition, a corpse cannot be harassed; at the same time, a dead body *does not enjoy*, so the disturbing threat of the other's excess-enjoyment is eliminated for the subject playing with the corpse.

The ideological space of such "tolerance" is delineated by two

poles: ethics and jurisprudence. On the one hand, politics—in its liberal-tolerant as well as in its "fundamentalist" version—is conceived as the realization of ethical stances (on human rights, abortion, freedom, etc.) which preexist politics; on the other hand (and in a complementary way), it is formulated in the language of jurisprudence (how to find the proper balance between the rights of individuals and of communities, etc.). It is here that the reference to religion can play the positive role of resuscitating the proper dimension of the political, of re-politicizing politics: it can enable political agents to break out of the ethico-legal entanglement. The old syntagm "theologico-political" acquires new relevance here: it is not only that every politics is grounded in a "theological" view of reality, it is also that every theology is inherently political, an ideology of new collective space (like the communities of believers in early Christianity, or the *umma* in early Islam). Paraphrasing Kierkegaard, we can say that what we need today is a *theologico-political* suspension of the ethical.

In today's proliferation of new forms of spirituality, it is often difficult to recognize the authentic traces of a Christianity which remains faithful to its own theologico-political core. A hint was provided by G. K. Chesterton, who turned around the standard (mis) perception according to which the ancient pagan attitude is one of the joyful assertion of life, while Christianity imposes a somber order of guilt and renunciation. It is, on the contrary, the pagan stance which is deeply melancholic: even if it preaches a pleasurable life, it is in the mode of "enjoy it while it lasts, because, in the end, there is always death and decay." The message of Christianity is, on the contrary, one of an infinite joy beneath the deceptive surface of guilt and renunciation: "The outer ring of Christianity is a rigid guard of ethical abnegations and professional priests; but inside that inhuman guard you will find the old human life dancing like children, and drinking wine like men; for Christianity

is the only frame for pagan freedom."[7]

Is not Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* the ultimate proof of this paradox? Only a devout Christian could have imagined such a magnificent pagan universe, thereby confirming that *paganism is the ultimate Christian dream*. Which is why the conservative Christian critics who expressed their concern at how *The Lord of the Rings* undermines Christianity with its portrayal of pagan magic miss the point, i.e., the perverse conclusion which is unavoidable here: You want to enjoy the pagan dream of pleasurable life without paying the price of melancholic sadness for it? Choose Christianity!

This is why C. S. Lewis's vision of Narnia is ultimately a failure: it doesn't work because it tries to infuse the pagan mythic universe with Christian motifs (the Christ-like sacrifice of the lion in the first novel, etc.). Instead of Christianizing paganism, such a move paganizes Christianity, re-inscribing it back into the pagan universe where it simply doesn't belong—the result is a false pagan myth. The paradox is here exactly the same as that of the relationship between Wagner's *Ring* and his *Parsifal*. The standard claim that the *Ring* is an epic of heroic paganism (since its gods are Nordic-pagan), and that *Parsifal* marks the Christianization of Wagner (his kneeling in front of the cross, as Nietzsche put it) must be reversed: it is in the *Ring* that Wagner comes closest to Christianity, while *Parsifal*, far from a Christian work, stages an obscene re-translation of Christianity into a pagan myth of the circular renewal of fertility through the King's recuperation.[8] This

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7   G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 164.

8   In private conversations, Wagner was quite explicit about the underlying pagan obscenity of *Parsifal*—at a private reception on the eve of its first performance, he "described [it] as a black Mass, a work that depicts Holy Communion . . . 'all of you who are involved in the performance must see to it that you have the devil in you, and you who are present as listeners must ensure that you welcome the devil into your hearts!'" Cited in Joachim Kohler, *Richard Wagner: The Last of the Titans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 591.

is why one can easily imagine an alternate version of *Parsifal*, a different direction that the plot should take in the middle, which, in a way, would also have been faithful to Wagner—a kind of "Feuerbachianized" *Parsifal*, in which, in Act II, Kundry *does* succeed in seducing Parsifal. Far from delivering Parsifal to the clutches of Klingsor, this Act delivers Kundry from Klingsor's domination. So when, at the Act's end, Klingsor approaches the couple, Parsifal does exactly the same as in the actual version (he destroys Klingsor's castle), but he then leaves for Montsalvat *with* Kundry. In the alternative finale, Parsifal arrives in the last seconds to save Amfortas, but this time with Kundry, proclaiming that the sterile masculine rule of the Grail is over, and that femininity must be readmitted in order to restore fertility to the land and the (pagan) balance of Masculine and Feminine. Parsifal then takes over as the new King with Kundry as Queen and, a year later, Lohengrin is born.

One often fails to take note of the fact, elusive in its very blatancy, that Wagner's *Ring* is the ultimate Paulinian work of art: the central concern in the *Ring* is the failure of the rule of Law, and the shift that best encompasses the inner span of the *Ring* is the shift from Law to love. What happens towards the end of the *Twilight* is that Wagner overcomes his own ("pagan" Feuerbachian) ideology of the love of the (hetero)sexual couple as the paradigm of love: Brunhilde's last transformation is the transformation from *eros* to *agape*, from erotic love to political love. Eros cannot truly overcome Law, it can only explode in punctual intensity, as the Law's momentary transgression, like the flame of Siegmund and Sieglinde which instantly destroys itself. *Agape* is what remains after we assume the consequences of the failure of *eros*.

There is effectively a Christ-like dimension in Brunhilde's death—but only in the precise sense that Christ's death marks the birth of the Holy Spirit, the community of believers linked

by *agape*. No wonder one of Brunhilde's last lines is "Ruhe, Ruhe, du Gott!" ("Die in peace, God!")—her act fulfills Wotan's wish to freely assume his inevitable death. What remains after the twilight is the human crowd silently observing the cataclysmic event, a crowd which, in the Chereau-Boulez path-breaking staging, is left staring into the audience when the music ends. Everything now rests on them, without any guarantee from God or any other figure of the big Other—it is up to them to act like the Holy Spirit, practicing *agape*:

> The Redemption motif is a message delivered to the entire world, but like all pythonesses, the orchestra is unclear and there are several ways of interpreting its message. . . . Doesn't one hear it, shouldn't one hear it, with mistrust and anxiety, a mistrust which would match the boundless hope which this humanity nurses and which has always been at stake, silently and invisibly, in the atrocious battles which have torn human beings apart throughout the *Ring*? The gods have lived, the values of their world must be reconstructed and reinvented. Men are there as if on the edge of a cliff—they listen, tensely, to the oracle which rumbles from the depths of the earth.[9]

There is no guarantee of redemption-through-love: redemption is merely given as possible. We are thereby at the very core of Christianity: it is God himself who made a Pascalian wager. By dying on the cross, he made a risky gesture with no guaranteed final outcome; he provided us—humanity—with the empty S_1, Master-Signifier, and it is up to us to supplement it with the chain of S_2. Far from providing the conclusive dot on the "i," the

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9   Patrice Chereau, cited in Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of Theatre* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 363.

divine act rather stands for the openness of a New Beginning, and it falls to humanity to live up to it, to decide its meaning, to make something of it. As with Predestination, which condemns us to frantic activity, the Event is a *pure-empty-sign*, and we have to work to generate its meaning. Therein resides the terrible *risk of revelation*: what "Revelation" means is that God took upon himself the risk of putting everything at stake, of fully "engaging himself existentially" by way, as it were, of stepping into his own picture, becoming part of creation, exposing himself to the utter contingency of existence. True Openness is not that of undecidability, but that of living in the aftermath of the Event, of drawing out the consequences—of what? Precisely of the new space opened up by the Event. The anxiety of which Chereau speaks is the anxiety of the act.

Today's propaganda—not just in the narrow political sense—targets the very possibility of such Openness: it fights against something of which it is not itself aware, something to which it is structurally blind—not its actual counter-forces (political opponents), but the *possibility* (the utopian revolutionary-emancipatory potential) which is immanent to the situation:

> The goal of all enemy propaganda is not to annihilate an existing force (this function is generally left to police forces), but rather to annihilate an *unnoticed possibility of the situation*. This possibility is also unnoticed by those who conduct this propaganda, since its features are to be simultaneously immanent to the situation and not to appear in it.[10]

This is why enemy propaganda against radical emancipatory

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10   Alain Badiou, "Seminar on Plato's *Republic*" (unpublished), February 13, 2008.

politics is by definition cynical—not in the simple sense of not believing its own words, but at a much more basic level: it is cynical precisely insofar as it *does* believe its own words, since its message is a resigned conviction that the world we live in, if not the best of all possible worlds, is the least bad one, so that any radical change can only make it worse.

1

Christianity Against the Sacred
Žižek

Although the statement "If there is no God, everything is permitted" is usually traced back to *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky never in fact made it[1] (the first to attribute it to him was Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*). However, the very fact that this misattribution has persisted for decades demonstrates that, even if factually false, it does hit a certain nerve in our ideological edifice. No wonder conservatives like to evoke it apropos scandals among the atheist-hedonist elite: from millions killed in gulags up to animal sex and gay marriage, here is where we end up when we deny all transcendent authority which would set unsurpassable limits to human endeavors. Without such limits—so the story goes—there is no ultimate barrier to exploiting one's neighbors ruthlessly, using them as tools for profit and pleasure, enslaving and humiliating them, or killing them by the millions. All that then separates us from this ulti-

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1 The closest we come to this statement are some approximations, like Dmitri's claim from his debate with Rakitin (as Dmitri reports it to Alyosha): "'But what will become of men then?' I asked him, 'without God and immortal life? All things are permitted then, they can do what they like?'" See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Dover Publications, 2005), 672. In this translation, the last sentence begins with "All things are lawful then"; after comparing it with the original, I replaced "lawful" with "permitted," *pozvoleno* in Russian .

mate moral vacuum are temporary and non-obligatory "pacts among wolves," self-imposed limitations accepted in the interests of one's own survival and well-being which can be violated at any moment . . . But are things really like that?

As is well known, Jacques Lacan claimed that psychoanalytic practice teaches us to turn around Dostoyevsky's dictum: "If there is no God, then everything is prohibited." This reversal is hard to swallow for our moral common sense: in an otherwise sympathetic review of a book on Lacan, a Slovene Leftist newspaper rendered Lacan's version as: "Even if there is no God, not everything is permitted!"—a benevolent vulgarity, changing Lacan's provocative reversal into a modest assurance that even we godless atheists respect some ethical limits . . . However, even if Lacan's version appears an empty paradox, a quick look at our moral landscape confirms that it is much more appropriate to describe the universe of atheist liberal hedonists: they dedicate their life to the pursuit of pleasures, but since there is no external authority guaranteeing them the space for this pursuit, they become entangled in a thick web of self-imposed Politically Correct regulations, as if a superego much more severe than that of traditional morality is controlling them. They become obsessed by the idea that, in pursuing their pleasures, they may humiliate or violate others' space, so they regulate their behavior with detailed prescriptions of how to avoid "harassing" others, not to mention the no less complex regulation of their own care of the self (bodily fitness, health food, spiritual relaxation . . .). Indeed, nothing is more oppressive and regulated than being a simple hedonist.

The second thing, strictly correlative to the first observation, is that today it is rather to those who refer to God in a brutally direct way, perceiving themselves as instruments of God's will, that everything is permitted. It is so-called fundamentalists

who practice a perverted version of what Kierkegaard called the religious suspension of the ethical: on a mission from God, one is allowed to kill thousands of innocents . . . So why do we witness today the rise of religiously (or ethnically) justified violence? Because we live in an era which perceives itself as post-ideological. Since great public causes can no longer be mobilized as grounds for mass violence (or war), i.e., since our hegemonic ideology calls on us to enjoy life and to realize our Selves, it is difficult for the majority to overcome their revulsion at the torture and killing of another human being. The vast majority of people are spontaneously moral: torturing or killing another human being is deeply traumatic for them. So, in order to make them do it, a larger "sacred" Cause is needed, one which makes petty individual concerns about killing seem trivial. Religion and ethnic belonging fit this role perfectly. Of course there are cases of pathological atheists who are able to commit mass murder just for pleasure, for the sake of it, but they are rare exceptions. The majority of people need to be anaesthetized against their elementary sensitivity to the other's suffering. For this, a sacred Cause is needed: without it, we would have to feel all the burden of what we did, with no Absolute upon whom to off-load our ultimate responsibility. Religious ideologists usually claim that, true or not, religion makes some otherwise bad people do some good things. From today's experience, we should rather stick to Steve Weinberg's claim that while without religion good people would continue doing good things and bad people bad things, only religion can make good people do bad things.

No less importantly, the same also seems to hold for the display of so-called "human weaknesses": isolated extreme forms of sexuality among godless hedonists are immediately elevated into representative symbols of the depravity of the godless, while any questioning of, say, the link between the much more massive

phenomenon of priests' pedophilia and the Church as an institution is rejected as anti-religious slander. The well-documented story of how the Catholic Church as an institution protects pedophiliacs in its own ranks is another good example of how, if God exists, then everything is permitted (to those who legitimize themselves as his servants). What makes this protective attitude towards pedophiliacs so disgusting is that it is not practiced by tolerant hedonists, but—to add insult to injury—by the very institution which poses as the moral guardian of society.

But what about the Stalinist Communist mass killings? What about the extra-legal liquidation of nameless millions? It is easy to see how these crimes were always justified by the Stalinists' own ersatz-god, "the God that failed," as Ignazio Silone, one of the great disappointed ex-Communists, called it—they had their own God, which is why everything was permitted to them. In other words, the same logic as that of religious violence applies here. Stalinist Communists do not perceive themselves as hedonist individualists abandoned to their freedom; no, they perceive themselves as instruments of historical progress, of a necessity which pushes humanity towards the "higher" stage of Communism—and it is this reference to their own Absolute (and to their privileged relationship to it) which permits them to do whatever they want (or consider necessary). This is why, the moment cracks appear in their ideological protective shield, the weight of what they had done became unbearable to many individual Communists, since they had to confront their acts as their own, with no cover in a higher Reason of History. This is why, after Khrushchev's 1956 speech denouncing Stalin's crimes, many cadres committed suicide: they had not learned anything new during that speech, all the facts were more or less known to them, they had just been deprived of the historical legitimization of their crimes by the Communist historical Absolute.

Stalinism adds another perverse twist to this logic: in order to justify their ruthless exercise of power and violence, the Stalinists not only had to elevate their own role into an instrument of the Absolute, they also had to demonize their opponents, to portray them as corruption and decadence personified. This was true to an even higher degree of Fascism. For the Nazis, every phenomenon of depravity was immediately elevated into a symbol of Jewish degeneration. A continuity between financial speculation, antimilitarism, cultural modernism, sexual freedom, and so on, was immediately asserted, since they were all perceived as emanating from the same Jewish essence, the same half-invisible agency which secretly controlled society. Such demonization had a precise strategic function: it justified the Nazis in doing whatever they wanted, since, against such an enemy, in what is now a permanent emergency state, everything is permitted.

And, last but not least, we should note here the ultimate irony: although many of those who deplore the disintegration of transcendent limits present themselves as Christians, the longing for a new external/transcendent limit, for a divine agent who imposes such a limit, is profoundly non-Christian. The Christian God is not a transcendent God of limitations, but a God of immanent love—God, after all, is love, he is present when there is love between his followers. No wonder, then, that Lacan's reversal, "If God exists, then everything is permitted!," is openly asserted by some Christians, as a consequence of the Christian notion of the overcoming of the prohibitive Law in love: if you dwell in divine love, then you need no prohibitions, you can do whatever you want, since, if you really dwell in the divine love, then, of course, you would never want to do anything evil . . . This formula of the "fundamentalist" religious suspension of the ethical was already proposed by Augustine when he wrote: "Love God and do as you please." (Or, another version: "Love, and do whatever

you want"—from the Christian perspective, the two ultimately amount to the same, since God *is* Love.) The catch, of course, is that if you really love God you will want what he wants—what pleases him will please you, and what displeases him will make you miserable. So it is not that you can just "do whatever you want": your love for God, if true, guarantees that in whatever you want to do you will follow the highest ethical standards. It is a little bit like the proverbial joke: "My fiancée is never late for an appointment, because when she is late, she is no longer my fiancée"—if you love God, you can do whatever you want, because when you do something evil, this is in itself a proof that you do not really love God. However, the ambiguity persists since there is no guarantee, external to your belief, of what God really wants you to do—in the absence of any ethical standards external to your belief in and love for God, the danger is always lurking that you will use your love of God as a legitimization for the most horrible deeds.

Furthermore, when Dostoyevsky introduces the line of thought "if there is no God, then everything is permitted," he is in no way simply warning us against limitless freedom—i.e., advocating God as the agency of a transcendent prohibition which would limit human freedom. In a society run by Inquisition, everything is definitely not permitted, since God is operative here as a higher power constraining our freedom, not as the source of freedom. The point of the parable of the Grand Inquisitor is precisely that such a society obliterates the very message of Christ—were Christ to return to that society, he would have been burned as a deadly threat to public order and happiness, since he brought to the people the gift (which turns out to be a heavy burden) of freedom and responsibility. The implicit claim that if there is no God, then everything is permitted thus turns out to be much more ambiguous—it is well worth taking a closer

look at this part of *The Brothers Karamazov*, the long conversation in Book Five between Ivan and Alyosha which takes place at a restaurant. Ivan tells Alyosha a story about the Grand Inquisitor that he has imagined: Christ comes back to earth in Seville at the time of the Inquisition; after he performs a number of miracles, the people recognize and adore him, but he is soon arrested by the Inquisition and sentenced to be burnt to death the next day. The Grand Inquisitor visits him in his cell to tell him that the Church no longer needs him—his return would interfere with the mission of the Church, which is to bring people happiness. Christ has misjudged human nature: the vast majority of humanity cannot handle the freedom he has given them; in giving humans freedom to choose, Christ has excluded the majority of humanity from redemption and doomed it to suffer.

In order to bring the people happiness, the Inquisitor and the Church thus follow "the wise spirit, the dread spirit of death and destruction"—the devil, who alone can provide the tools to end all human suffering and unite everyone under the banner of the Church. The multitude should be guided by those few who are strong enough to take on the burden of freedom—only in this way will all humankind be able to live and die happily in ignorance. These strong few are the true self-martyrs, dedicating their lives to protecting humanity from having to face the freedom of choice. This is why, in the temptation in the desert, Christ was wrong to reject the devil's suggestion that he turn stones into bread: the people will always follow those who will feed their bellies. Christ rejected the temptation by saying "Man cannot live on bread alone," ignoring the wisdom which tells us to first "Feed men, and then ask of them virtue!" (or, as Brecht put it in his *Beggar's Opera*: "*Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral!*").

Instead of answering the Inquisitor, Christ, who has been silent throughout, kisses him on the lips. Shocked, the Inquisitor

releases Christ but tells him never to return . . . Alyosha responds to this tale by repeating Christ's gesture: he also gives Ivan a soft kiss on the lips.

The point of the story is not simply to attack the Church and advocate the return to the full freedom given to us by Christ. Dostoyevsky himself could not come up with a straight answer on the matter. One can argue that the story of the life of the Elder Zosima, which follows almost immediately the chapter on the Grand Inquisitor, is an attempt to answer Ivan's questions. Zosima, on his deathbed, tells how he found his faith in his rebellious youth, in the middle of a duel, and decided to become a monk. Zosima teaches that people must forgive others by acknowledging their own sins and guilt before others: no sin is isolated, so everyone is responsible for their neighbor's sins . . . Is this not Dostoyevsky's version of "If there is no God, then everything is prohibited"? If the gift of Christ is to make us radically free, then this freedom also brings with it the heavy burden of total responsibility. Does this more authentic position also imply a sacrifice? It depends on what we mean by this term.

In his "Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of Sacrifice,"[2] Jean-Luc Marion begins with the claim that our godless times have "abolished every difference between the sacred and the profane, thus every possibility of crossing over it by a *sacrifiement* (or on the contrary, by a profanation)." The first thing to add here is Agamben's distinction between the secular and the profane: the profane is not the secular-utilitarian, but the result of the profanation of the sacred and is thus inherent to the sacred. (We should also take the formula of "making it sacred" literally: it is the sacrifice itself which makes an ordinary object sacred, i.e.,

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2   Marion's unpublished essay is based on his "Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of the Gift," which appeared in M. M. Olivetti, ed., *Filosofia della rivelazione* (Rome: Biblioteca dell' *Archivio di Filosofia*, 1994).

there is nothing sacred about the object as such, in its immediate being.) Marion then provides a detailed description of the three main modes of sacrifice:

First, there is the negative-destructive aspect which survives in our godless era as pure (terrorist) destruction: the only way that remains to grasp the Sacred is through pointless acts of destruction which subtract something from the everyday utilitarian-functional run of things. A thing is "made sacred" by destroying it—this is why the ruins of 9/11 ("Ground Zero") are sacred . . . (Here Marion adds a subdivision to this negative-destructive sacrifice: the ascetic sacrifice of all material, "pathological" goods or features of the Self to assert the Self itself in its autarchic autonomy. Since what is sacrificed here is non-essential "pathological" content, which enables the auto-appropriation of the Self's autarchic autonomy—in making the sacrifice I lose nothing, i.e., only that which is in itself irrelevant.)

Second, there is the exchange aspect, or sacrifice as conditional gift—we give something to get something back: "sacrifice no more destroys than the gift gives up, since both of them work to establish the exchange; or rather, when sacrifice destroys and when the gift gives up, they work in exactly the same way to establish the economy of reciprocity." This ends up in a deadlock, since the sacrifice as an act of exchange cancels itself:

> The truth of sacrifice ends up in exchange, that is to say in the non-truth of sacrifice, because it ought to consist precisely in giving up without return; so it would also amount to the truth of the non-gift par excellence, that is to say, to the confirmation that wherever one believes he speaks of sacrifice and makes it, in fact he always hopes for an exchange, and for an exchange earning all the more, as far as he claimed to have lost everything.

The problem is: do these two dimensions of sacrifice suffice? Marion makes it clear that, in the logic of exchange, the essential dimension of sacrifice, that of pure superfluous giving, is lost: "the gift can and thus must be freed from exchange, by letting its natural meaning be reduced to givenness. For, while the economy (of exchange) makes an economy of the gift, the gift, if reduced to givenness, inversely excepts itself from the economy, by freeing itself from the rules of exchange." Note here the exact symmetry of the two aspects: if sacrifice-as-destruction ends in the auto-appropriation of autonomy, which cancels the very dimension of sacrifice (since we lose only the inessential-indifferent), sacrifice-as-exchange also cancels the dimension of exchange—I do not really sacrifice or give anything away, since I count on being paid back for whatever I have given by the higher authority to which I make the sacrifice. Both times, the sacrificial loss is canceled.

What is missing in this description is a more radical dimension of sacrifice which is immanent to sacrifice-as-exchange: I must, in advance, sacrifice something in order to enter the very field of exchange, and this sacrifice is prior to any particular sacrifice of some content or object—it is the sacrifice in my very subjective position which makes me a subject of exchange. This sacrifice is the price to be paid for meaning: I sacrifice content for form, i.e., I gain entry into the dialogic form of exchange. That is to say, even if my sacrifice has no effect, I can interpret this as a (negative) reply, since whatever happens can now be interpreted by me as a meaningful response—either way, there is someone to communicate with, someone to whom I can offer my sacrifice.

Third, in order to elaborate a notion of sacrifice which does not cancel itself like the previous two, Marion focuses on the paradox of (sacrifice as a) gift, a pure act of giving with no return. The paradox is that if the gift is truly given, outside of any economy of exchange, then it again cancels itself as a gift, since the givenness

of the gift and thus its giver both disappear in it: "The givee cannot take the gift given for his own, so long as he still sees in it the face and the power of its previous owner. This owner (the giver) must disappear, so that the gift can start to appear as given; finally the giver must disappear completely for the gift to appear as given definitively, that is to say given up." Here enters the sacrifice: it renders the givenness (and thereby the giver) visible:

> Sacrifice gives the gift back to the givenness, from which it comes, by returning it to the very return that originally constitutes it. Sacrifice does not leave the gift, but dwells in it totally. It manifests it by re-giving the gift its givenness, because it repeats it starting from its origin. . . . It is absolutely not a question of a counter-gift, as if the giver needed either recovering his due (exchange), or receiving a supplementary tribute (gratitude as a symbolic salary), but of recognizing the gift as such, by repeating in an inverse sense the process of givenness, reinstating the gift there, and rescuing it from its factual fall back to the rank (without givenness) of a found object.

In such a structure of sacrifice I really lose nothing, it is just that the gift-status of what I have is asserted as such. No wonder that Marion's main example is that of Abraham and Isaac where Abraham does not really lose his son—all he has to do is to manifest his readiness to sacrifice him, based on the recognition that his son is not his in the first place, but given to him by God:

> On the condition of seeing indeed that by restraining him from killing Isaac, God precisely does not refuse the sacrifice of Abraham, but annuls only his being put

> to death, because that does not belong to the essence
> of sacrifice: the actual death of Isaac would only have
> satisfied sacrifice in its common concept (destruction,
> dispossession, exchange and contract). . . . By sparing
> Isaac from now on recognized (by Abraham) as a gift
> (of God), God re-gives him to him, gives him a second
> time, and by presenting a gift by a redundancy, which
> consecrates it definitively as a gift. . . . The sacrifice
> redoubles the gift and confirms it as such for the first
> time.

The term "as such" is crucial here: through repetition, the gift
is no longer obliterated in the given, but asserted as a gift. So
who sacrifices here? Gift and sacrifice are opposed: God gives a
gift, man sacrifices the appropriated gift to regain it as given . . .
Sacrifice is stopped at the last moment, similarly to polite offers
meant to be rejected: I offer (to apologize, to pay the bill . . .)—on
condition that you will reject my offer. There is, however, a key
difference here: while in an offer meant to be rejected both the
giver and the givee know that the offer is *meant* to be rejected, in
the sacrifice as repeated gift I get the gift back (it is re-given to
me) only if I was *really* ready to lose it. But does the same really
go for Christ's sacrifice, where he loses his life and gets it back in
Resurrection? Who is the giver and the givee here? In a convo-
luted and rather unconvincing attempt to squeeze Christ's sacri-
fice into his scheme, Marion sees God the Father as giver, Christ
as givee, and the Holy Spirit as the object of sacrifice which Christ
returns to his father and gets back (in Resurrection) as a gift:

> The death of the Christ accomplishes a sacrifice in this
> sense (more than in the common sense): by returning
> his spirit to the Father, who gives it to him, Jesus

prompts the veil of the Temple (which separates God from men and makes him invisible to them) to be torn, and at once appears himself as "truly the son of God" (Matthew 27:51, 54), thus making appear not itself but the invisible Father. The gift given thus lets the giver and the process (here Trinitarian) of givenness be seen.

Is the sense of Christ's sacrifice—which is that of Christ himself, who by way of dying on the cross gives his life as a pure unconditional gift to humanity as givee—not lost here? Is Marion's reading here not basically pre-Christian, reducing Christ to a mere mediator, focusing on God-the-Father as the only true giver? Are things not the exact opposite?—Is what in the most emphatic sense *appears* on the cross not precisely Christ himself as giver, and not God the Father who disappears in the background of the fascinating figure of the suffering Christ? Is his act of sacrifice not the ultimate gift? In other words, is it not much more appropriate to read Christ's death as a sacrifice for the real: Christ really and fully dies on the cross, so that we humans get the gift of the Holy Spirit (the community of believers)? Furthermore, if we take this gift in all its radicality, does it not compel us to read its meaning as the full acceptance of the fact that God is dead, that there is no big Other? The Holy Spirit is not the big Other of the symbolic community, but a collective which *ne s'autorise que de lui-même*, in the radical absence of any support from the big Other. What this means is that Christ's sacrifice precisely abolishes (sacrifices) the most perverse form of sacrifice, the one missing in Marion's classification and whose central role was deployed by Lacan.

For Lacan, this additional "perverse" sacrifice has two modes. First, a sacrifice enacts the disavowal of the impotence of the

big Other: at its most elementary, the subject does not offer his sacrifice to profit from it himself, but to fill in the lack *in the Other*, to sustain the appearance of the Other's omnipotence or, at least, consistency. Let me recall *Beau Geste*, the classic Hollywood adventure melodrama from 1938, in which the elder of the three brothers who live with their benevolent aunt, in what seems to be an ungrateful gesture of excessive cruelty, steals the enormously expensive diamond necklace which is the pride of the aunt's family and disappears with it, knowing that his reputation is ruined, that he will be forever known as the ungracious embezzler of his benefactress—so why did he do it? At the end of the film, we learn that he did it in order to prevent the embarrassing disclosure that the necklace was a fake: unbeknownst to all others, he knew that, some time ago, the aunt had to sell the necklace to a rich maharaja in order to save the family from bankruptcy, and replaced it with a worthless imitation. Just prior to his "theft," he had learned that a distant uncle who co-owned the necklace wanted it sold for financial gain; if the necklace were to be sold, the fact that it was a fake would undoubtedly be discovered, so the only way to protect the aunt's and thus the family's honor was to stage its theft . . . This is the proper deception of the crime of stealing: to occlude the fact that, ultimately, *there is nothing to steal*—this way, the constitutive lack of the Other is concealed, i.e. the illusion is maintained that the Other possessed what was stolen from it. If, in love, one gives what one doesn't possess, in a crime of love, one steals from the beloved Other what the Other doesn't possess . . . to this alludes the "beau geste" of the film's title. And therein resides also the meaning of sacrifice: one sacrifices oneself (one's honor and future in respectful society) to maintain the appearance of the Other's honor, to save the beloved Other from shame.

There is yet another, much more uncanny, dimension of sacri-

fice. Let me take another example from cinema, Jeannot Szwarc's *Enigma* (1981), the story of a dissident journalist-turned-spy who emigrated to the West and is then recruited by the CIA and sent to East Germany to get hold of a scrambling/descrambling computer chip whose possession enables the owner to read all communications between KGB headquarters and its outposts. Small signs tell the spy that there is something wrong with his mission, i.e., that East Germans and Russians have been told in advance about his arrival—so what is going on? Is it that the Communists have a mole in the CIA headquarters who has informed them of his secret mission? As we learn towards the film's end, the solution is much more ingenious: the CIA *already possesses* the scrambling chip, but, unfortunately, the Russians suspect this, and so have temporarily stopped using the computer network for their secret communications. The true aim of the operation was to convince the Russians that the CIA did not have the chip: the CIA sent the agent to get it and, at the same time, deliberately let the Russians know that there was an operation going on to get the chip, counting, of course, on the probability that the Russians would arrest their spy. The ultimate result will thus be that, by successfully preventing the mission, the Russians will be convinced that the Americans do not possess the chip and that it is therefore safe to use this communication link . . . The tragic aspect of the story, of course, is that the CIA *wants* the mission to fail: the dissident agent is sacrificed in advance for the higher goal of convincing the opponent that one doesn't possess his secret.

The strategy is here to stage a search operation in order to convince the Other (the enemy) that one does not already possess what one is looking for—in short, one feigns a lack, a want, in order to conceal from the Other that one already possesses the *agalma*, the Other's innermost secret. Is this structure not

somehow connected with the basic paradox of symbolic castra-
tion as constitutive of desire, in which the object has to be lost
in order to be regained on the inverse ladder of desire regulated
by the Law? Symbolic castration is usually defined as the loss
of something that one never possessed, i.e., the object-cause of
desire is an object which emerges through the very gesture of its
loss/withdrawal; however, what we encounter here is the obverse
structure of feigning a loss. Insofar as the Other of the symbolic
Law prohibits *jouissance*, the only way for the subject to enjoy is
to feign that he lacks the object that provides *jouissance*, i.e., to
conceal from the Other's gaze its possession by way of staging
the spectacle of the desperate search for it.

This also casts a new light on the topic of sacrifice: one sacri-
fices not in order to get something from the Other, but in order
to dupe the Other, in order to convince him/it that one is still
missing something, i.e., *jouissance*. This is why obsessional neu-
rotics experience the compulsion repeatedly to accomplish their
rituals of sacrifice—in order to disavow their *jouissance* in the
eyes of the Other . . . What do these two psychoanalytic versions
of sacrifice mean for a theological perspective? How can we avoid
their trap? The answer is outlined in Jean-Pierre Dupuy's *The
Mark of the Sacred*,[3] a book on the link between sacrifice and the
sacred. This book confronts the ultimate mystery of the so-called
human or social sciences, that of the origins of what Lacan calls
the "big Other," what Hegel called "externalization" (*Entäusserung*),
what Marx called "alienation," and—why not—what Friedrich
Hayek called "self-transcendence": How, out of the interaction
of individuals, can the appearance of an "objective order" arrive
which cannot be reduced to their interaction, but is experienced
by them as a substantial agency which determines their lives? It

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3   Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *La marque du sacre* (Paris: Carnets Nord, 2008). Numbers
     in brackets later in the text refer to pages in this book.

is all too easy to "unmask" such a "substance," to show, by means of a phenomenological genesis, how it gradually gets "reified" and is sedimented out of individuals' interaction: the problem is that the presupposition of such a spectral/virtual substance is in a way co-substantial with being-human—those who are unable to relate to it as such, those who directly subjectivize it, are called psychotics: it is for psychotics that, behind every impersonal big Other, there is a personal big Other, the paranoiac's secret agent/master who pulls the strings. (Dupuy prefers to leave the big question that lurks behind this topic—can such a transcendent substance emerge out of individuals' immanent interaction, or should it be sustained by a *real* transcendence?—undecided, while we shall try to demonstrate that, the moment one raises this question, the "materialist" answer is the only consistent one.)

Dupuy's great theoretical breakthrough is to link this emergence of the "big Other" to the complex logic of the sacrifice constitutive of the dimension of the sacred, i.e., of the rise of the distinction between the sacred and the profane: through the sacrifice, the big Other, the transcendent agency which poses limits to our activity, is sustained. The third link in this chain is hierarchy: the ultimate function of sacrifice is to legitimize and enact a hierarchic order (which works only if it is supported by some figure of the transcendent big Other). It is here that the first properly *dialectical* twist in Dupuy's line of argumentation occurs: relying on Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus*,[4] he shows how hierarchy implies not only a hierarchic order, but also its immanent loop or reversal: true, the social space is divided into higher and lower hierarchical levels, but *within the lower level, the lower is higher than the lower*. An exemplary instance is pro-

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4   Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).

vided by the relationship between Church and State in Christi-
anity: in principle, of course, Church is above State; however, as
thinkers from Augustine to Hegel made clear, *within the secular
order of the State, State is above Church* (i.e., Church *as a social
institution* should be subordinated to State)—if it is not, if the
Church wants directly to rule also as a secular power, then it
gets unavoidably corrupted from within, reducing itself to just
another secular power using its religious teaching as an ideology
to justify its secular rule. (As Dumont has demonstrated, long
before Christianity, this paradoxical reversal is clearly discernible
in the ancient Indian Veda, the first fully elaborated ideology of
hierarchy: the cast of preachers is in principle superior to the cast
of warriors, but, within the actual power structure of the state,
they are *de facto* subordinated to warriors.)

Dupuy's next, even more crucial move is to formulate this
twist in the logic of hierarchy, which is the immanent condi-
tion of its functioning, in terms of the negative self-relationship
between the universal and the particular, between the All and its
parts—i.e., as a process in which the universal encounters itself
among its species in the guise of its "oppositional determina-
tion." Back to the example of Church and State, Church is the
encompassing unity of all human life, standing for its highest
authority and conferring on all its parts their proper place in the
great hierarchical order of the universe; however, it encounters
itself as a subordinate element of the terrestrial State power
which is in principle subordinated to it—the Church as a social
institution is protected by and has to obey the laws of the State.
Insofar as the higher and the lower also relate here as the Good
and the Evil (the good domain of the divine versus the terres-
trial sphere of power struggles, egotistic interests, the search
for vain pleasures, etc.), one can also say that, through this loop
or twist immanent to hierarchy, the "higher" Good dominates,

controls, and uses the "lower" Evil, even if it may appear, super-ficially (i.e., to a gaze constrained by the terrestrial perspective of reality as the domain of egotistic power struggles and search for vain pleasures), that religion, with its pretense to occupying a "higher" place, is just an ideological legitimization of the "lower" interests (say, that the Church ultimately just legitimizes social hierarchical relations). From this perspective, it is religion that secretly pulls the strings, that remains the hidden power which allows and mobilizes Evil for the larger Good. One is almost tempted here to use the term "over-determination": although it is the secular power which immediately plays the determining role, this role is itself over-determined by the religious/sacred All. (Of course, for partisans of the "critique of ideology," this very notion that religion secretly dominates social life, as a power gently controlling and steering its chaotic struggle, is the ideological illusion par excellence.) How are we to read this com-plex self-relating entwinement of the "higher" and the "lower"? There are two main alternatives, which perfectly fit the opposi-tion between idealism and materialism:

> (1) The traditional theological-(pseudo-)Hegelian matrix of containing the *pharmakon*: the higher all-embracing All allows the lower Evil, but contains it, making it serve the higher goal. There are many figures of this matrix: the (pseudo-)Hegelian "Cunning of Reason" (Reason is the unity of itself and particular egotistical passions, mobilizing them to achieve its secret goal of universal rationality); the Marxist "march of history" in which violence serves progress; the "invisible hand" of the market which mobilizes individual egotisms for the common good . . .
> (2) The more radical (and truly Hegelian) notion of

Evil distinguishing itself from itself by externalizing itself in a transcendent figure of the Good. From this perspective, far from encompassing Evil as its subordinated moment, the difference between Good and Evil is inherent to Evil, Good is nothing but universalized Evil, and Evil is itself the unity of itself and the Good. Evil controls/contains itself by generating the specter of a transcendent Good; however, it can only do this by way of superseding its "ordinary" mode of Evil with an infinitized/absolutized Evil. This is why the self-containing of Evil through the positing of some transcendent power which limits it can always explode—which is why Hegel has to admit an excess of negativity that always threatens to disturb the rational order. All the talk about the "materialist reversal" of Hegel, about the tension between the "idealist" and the "materialist" Hegel, is pointless if it is not grounded in this precise topic of two opposed and conflicting ways of reading the negative self-relating of universality. The same can also be put in terms of the metaphor of Evil as a stain in the picture: if, within the traditional teleology, Evil is a stain legitimized by the overall harmony, contributing to it, then, from a materialist standpoint, the Good itself is a self-organization/self-limitation of the stain, the result of a limit, a "minimal difference," within the field of Evil. This is why moments of crisis are so dangerous—in them, the obscure obverse of the transcendent Good, the "dark side of God," the violence which sustains the very containment of violence, appears as such: "One believed that the good rules over the evil, its 'opposite,' but it appears now

that it is rather the evil which rules over itself by way
of assuming a distance towards itself, by way of pos-
iting itself outside itself; thus 'self-externalized,' the
superior level appears as good" (13).

Dupuy's point is that the sacred is, as to its content, the same as
the terrible evil; their difference is purely formal/structural—what
makes it "sacred" is its exorbitant character, which makes it a limi-
tation of "ordinary" evil. To see this, we should not only focus on
religious prohibitions and obligations, but also bear in mind the
rituals practiced by a religion, and the contradiction, already noted
by Hegel, between prohibitions and rituals: "Often, the ritual
consists in staging the violation of these prohibitions and viola-
tions" (143). The sacred is nothing but the violence of humans, but
"expulsed, externalized, hypostazied" (151). The sacred sacrifice to
the gods is the same as an act of murder—what makes it sacred
is the fact that it limits/contains violence, including murder, in
ordinary life. In times of crisis of the sacred, this distinction dis-
integrates: there is no sacred exception, a sacrifice is perceived as
a simple murder—but this also means that there is nothing, no
external limit, to contain our ordinary violence.

Therein resides the ethical dilemma Christianity tries to
resolve: how to contain violence without sacrificial excep-
tion, without an external limit? Following René Girard, Dupuy
demonstrates how Christianity stages the same sacrificial pro-
cess, but with a crucially different cognitive spin: the story is
not told by the collective which stages the sacrifice, but by the
victim, from the standpoint of the victim whose full innocence
is thereby asserted. (The first step towards this reversal can be
discerned already in the book of Job, where the story is told from
the standpoint of the innocent victim of divine wrath.) Once
the innocence of the sacrificial victim is *known*, the efficiency of

the entire sacrificial mechanism of scapegoating is undermined: sacrifices (even of the magnitude of a holocaust) become hypocritical, inoperative, fake, but we also lose the containment of violence enacted by the sacrifice: "Concerning Christianity, it is not a morality but an epistemology: it says the truth about the sacred, and thereby deprives it of its creative power, for better or for worse. Humans alone decide this" (161). Therein resides the world-historical rupture introduced by Christianity: *now we know*, and can no longer pretend that we don't. And, as we have already seen, the impact of this knowledge is not only liberating, but deeply ambiguous: it also deprives society of the stabilizing role of scapegoating and thus opens up the space for violence not contained by any mythic limit. This is how, in a truly perspicuous insight, Dupuy reads the scandalous lines from Matthew: "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). The same logic holds for international relations: far from making violent conflicts impossible, the abolishment of sovereign states and the establishment of a single world state or power would open up the field for new forms of violence within such a "world empire," with no sovereign state to set a limit to it: "Far from guaranteeing eternal peace, the cosmopolitic ideal would rather be the favorable condition for a limitless violence."[5]

The role of contingency is crucial here: in the post-sacred world, once the efficiency of the transcendent Other is suspended and the process (of decision) has to be confronted in its contingency, the problem is that this contingency cannot be fully assumed, so it has to be sustained by what Lacan called *le peu du réel*, a little piece of the contingent real which acts as *la réponse du réel*, the "answer of the real." Hegel was deeply aware of this

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5   Monique Canto-Sperber, in *Jean-Pierre Dupuy: Dans l'oeil du cyclone. Colloque de Cerisy* (Paris: Carnets Nord, 2008), 157.

paradox when he opposed ancient democracy to modern mon-
archy: it was precisely because the ancient Greeks had no figure
of pure subjectivity (the king) at the summit of their state edifice
that they needed to resort to "superstitious" practices—such as
looking for signs in the flight-paths of birds or the entrails of
animals—to guide the *polis* in making crucial decisions. It was
clear to Hegel that the modern world could not dispense with
this contingent real and organize social life only through choices
and decisions based on "objective" qualifications (the illusion of
what Lacan later called the discourse of the University): there is
always something of a ritual in being invested with a title, even
if the conferring of the title follows automatically from meeting
certain "objective" criteria. A semantic analysis of, say, what
"passing one's exams with the highest grades" means cannot
be reduced to "proving that one has certain actual properties—
knowledge, capacities, etc."—to all this, a ritual must be added by
means of which the results of the exam are proclaimed and the
grade is conferred and acknowledged. There is always a minimal
gap or distance between these two levels: even if I am absolutely
sure I have answered all the exam questions correctly, there *has*
to be something contingent—a moment of surprise, the thrill
of the unexpected—in the announcement of the results; which
is why, when waiting for the results to be announced, we cannot
ever fully escape the anxiety of expectation. Take political elec-
tions: even if the result is known in advance, its public proclama-
tion is anticipated with a thrill—in effect, to make something
into Fate, contingency is needed. This is what, as a rule, critics
of the widespread procedures of "evaluation" miss: what makes
evaluation problematic is not the fact that it reduces unique sub-
jects with the wealth of their inner experience to a set of quan-
tifiable properties, but that it tries to reduce the symbolic act of
investiture (the investing of a subject with a title) to a procedure

totally grounded in the knowledge and measurement of what the
subject in question "really is."

Violence threatens to explode not when there is too much
contingency in the social space, but when one tries to eliminate
that contingency. It is at this level that we should search for
what one might call, in rather bland terms, the social function
of hierarchy. Dupuy here makes yet another unexpected turn,
conceiving hierarchy as one of the four procedures ("symbolic
dispositifs") whose function it is to make the relationship of
superiority non-humiliating for those subordinated: (1) *hierarchy*
itself (the externally imposed ordering of social roles in clear
contradistinction to the immanent higher or lower value of indi-
viduals—I thereby experience my lower social status as totally
independent of my inherent value); (2) *demystification* (the crit-
ico-ideological procedure which demonstrates that relations of
superiority/inferiority are not founded in meritocracy, but are
the result of objective ideological and social struggles: my social
status depends on objective social processes, not on my merits
—as Dupuy acerbically puts it, social demystification "plays in
our egalitarian, competitive and meritocratic societies the same
role as hierarchy in traditional societies" (208)—it enables us to
avoid the painful conclusion that the other's superiority is the
result of his merits and achievements); (3) *contingency* (the same
mechanism, only without its social-critical edge: our position on
the social scale depends on a natural and social lottery—lucky
are those who are born with better dispositions and into rich
families); (4) *complexity* (superiority or inferiority depend on
a complex social process which is independent of individuals'
intentions or merits—the invisible hand of the market, say, can
cause my failure and my neighbor's success, even if I worked
much harder and was much more intelligent). Contrary to how it
may appear, none of these mechanisms contest or threaten hier-

archy, but rather make it palatable, since "what triggers the tur-
moil of envy is the idea that the other deserves his good luck and
not the opposite idea which is the only one that can be openly
expressed" (211). Dupuy draws from this premise the (for him
obvious) conclusion: it is a great mistake to think that a society
which is just and which also perceives itself as just will thereby
be free of all resentment—on the contrary, it is precisely in such
a society that those who occupy inferior positions will only find
an outlet for their hurt pride in violent outbursts of resentment.

   Dupuy's limitations are here clearly discernible in his rejection of
class struggle as being determined by this logic of envious violence:
class struggle is for him the exemplary case of what Rousseau called
perverted self-love, in which one cares more for the destruction of
the enemy (perceived as an obstacle to my happiness) than for one's
own happiness. The only way out, for Dupuy, is to abandon the
logic of victimhood and accept negotiations between all parties
concerned, treated as equal in their dignity: "The transformation
of the conflicts between social classes, between capital and labor,
in the course of the twentieth century amply demonstrates
that this way is not utopian. We progressively passed from the
class struggle to social coordination, the rhetoric of victimhood
mostly replaced by wage negotiations. From now on, bosses
and trade organizations view each other as partners with inter-
ests which are simultaneously diverging and converging" (224).
But is this really the only possible conclusion to be drawn from
Dupuy's premises? Does such a replacement of struggle with
negotiation not also rely on a magical disappearance of envy,
which then stages a surprising comeback in the form of different
fundamentalisms?

   Furthermore, we stumble here upon another ambiguity: it is
not that this absence of limits should be read in terms of the
standard alternative: "either humanity will find a way to set

itself limits or it will perish from its own uncontained violence."
If there is a lesson to be learned from so-called "totalitarian"
experiences, it is that the temptation is exactly the opposite one:
the danger of imposing, in the absence of any divine limit, a *new*
pseudo-limit, a fake transcendence on behalf of which I act (from
Stalinism to religious fundamentalism). Even ecology functions
as ideology the moment it is evoked as a new Limit: it has every
chance of developing into the predominant form of ideology for
global capitalism, a new opium for the masses replacing the old
religion[6] by taking over the latter's fundamental function, that of
assuming an unquestionable authority which can impose limits.
The lesson ecology constantly hammers home is that of our fini-
tude: we are not Cartesian subjects extracted from reality, we are
finite beings embedded in a biosphere which vastly transgresses
our horizons. In our exploitation of natural resources, we are
borrowing from the future, and so should treat our Earth with
respect, as something ultimately Sacred, something that should
not be unveiled totally, that should and will forever remain a
Mystery, a power we should trust, not dominate.

It is fashionable, in some of today's neo-pagan "post-sec-
ular" circles, to affirm the dimension of the Sacred as a space
in which every religion dwells, but which is prior to religion
(there can be the Sacred without religion, but not the other way
round). (Sometimes, this priority of the Sacred is even given an
anti-religious spin: a way to remain agnostic while nonetheless
engaged in a deep spiritual experience.) Following Dupuy, one
should exactly turn things around here: the radical break intro-
duced by Christianity consists in the fact that it is the first reli-
gion *without* the sacred, a religion whose unique achievement is
precisely to demystify the Sacred.

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6   I take this expression from Alain Badiou.

What practical stance follows from this paradox of religion without the sacred? There is a Jewish story about a Talmud specialist opposed to the death penalty who, embarrassed by the fact that the penalty is ordained by God himself, proposed a wonderfully practical solution: one should not directly overturn the divine injunction, which would be blasphemous, but one should treat it as God's slip of tongue, his moment of madness, and invent a complex network of sub-regulations and conditions which, while leaving the possibility of the death penalty intact, would ensure that this possibility would never be realized.[7] The beauty of this solution is that it turns around the standard procedure of prohibiting something in principle (like torture), but then slipping in enough qualifications ("except in specified extreme circumstances . . .") to make sure it can be done whenever one really wants to do it. It is thus either, "In principle yes, but in practice never," or, "In principle no, but when exceptional circumstances demand it, yes." Note the asymmetry between the two cases: the prohibition is much stronger when one allows torture in principle—in this case, the principled "yes" is *never* allowed to realize itself, while in the other case, the principled "no" is *exceptionally* allowed to realize itself . . . Insofar as the "God who enjoins us to kill" is one of the names of the apocalyptic Thing, the strategy of the Talmud scholar is a way of practicing what Dupuy calls "enlightened catastrophism": one accepts the final catastrophe—the obscenity of people killing their neighbors as a form of justice—as inevitable, written into our destiny, and then one engages in postponing it for as long as possible, hopefully indefinitely. Here is how, along these lines, Dupuy resumes Guenther Anders's reflections apropos the explosion of the atomic bomb above Hiroshima:

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7   I owe this story to Eric Santner.

On that day history became "obsolete." Humanity
became able to destroy itself, and nothing can make
it lose this "negative omnipotence," even a global dis-
armament or a total denuclearization of the world.
*The apocalypse is inscribed as a destiny into our future,
and the best we can do is to delay indefinitely its occur-
rence.* We are in excess. On August 1945 we entered
the era of "freeze" and of the "second death" of all
that existed: since the meaning of the past depends
on future acts, the becoming-obsolete of the future,
its programmed ending, does not mean that the past
has no longer any meaning, it means that it never had
any meaning. (240)

It is against this background that one should read the basic Pau-
linian notion of living in an "apocalyptic time," a "time at the
end of time": the apocalyptic time is precisely the time of this
indefinite postponement, the time of freeze in between the two
deaths: in some sense, we are already dead, since the catastrophe
is already here, casting its shadow from the future—after Hiro-
shima, we cannot any longer play the simple humanist game of
the choice we have ("it depends on us whether we follow the path
of self-destruction or the path of gradual healing"). Once the
catastrophe has happened, we lose the innocence of such a posi-
tion, we can only (indefinitely, maybe) postpone its happening
again. (In a homologous way, the danger of nano-technology is
not only that scientists will design a monster which will develop
out of (our) control: when we try to create a new life, it is our
direct aim to bring about an uncontrollable self-organizing and
self-expanding entity (43). This is how, in yet another herme-
neutic coup, Dupuy reads Christ's skeptical words addressed to
the prophets of doom:

> As he went out of the temple, one of his disciples said
> to him, "Teacher, see what kind of stones and what
> kind of buildings!" Jesus said to him, "Do you see
> these great buildings? There will not be left here one
> stone on another, which will not be thrown down." As
> he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple,
> Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately,
> "Tell us, when will these things be? What is the sign
> that these things are all about to be fulfilled?" Jesus,
> answering, began to tell them, "Be careful that no
> one leads you astray. For many will come in my name,
> saying, 'I am he!' and will lead many astray. When you
> hear of wars and rumors of wars, don't be troubled.
> For those must happen, but the end is not yet. . . .
> Then if anyone tells you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or,
> 'Look, there!' don't believe it. For there will arise false
> Christs and false prophets, and they will show signs
> and wonders, that they may lead astray, if possible,
> even the chosen ones. But you watch." (Mark 13:1-23)

These lines are tremendous in their unexpected wisdom: do
they not exactly correspond the stance of the above-mentioned
Talmud scholar? Their message is: yes, of course, there will be
a catastrophe, but watch patiently, don't believe in it, don't get
caught in precipitous extrapolations, don't give yourself up to
the properly perverse pleasure of thinking "This is it!" in all its
diverse forms (global warming will drown us all in a decade, bio-
genetics will mean the end of being-human, et cetera, et cetera).
Far from luring us into a perverse self-destructive rapture,
adopting the properly apocalyptic stance is—today more than
ever—the only way to keep a cool head.

2

Babylonian Virtues—
Minority Report
Gunjević

As Saint Augustine says, the great reigns are only the enlarged projections of little thieves. Augustine of Hippo, however, so realistic in this pessimistic conception of power, would be struck dumb by today's little thieves of monetary and financial power. Really, when capitalism loses its relationship to value (both as the measure of individual exploitation and as a norm of collective progress) it appears immediately as corruption.[8]

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri are right to say that Augustine would be dumbfounded by the level of corruption in Empire today, but he would be just as surprised by the way Hardt and Negri interpret this in their discussion of imperial practices. What the two of them are doing, in the most general way, is a postmodern (whatever that notorious notion might mean) Spinoza-izing of Augustine, which seems altogether charming and original. There is a need for reciprocity here, however, meaning that Spinoza also needs to be Augustine-ized. John Milbank considers this particularly crucial for constructing an authentic postmodern Christian theology, which could help in what Hardt

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8   Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 390.

and Negri mean to accomplish. Their intention is to show how the multitude becomes a political subject, but despite their serious attempts, this remains unrealized because Spinoza must be Augustine-ized in a way entirely opposed to what we find in Hardt and Negri. *Empire* should be re-read alongside Augustine's *City of God* in order to show what the multitude needs to become a political subject—the crucial question around which their book turns. Hardt and Negri speak of the *multitude* as an irreducible multiplicity of subjects, a concept of class which is, at the same time, ontological power. Their critics feel that the *multitude* concept is too abstract, too pompous, while Milbank terms it sanguine.

Hardt and Negri take the concept of multitude from the "political theory of Antiquity," as described by historians such as Polybius and Livy. Machiavelli took the concept of multitude from Polybius. Augustine stands here as an exacting critic of Polybius since he himself writes history, although from the linear rather than the cyclical perspective which was the approach of the historians of Antiquity. The Bishop of Hippo is the first writer of Antiquity to venture a story of the creation of the world, its existence, and its end (yet to come) through the theological practice of community. In doing so he is the first to describe human history based directly on a philosophy of history which Hegel doesn't even mention. Augustine wrote a story about history, interpolated by Christ's incarnation. Hence the whole of history is explained in the light of the incarnation (*logos*) and the origin of community—a continuation of the incarnation in time. In Augustine's meta-story there is a simple outcome which is readily understandable: *Torah + Logos = Christ*.

It goes without saying that the world we live in differs in many ways from the world of Antiquity and the Roman Empire, to which Aurelius Augustine addresses his critique. Although these

two worlds are vastly different, there are similarities of which Hardt and Negri make careful note, and it is therefore not surprising that Augustine is one of their most important references. This is why the two texts should be compared, the first having informed the second. *Empire* can be read, like any book, in several ways. Whether this is the Communist Manifesto of the twenty-first century or an exercise in Deleuzian politics, *Empire* is a book of important and influential insights. We can read *Empire* equally as an introduction to the history of political theory or as a materialistic commentary on Augustine's *City of God*. In my opinion, the two texts should be read together since Negri and Hardt's *Empire* largely relies on Augustine's conclusions from his voluminous work. Two things spring indirectly from this. The first is that strategies of reading determine perception of political practice; the second, and just as important as far as I am concerned, is to construct a plausible critique that Augustine might have made of Hardt and Negri, being what I described as making an Augustinian version of Spinoza. First let us look at what Hardt and Negri have to say about Augustine:

> In this regard we might take inspiration from Saint Augustine's vision of a project to contest the decadent Roman Empire. No limited community could succeed and provide an alternative to imperial rule; only a universal, catholic community bringing together all populations and all languages in a common journey could accomplish this. The divine city is a universal city coming together, cooperating, communicating. Our pilgrimage on earth, however, in contrast to Augustine's, has no transcendent *telos* beyond; it is and remains absolutely immanent. Its continuous movement, gathering aliens in community, making

this world its home, is both means and end, or rather
a means without an end.[9]

Within Augustine's vision, as the authors remark, there is a pow-
erful form of struggle against imperial postmodernism, which
articulates its discourse through discord. To be against it means
to begin by discovering the best means for undermining imperial
sovereignty. Hardt and Negri claim with authority that battles
against Empire are won by refusal, by desertion, by deliberately
embracing exodus, mobility, and nomadism. We resist the net-
worked systems of regulation and power by desertion, which
means that we do nothing more than deliberately abandon the
places of power. Desertion, exodus, and nomadism are the initial
phases of the republican principle, say the authors. This would
seem to be easier said than done. How can one desert if all that
exists is immanent labor on the surfaces of Empire, networked
with systems of sovereign regulation? Whither to take one's
exodus if there is nothing objective standing outside of us, and
how to think nomadism when Empire holds virtues and practice
under control, and keeps a close eye on the very margins through
capitalist rationality? The answer to the question posed is more
intuitive than intriguing. The answers offered by Hardt and
Negri are more enigmatic than inarticulate and they are linked
with the way in which the political subject of the abstract multi-
tude becomes a universal singular.

According to Hardt and Negri, the person who best embodies
the joy of neo-Communist struggle against Empire is none other
than Francis of Assisi. This is a significant statement and its conse-
quences have not been fully fathomed. Are the authors of *Empire*
suggesting that Francis of Assisi is not only a model postmodern

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9   Ibid., 207.

political activist, but a model embodying the multitude as polit-
ical subject? Whence this sudden invocation of a romantically
dangerous Francis and his unprecedented asceticism? Although
at the beginning of *Empire* the authors advocate the Franciscan
nominalist theology of Duns Scotus out of which, according to
their thinking, emerged the consequential nominalist political
matrix, the act of invoking Francis and his asceticism seems to
be regression to a religious discourse on immanence for lack of
more robust arguments. This is a case of asceticism (as well as
of religion) that Negri embraces in principle as an internaliza-
tion of the object as a constituent state that is simultaneously
a transformation of the senses, imagination, body, and mind.
Normally, Negri does not accept a single form of transcendence,
but he accepts asceticism which he sees as necessary for a life of
virtue, about which more will be said later.

> In order to live well and construct the common, ascet-
> icism is always necessary. Christ-like incarnation,
> which is a kind of asceticism, is a kind of ascetic guid-
> ance, or rather a path towards the virtuous life—as
> Spinoza recommended. It is probably in secular asceti-
> cism that singularities and sensuality are most effec-
> tively intertwined in order to construct the world to
> come.[10]

This, it seems, is why Francis matters to Hardt and Negri. With
his simple, romantic asceticism and his child-like imagination
Francis counters the very kernel of capitalism, emerging in a
way that is identified with the poorest and most oppressed.
This, according to the authors, is an inherently revolutionary

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10   Antonio Negri, *Negri on Negri: Antonio Negri in Conversation with Anne Dufour-
      mantelle* (London: Routledge, 2004), 158.

act. Francis disempowers himself in the name of the multitude, embracing discipline consisting of the joy of being in order to oppose the will of power and reject every form of instrumental discipline. He affiliates himself with all of nature, the animals, birds, the brother sun and sister moon in his battle against the corruption and venality of early capitalist society. In Francis of Assisi we have a symbol of the impossibility of controlling cooperation and revolution. Cooperation and revolution as embodied by Francis remain together in love, simplicity, joy, and innocence. Such cooperation and revolution in simplicity are the irrepressible lightness and joy of being Communist.

But there is something equally important here which should not go unremarked: a reading of Plotinus which in a certain way Augustine and Hardt and Negri have in common, both in their acceptance and their rejection of it. This seems particularly important. Augustine, at the close of the ninth book of his *Confessions*, attempts a response to Monica's question about the nature of the eternal life of the saints. When discussing Paul's epistle in Philippians 3:3, he says the Philippians gradually fell into joy, lifting themselves with a more ardent affection towards God, towards *the Selfsame* as Augustine puts it. Further, he says, they came to their own minds and gradually rose above all corporeal things, above the moon, sun, and stars shining upon the earth. After that, admiring God's work, they came to their soul, reaching into it to the experience of the divine, the unfailing plenty, where life is wisdom and the truth by which all things that are made exist, outside the transience of time. Augustine describes how, as they were speaking and straining after this wisdom, they slightly touched upon it with the whole effort of their hearts and experienced the wisdom that is God himself.

And we sighed, and there left bound "the first-fruits

of the Spirit;" (Rom. 8:23) and returned to the noise
of our own mouth, where the word uttered has both
beginning and end. And what is like Your Word, our
Lord, who remains in Himself without becoming old,
and "makes all things new?" (Wis. 7:27)[11]

Writing these lines, Augustine was not merely responding to
his rather possessive mother on a theological quandary, nor was
he showing how the Christian ecstasy which awaits us in eternity
is intended for all, whether or not we led a contemplative life,
as did Augustine, or an active life, as did Monica. Instead this
was, in fact, a critique of Plotinus' mystical philosophical dis-
course in which the goal was ecstasy, which one reached through
one's inner being and by ascending to the divine by means of
wisdom, but without Christ. The problem with Plotinus' ecstasy,
as Augustine shows, is its temporal limit, its brevity, after which
we must come back to the "real" world and go on living—as the
Bishop of Hippo said, "we return to the noise of our own mouth."
Augustine's critique of Plotinus is that although in eternity we
will be in that state of ecstasy, this is not possible in our earthly
lives; here we must act and not merely contemplate. The ecstasy
they shared in Ostia, of which Augustine speaks, is actually a
synthesis of ecclesial practice in which contemplation and action
mingle, as becomes clear later, in the thirteenth book of *Confes-
sions*, in his commentaries on the *Hexameron*, as the six days of
creation, in which the first, third, and fifth days are for contem-
plation, while the second, fourth, and sixth are for activity.

Just as Augustine critically rejects Plotinus, so do Hardt and

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11   Augustine, *Confessions*, 9:10:24, trans. J.G. Pilkington, in Philip Schaff, ed.,
      Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, vol. 1 (Buffalo, NY: Christian
      Literature Publishing Co., 1887). Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin
      Knight; available at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/110109.htm

Negri, but for an entirely different reason. They feel that we cannot surrender to the state in which Plotinus found himself by calling people to "flee to the heavenly Fatherland" through mystical contemplation.[12] In an attempt to detect the actions of the multitude which enable it to become a political subject we cannot, in the opinion of the authors, surrender to the mysticism Plotinus' Enneads espouse. In answer to the question of how to organize the multitude and how to channel energy against the permanent territorial segmentation of Empire, Plotinus' insights and ecstasies will not suffice because they include no God the Father and no transcendence, say Hardt and Negri. All the multitude has left is its immanent labor. This is labor on the surfaces of the immanent plane that generates an insistence on the right of reappropriation, which would include:

> ❯ Global citizenship, which is connected to autonomy and the right to regulate one's own movement.
> ❯ Social wages and a guaranteed income for all, at a time of collective existence within the multitude.
> ❯ Knowledge, self-regulation, and autonomous self-production, which the authors interpret as an attempt at making a new place in the *telos* within the body of the multitude.

Hardt and Negri state that in this process of reappropriation there is a "material mythology of reason" at work which is nothing short of a specific material religion of the senses that keeps the multitude beyond the grasp of imperial sovereignty. In fact this refers to a mythology of reason, symbolically and imagi-

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12   Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 395.

natively shaping and enabling the ontology of the multitude to express itself as action and consciousness. This is an ontology, indeed, which interprets the *telos* of the earthly city in a new way. It makes possible a strategy by which the absolute constitution of labor and cooperation is realized within the earthly city of the multitude in the battle against violence and corruption without the help of metaphysical and transcendent mediation. In other words, this is what Hardt and Negri describe as the "theurgical teleology of the multitude."[13] Herein lies the key problem for the constitution of the multitude as political subject, and it relates indirectly to Augustine. This is primarily because their interpretive framework assumes a nominalist political theory that is both progressive in terms of paganism and stealthily Gnostic. A different framework is needed to supersede the critique of Plotinus' (proto)modern mysticism to which Hardt and Negri are, in fact, juxtaposing their paganistically progressive "theurgical teleology." In other words, it is not possible to counter Plotinus' mystical philosophical theology using Iamblichus' and Proclus' mystical theurgical theology/teleology (they were the first to popularize the theurgical discourse with Porphyry within the philosophical context of late Antiquity, interpreting it in a Platonistic key) in a postmodern version, as Hardt and Negri approach it. To the authors' regret, this is simply not feasible.

Theurgy can be summed up as a popularized religious (neo) Platonism; hence the fact that among "theurgical philosophers" there is talk not only of the One, the Divine, or the gods, but of God himself, incommunicable beyond the One, is not surprising. Theurgy can be interpreted within the canon of the Pla-

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13   Ibid., 396: "The teleology of the multitude is theurgical; it consists in the possibility of directing technologies and production towards its own joy and its own increase of power. The multitude has no reason to look outside its own history and its own present productive power for the means necessary to lead towards its constitution as a political subject."

tonic philosophical tradition. It follows that theurgical practice is reminiscent, in part, of the magic which Augustine criticizes so harshly in the tenth book of *City of God*, comparing theurgy to demon worship.[14] Gregory Shaw, one of the most knowledgeable commentators on the subject, argues that in order to understand Iamblichus' Platonism one must look closely at his distinction between theurgy and theology. For Iamblichus, theology is a discourse about the "gods," while theurgy is the gods' labor to make man Divine. Iamblichus was the first to offer a rational foundation for theurgy, wanting to show how theurgical practice is a part of Plato's philosophy, since theurgy, according to Iamblichus, fulfills the purpose of that philosophy. Theurgy is not a beginning for philosophy as it is with Porphyry, but rather a ritual work of the gods who allow us an encounter with the Divine and a transformation into the Divine. This means that in theurgical practices we encounter God not in seeing but in a ritual cult invocation of the Divine; Iamblichus states that this is part of the very canon of the Platonic tradition. In theurgy God exists for us where we invoke him and where we do the prescribed works of the "gods" to harmonize with his works, in order to receive what the "gods" would give us. The neo-Platonic discourse, to which were added Iamblichus' *Chaldean Oracles* and the neo-Pythagorean discourse, made it possible for the theurgical practitioner or wise man to make himself, through ritual, more receptive to the Divine and capable of acting in harmony with the natural processes surrounding him. It is important to note that theurgical practices communicate "divine love," or goodness, which allows practitioners to ascend to transcendence

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14   Augustine, *City of God*, 10:1:1–10:32:4, trans. Marcus Dods, in Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 2 (Buffalo NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887). Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, available at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120102.htm

and rid the soul of the physical. The theurgical begins with the Divine "descending" among us which gives us the possibility of harmonizing ourselves with the Divine in an entirely new "ascending" way. Through these processes of harmonization we reach a state in which we are ready to receive the Divine concern we have suffered without. According to Iamblichus, the "gods" gather all beings together with them in a unity. Hence the light of the Divine illuminates in a transcendental way those who are gathered through theurgy and places them in their own cosmic order of the Divine, ensuring their participation for the entirety of their existence. From the texts Iamblichus wrote which have come down to us (and from Damascius' writings about him) we can see how the author of the *Chaldean Oracles* interpreted the One. Iamblichus' One is beyond all Good and even beyond Being itself. In a paradoxical way, beyond cognition, the divine world descends into the earthly world, participating in it sacramentally by means of a reality which is the cosmos expanding in time and space. The gods and what is generically termed the multiplicity (or many) in metaphysics contained in themselves a unity of totality and a totality of unity. The beginning of the multiplicity, its middle, and its end, exist in various forms of unity to which the multitude aspires, as Iamblichus' reading of Plato makes clear.

For Iamblichus there is a "single beginning." It precedes every duality, beyond the One that gives life to the dyad. The One is beyond contrast between the participating and that in which there can be no participation. There is an absolute in Iamblichus' work that confirms the mediation between these two origins. This mediation eludes comparison as, for instance, in the case of the limited and the limitless, the many and the One, the finite and the infinite. Iamblichus' One is not only a unifying origin which always remains alien to everything which originates in it

and beyond any form of participation.[15] It is at least somewhat imaginable as a kind of sacrament of the earth transcending this distinction between the One and the many (the limited and the unlimited, the finite and the infinite), which in a specific "theurgical form of trust" transcends matter and the scattered multitude in an entirely different way from what Plotinus, for instance, suggests, as shown by Pierre Hadot.[16] Proclus' theurgical inquiries can be related to these conclusions of Iamblichus' according to which one reaches the proximity of the Divine through initiation into knowledge, in contrast, for example, to the teachings of Paul the Apostle (and, later, Augustine) where this transpires through faith. But when re-reading these textual reports, one notes a certain paradox according to which things actually proceed in a contrary direction. The wise man, according to Proclus, progresses from knowledge to faith, while Paul argues that for the Christian, a person reaches a state, when in faith, of immediate knowledge of God, therefore mercy is inherent to knowledge. These conclusions should not be dismissed lightly for two important reasons.

The first is the crucial event of incarnation which allows the participation of the finite in the infinite, as well as participation of the scattered multiplicity which ascends towards the One through a mercy which does not reject matter and corporeality (as does theurgy). The second reason is equally important for it relates to a Christianized Proclianism which has become an inseparable part of Christian theology through the works of Dionysius the Areopagite, Eriugena, and Thomas Aquinas. The person whose great and inestimable work stands between these

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15   Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 143–52.

16   Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus, or, the Simplicity of Vision* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 23–4.

two reasons is Augustine. Through his destructive critiques of theurgy he connects the incarnational action of mercy and the material ascent to God, on the one hand, and celebrates the ritual, in fact sacramental, dedication of the corporeal, by virtues explained in terms of society and ontology, on the other.

Augustine's insistence on the importance of God's merciful descent among men (in the incarnation) and the ecclesial ritual ascent to God through virtue helps us to see theurgy in an altogether different light, especially as applied to the liturgy. God shows the human community, which had been scattered by sin, how to harmonize with the Divine, how, through participation in the liturgy as a kind of mystagogy, they can belong completely to God. Participation in the liturgy again points us to, and exposes, man's divine origin, and guides the individual through the community to his divine *telos*, i.e., to deification.[17] In other words, the paradox of incarnation shows us the divine example of *kenosis* in which God himself comes down among men to offer us a pedagogical example of how to worship God. Here I agree with John Milbank who claims that pagan theurgic philosophy can help us in a very specific way to a further understanding of the relationship between incarnation and participation in paradoxical terms, while at the same time it illuminates in a new way the importance of a life of virtue as described by Augustine in *City of God*.

In the fifth chapter of *City of God*, Augustine inventively *decon-*

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17   It would be possible to establish how Iamblichus and Proclus relegated this mystical discourse, though not intentionally, to Christian theology, which has never entirely "rejected" theurgy, as the positive statements about it in Augustine's writings suggest. Augustine's critique and modification of theurgical practices enabled the origin of the sole original discourse in his own thought in a completely new cosmic perspective. This perspective is simultaneously located, politically, in terms of topography and framed by a common theological center. This will become evident in the rigorous Christian mysticism of Dionysius the Areopagite and Maxim the Confessor, though here we are not concerned with this.

structs the virtues of the Roman Empire. Within the ecclesial context of Northern Africa where he was located, the Bishop of Hippo attempted indirectly to elucidate what had led, after eight hundred years, to the fall of Rome. His intertextual reading, both theological and political, of Roman political history can be applied in a critical way to Hardt and Negri's project in *Empire*. Augustine's first five books are written as a critique of those who want to hold on to the worship of multiple pagan gods, while the second five are directed against those apologists who claim that there were always lesser and greater evils. Hence all the first ten books are an assault on those who oppose Christianity. The next four books describe the origin of the earthly city and of the city of God. After that, Augustine speaks in another four books of the path and development of these two cities, while the last four books set forth the cities' purpose.

The fifth book of *City of God* serves as a turning point in Augustine's impassioned argument against pagan attacks on the Christian faith. His rebuttal brings with it interpretations and critiques of imperial virtues. Augustine observes the genealogy of the Roman Empire through the complex network of relations of power in which he himself is immersed. He is aware of the interwoven nature of Roman history and politics and he claims that this is no coincidence—it is not the work of fate, nor is it the work of pagan gods. Augustine argues that Rufius Antonius Agrypinus Volusianus' remonstrance, holding Christianity responsible for the scourges of war that nearly destroy Rome, is irrelevant and pointless; he sets this forth in the first ten books of *City of God*. There had always been these and similar calamities, Augustine opines, so this one is no exception. The Bishop of Hippo relates the history of the Roman wars—not few in number—some lasting more than thirty or forty years. Later Christian apologists, particularly the medieval apologists, as adherents of the Augustinian school,

largely interpreted Augustine's apologist insights superficially, in terms of ideology. Precisely for this reason these five books should be re-read as they provide the best possible critique of Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, and in particular their insistence on a theurgical teleology of the multitude.

The question to which Augustine indirectly responds is: "Why did God help the Romans expand the Empire?" In other words, for what theological, political, or other reasons, did God make the Romans the world's most powerful force? God, according to Augustine, elevated the Roman Empire so he could bring into line the venality of many peoples. Augustine wished to convince his readers that the Roman Empire was expanded as recompense for those people who served their homeland for glory, honor, and power, and who were prepared to give their own lives to save the homeland so they could attain glory. Although this was a sin in the eyes of the Bishop of Hippo, love of praise serves to suppress other, more pernicious, vices such as, for instance, avarice and the cruder forms of the struggle for power. Such people are hardly saints, but the lust for human glory is a lesser evil than other vices, as Cicero and Horace also argue. Of course, Augustine continues, one ought to resist such a desire rather than succumb to it. But God did reward the Romans with temporal success even if they flaunted their glory while doing good. These people are rewarded in this life because they eschew wealth and champion the common good, not covetous or wickedly succumbing to pleasures but striving for glory and honor. Here Augustine commends, as does Sallust, the great men of Roman history such as Marcus Cato and Gaius Caesar for their virtue. They hungered for mastery, for the army, for new wars in which they might exercise their virtues. According to Augustine, the Roman Empire was made great by simple things such as the diligence of households and just administration abroad; an objective and free spirit in

counsel, not motivated by crime and injustice; and modest personal wealth alongside a rich public treasury.

The Empire did not become vast and powerful because of political allies or its military might but because after subjecting other nations, the Romans brought them into the common Roman state. All were granted equal rights and privileges in the community of Rome that only a few had enjoyed before. What made the Empire politically unstable and decadent was not so much the distortion of "beneficial" Roman customs as it was the luxury, avarice, arrogance, and impoverishment of the public treasury, and the burgeoning of personal wealth. Wealth was glorified, leisure worshipped, and the recompense for virtue was an ambition in which there was no clear distinction drawn between good and evil. The citizen thought only of himself; at home he was a slave of his passions, while in public he was slave to influence and money. As such the Empire was hard pressed to sustain the ever more frequent onslaughts of the barbarians.

Augustine contends that the Romans desired glory and riches acquired honestly. They loved, desired, and lived for glory to such a degree that they were ready to die for it. Their lust for glory suppressed all other desires. He argues that both a good and a bad man might covet glory, honor, and power, the first going about it the right way because he had the skills, meaning he was virtuous, the second going about it the wrong way because he had no skills, and therefore relied on fraud and deceit. Inasmuch as the individual despises glory yet worships power, this man, Augustine states, is a vile and vicious beast. Fortunately there were few such men in Rome, though a certain Nero might be singled out. In the theopolitical imagination of Aurelius Augustinus, Nero was portrayed as the incarnation of a raw greed for power. What was essentially a caricature of Nero—possessed with the madness of avarice and power—represented the pin-

nacle of vice for Augustine. He saw the hand of God's providence even in the behavior of such beasts, permitting them to rule at a time when the Empire deserved them. Shakespeare describes such decadence and decline in a "modern" way in his tragedy *Julius Caesar*, portraying Caesar's paranoia and the scheming character of Cassius with remarkable perspicacity. Cassius is a thin, silent, hungry character, his greatest crime being that he thinks too much. Caesar speaks to Antonio, commenting on the paradigmatic character of the subversive Roman plotter:

> Would he were fatter! But I fear him not:
> Yet if my name were liable to fear,
> I do not know the man I should avoid
> So soon as that spare Cassius. He reads much;
> He is a great observer and he looks
> Quite through the deeds of men: he loves no plays,
> As thou dost, Antony; he hears no music;
> Seldom he smiles, and smiles in such a sort
> As if he mock'd himself and scorn'd his spirit
> That could be moved to smile at any thing.
> Such men as he be never at heart's ease
> Whiles they behold a greater than themselves,
> And therefore are they very dangerous.
> I rather tell thee what is to be fear'd
> Than what I fear; for always I am Caesar.
> Come on my right hand, for this ear is deaf,
> And tell me truly what thou think'st of him.
> (Act 1, Scene 2)

According to the Bishop of Hippo, the one true God helped the Romans attain glory and supremacy because, by certain standards and opinion, earthly supremacy may be benevolent, and

the Romans came the closest, through their own merit, to the ideal of the Heavenly City. Here Augustine acknowledges that he is unaware of any other reasons for the Roman supremacy, these reasons being a question of providence (better known to God than to humankind), for though the Romans are not citizens of the Heavenly City, they have a specific understanding of virtue, far better than having no virtue at all. For the devout who undertake pilgrimages to the Heavenly City, it is better that those nearest them make a legacy of a virtue than that they be barbarians bereft of all virtue. God likes nothing of what is unjust and this is what God meant to impart with the story of the two cities.

But Augustine's critique is far more complex because he contends that Roman virtues cannot be reconsidered critically without a deconstruction of the Roman Empire, the community living by these virtues. Hence there is significance in Augustine's argument that the Romans are not a nation because they were not just, and they were not just because they had always come to peace through violence, foisting themselves on their subjected peoples with the right of might. Augustine is here criticizing, with an ironic twist, Scipio's definition of nation (set forth by Cicero in the lost *De re publica*), by applying this criticism to the Roman Empire as a community of nations. *A people*, as Scipio says, is an "assemblage of some size associated with one another through agreement on law and community of interest."[18] Augustine in the nineteenth book of *City of God* offers his own definition: "a people is an assemblage of reasonable beings bound together by a common agreement as to the objects of their love."[19] Augustine's definition is more complex because this people is not bound by an agreement defining what is just, nor does he advise

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18   *On the Commonwealth and On the Laws*, trans. and ed. James E. G. Zetzel
       (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1999), 18.
19   Augustine, *City of God*, 19:24.

them as to how they might reach their goal. At the core of his own definition Augustine places love and the beloved, meaning that he sets forth desire. He proposes a model that in a certain way would guide the love to an eternal and universal beloved. In other words, Augustine says that orderly guidance for desire is what matters. Guiding desire determines whether the "assemblage" is a community that is united and just, meaning whether it has the virtue to build community. Here at work is Augustine's indirect critique of the Stoic notion of desire which exists either as ordered desire regulated by reason, or, in contrast, as excessive desire governed by perverted passions. Augustine is aware that reason itself might be perverted in such a way that it becomes subject to desires that enslave and determine action. Hence reason can desire undesirable things and goals. Understood as such, subjective reason opens the way to the perversion of the person and the community. Also, desires that govern reason may desire false goals, meaning that in so doing they may negate the goal of a united and just community, its social structure, and nature.

Augustine's definition of community is less personal than Scipio's. Scipio interprets the Roman community as a personally understood *dominium* of the heroic virtues of honor, glory, and power, and as such it can never fulfill the ideal of Antique politics. This is evident in Augustine's critique of Cicero's insight at the very beginning of *City of God* that everyone should be able to "enjoy what is his," and therefore the peace that Empire offers is merely a compromise, always attained by violence between stubbornly vying wills. In other words, Augustine negates the ontological foundation of *dominium*, he negates power for its own sake, thereby questioning the absolute quality of *Empire*, the absolute quality of private property and of market competition purely for profit. Augustine sees this form of imperial practice as

wrong and violent, starting from the fact that it entails a depri-
vation of being. Furthermore, a truly just community, according
to Augustine, must imply an "ecstatic and relational consensus of
one and all" as to what the community desires. Such a consensus
involves, by that same token, a harmony among the members of
a community in which the being of the community is renewed. A
community so conceived carries in itself something tribal, which
the *polis* and *civitas* tend to negate. In this tribal community
the cultivation of heroic virtues is not what matters but rather
the ever-renewed transmission of the signs of love, charity, and
the bringing to birth of new members by baptism, with which
the lifelong emancipatory process of *paideia* begins. No one is
excluded from *paideia* (as would be the case, for example, with
Plato or Aristotle), from receiving divine love and charity, no
matter whether a slave, a child, a woman, a cripple, or a poor
man. No one can be prevented from joining the community and
this is one of the important novelties of Augustine's universal-
istic notion of community.

The goal of the *polis* thus understood is not collective glory
and the power of Rome, as the city is not a Roman hero. Paradox-
ically speaking, the *polis* becomes the differential sequence which
has as its goal beyond goal the generation of new relationships,
which themselves situate and define new individuals. A goal
beyond goal is one that cannot be described or imagined in its
full breadth, unlike an earthly city which contains its goal within
itself and which is a vestige of the pagan *dominium*, stretching
back, as Augustine demonstrates, to Babylon. Babylon is a meta-
phor for a city founded in the violence of civil war and within
which there are no objective political goals that are good in and
of themselves. Babylonian virtues serve only for maintaining the
dominium, hence they must be rejected. Augustine is convinced
that everything that has any value should correlate to the reality

of the City of God. Everything that is in any way distinct from the ecclesial practice of the "divine nomadic city" indicates the reality of sin of one's relativity. What is outside the Church is subject to a power (violence) that is always arbitrary and always excessive. The political characteristics of the *civitas terrena* are slavery, excessive political force, and compromise between the competing economic interests of individuals. At the same time this is the way the earthly city attains peace.

One of the most important claims in *City of God* which Milbank aptly remarks upon is that a pagan society misses not only justice, but virtue in general. Where does Augustine ground this unusual assertion, noted elsewhere as well in his own way by Giambattista Vico? Augustine says that pagans had not performed *latreia*, the worship of a single God, hence they had withheld justice from him who most deserves it. They had denied God the honor of true and proper worship, *latreia*, while at the same time honoring pagan gods who were, for Augustine, malignant demons celebrated in the theurgical rituals described earlier. Augustine's criticism is pitched not merely at the level of ecclesial practice of the liturgy, which the pagans didn't perform in a manner arranged by charity. This is something far more complex because ecclesially organized worship of the true God (which Paul says is the true and proper form of worship in Romans 12:1) leads to the de-coding of Antique political antimonies. Augustine suggests that through ecclesial practices one arrives at the proper order of *psyche*, *oikos*, *polis* and *cosmos*.

> And it is when the soul serves God that it exercises a right control over the body; and in the soul itself the reason must be subject to God if it is to govern as it ought the passions and other vices. Hence, when a man does not serve God, what justice can we ascribe

to him, since in this case his soul cannot exercise a just
control over the body, nor his reason over his vices?
And if there is no justice in such an individual, cer-
tainly there can be none in a community composed
of such persons. Here, therefore, there is not that
common acknowledgment of right which makes an
assemblage of men a people whose affairs we call a
republic. And why need I speak of the advantageous-
ness, the common participation in which, according
to the definition, makes a people?[20]

Augustine states that true worship consists of allowing God
to subordinate himself ephemerally to what is constant and
unchanging. Such a subordination is realized primarily in the
relation of the soul towards God in which desires and passions
are therapeutically subordinated to God who channels them in
an orderly manner, thereby "healing." After this fundamental
subordination, the soul is shaped consecutively through proper
positioning in relation to the household, the household to the
city, the city to the cosmos. The opposite of this subordination of
all desires to a single God is reverse worship of pagan gods that
aims to make *dominium* and Empire (as that which is transient)
ends unto themselves. In that case the person and the commu-
nity foment the worst form of idolatry, which Augustine equates,
of course, with primal injustice. Every desire to turn the secular
pagan authorities into a universal measure of reality (no matter
how just they may seem) is ultimately a case of injustice and
idolatry. In other words, Augustine sees how a lack of trust in
transcendence leads to social injustice, because without belief in
transcendence, virtue—which he defines as order in love—could

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20   Augustine, *City of God*, 19:21.

not be established. The lack of organized worship of the true God leads to injustice and negates the ecclesial practice of charity, meaning that it negates the order of love.

For the Romans, therefore, virtue cannot be practiced because they have cut themselves off from the reference to transcendence, to the celestial peace of the City of God, attained through mutual absolution. The pagans are unjust and cannot properly understand virtue because they have not given priority to forgiveness and peace. So it is that they cannot establish a proper order that relates to the soul, the household, the city, and the cosmos, hence they remain trapped in the antinomy of virtues attained by violence. Inasmuch as the soul subordinates both the body and its own passions, Augustine states that a third level should be introduced, missing among the pagans, the level that relates to *latreia* in which the soul itself is subordinated to one God. Commenting on the Sermon on the Mount, Augustine asks how people will understand that in man's soul, no matter how depraved it may be, there will be a trace of reason to which God speaks through the conscience. Continuing his commentary, Augustine goes on to argue that as long as the Devil himself possesses a trace of reason he can hear God speak to him.[21] In other words, God addresses the rational part of the soul by giving it heavenly peace. In so doing, God requires that the soul first subordinate itself to him in an orderly and harmonious fashion so that it can then subordinate the body to itself. This strategy applies thereafter to the household and the community.

In other words, if the community desires to be just it must reflect an absolute social consensus and harmony; the community

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21   Augustine, *Sermon on the Mount*, 2:9:32, trans. William Findlay, in Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 6 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888). Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight; available at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/16012.htm

must hold to the conviction of infinite justice in terms of which we situate love. Infinite justice, so conceived, is able to order everything properly in terms of time so that there will be no chaotic vestige of disorder. Justice interpreted in this manner is distinct from the pagan virtues which (with inherently dangerous psychic elements, as Augustine shows in the fifth book of *City of God*) are compared to what stands in opposition and what must be vanquished in adversarial struggle "from without." Hence the metaphor of Antique virtue as a "war fortification" (the original meaning of the word *polis*) captured in a military fashion by heroic virtue. In a fortification understood in these terms one strives to secure inner space through heroic virtue by the rule of one group against others, while at the same time the territory must be preserved from external enemies in the interest of the whole. Inasmuch as the city encourages the virtues of individuals, these are certainly private virtues which celebrate victory over rivals in the city, and therefore it is clear that the virtues of individuals invariably relate to achieving internal control over the passions in the struggle against vices in which there can be no charity. For Augustine, charity is the arrangement of reciprocal activity necessary for producing a social and aesthetic order. Only charity can complement justice and reason, which must assume an ontological priority of peace opposed to the primeval violence of the earthly city, Babylon. This assumption is based on parables, signs, in an event whose social idiom of absolution of sin and charity Jesus demonstrated to us, inviting people into a community which anticipates the reality of the Heavenly City.

For Augustine absolution of sin is the precondition for all social constructs, to be summarized as follows: Virtue can fully function only if the whole community possesses it and lives together in a life of virtue. This communal possession of virtue influences the sequencing of individual differences and as such resembles

the heavenly virtue of charity. The attempt in which our actions most resemble heavenly virtues "compensate for, substitute for, even short-cut this total absence of virtue," as Milbank puts it so nicely.[22] By not taking offence, assuming the guilt of others, doing what they should have done (beyond the bounds of any responsibility as defined by law), we arrive at an important paradox in which we begin to incorporate heavenly virtue, which is another name for faith, hope, and charity, or as Alain Badiou puts it, fidelity, perseverance, and love. The paradox lies in the fact that virtue is genuinely and currently present only in exchange and sharing, in acceptance of responsibility for and bearing the burden of those nearest to us. This is not about a person's accomplishment as dictated by the law of the community, since virtue of that sort, according to Augustine, would in fact be a vice, as it was not attained through mutual forgiveness and absolute social consensus, meaning the harmony of heavenly peace that relocates us within the community of the body of Christ.

Hardt and Negri should be commended for their shrewd observation that St. Augustine is an excellent collocutor in the current political debate. They are right when they posit that only a catholic, universal community can offer an alternative to the practices of Empire which, under the guise of capital circulating as fast as possible, invariably celebrate violence and terror which then lead to nihilism. Although it might seem self-congratulatory to proclaim these assertions from the old Communist, Negri, to be insufficiently radical, so they seem to me. Simply put, Hardt and Negri are not radical enough. For how else to interpret their assertion that a catholic society of aliens, coming together, cooperating, communicating, know that this is a means without an end? How otherwise to interpret their statement that Francis

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22   John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (London: Blackwell, 2006), 417.

of Assisi is a postmodern model for the activist who embodies the joy of Communist being? Hardt and Negri's Spinoza-esque Augustinized neo-Communist vision prevents them from seeing beyond what is immanent on the surfaces of Empire. Despite this, their reading of Augustine should not be dismissed as altogether wrong. I have juxtaposed to their critique of Augustine the only possible response from an Augustinian perspective. Such dual criticism is a theological attempt at bringing Augustine to Spinoza and Spinoza to Augustine.

Hence we can adopt the Augustinian vision of two cities despite the fact that their boundaries are not always clear and distinct, that they overlap and remain porous. We are not always sure who is inside and who is out, though there are external signs of membership in the universal community of which Augustine speaks, modest means of salvation such as sacraments, prayers, liturgy, reading the Holy Gospel. Clearly, these signs and means have been abused many times in many ways, though they were meant to ease the journey of the ecclesial nomads whom Augustine mentions. These modest means have a regenerative and therapeutic effect on all people who bear Christ's burden in the world, as described, through paradox, in Matthew's Gospel at the last judgment (Matthew 25:31–46), or in Luke's Gospel in the parable about the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37). Among the nomads and deserters in permanent exodus there are some, Augustine argues, who, although they manifest the "outward" trappings of belonging to a community (such as baptism, reading the Gospel, participating in liturgy), do not belong to the City of God for their heart is not with God. There are also those who though they manifest no outward trappings of Christ's burden and are not in visible commune with the Church, belong to God's people and his city. Only God knows who truly belongs with him and who does not, while people, thank God, are spared this

knowledge. In one place Augustine argues that we will be surprised by whom we encounter in heaven and we will be the most surprised of all when we there encounter ourselves.

As I said above, I contend that Negri's and Hardt's critique of Plotinus is an insufficiently radical option which will not, using the "theurgical teleology of multitude," suffice to realize, or rather constitute, the political subject. No matter how logical this may seem, their proposal that the multitude is the new political subject remains undeveloped. The intensity needs to be heightened and they need to explore a different tack from the theurgical teleology of the multitude, moving towards the ecclesial practices that Augustine suggests, and not his pagan, popular-religious, Platonic counterpoint as expounded by Hardt and Negri. Alternative practices need to be sought which can be juxtaposed to the virtues that Empire glorifies. This is how I see the Augustinian critique of Hardt and Negri. My conclusion is simple. A shared pilgrimage of the catholic community on earth is the only alternative to an imperial meta-narrative that can form the practice needed for the constitution of the political subject. This constitution must be founded on a single assumption.

What if there is a goal which we cannot imagine existing, a goal beyond goal? If we cannot call upon our own imagination, which Empire is destroying with more and more vigor and clarity, then all that is left to us is common sense. Herein lies the problem, as G. K. Chesterton said when describing a madman as someone who has lost everything but his reason (his imagination, his sensibility, his emotions, which here I understand to mean that which enables intensity in ecclesial practices). In his critique of the virtues of Empire that always increase capital and legitimize various forms of terror, Augustine suggests stripping away the supports for such decadent and corrupt practices by summoning people to ecclesial practice, to counter the imperial virtues

shaping the character of those who are members of the City of God. As we have seen in the fifth book (in fact from the second to the nineteenth) of *City of God*, Augustine is calling for a certain form of desertion, exodus, and nomadism. He is asking for a disciplined asceticism. This is what is missing not only from Negri's anti-imperial postmodern activism but from the very multitude which he constitutes as his political subject. In contrast to Hardt and Negri, I contend that it is especially important to consider Francis of Assisi within the universal community that undertakes pilgrimages to the City of God according to the model offered by Augustine. Catholicity in Augustine's interpretation, with its local concept of the universal, is a subversive counter-parable to the imperial meta-narrative and helps us answer the question of how we might rightly understand desertion, exodus, and nomadism, which we see here as a specific form of ascetic exercise.

In other words, the mindlessness of the multitude about which Hardt and Negri speak lies in the fact that there is no ascetic exercise required for their political practice, as noted by the Italian philosopher. If we accept Walter Benjamin's assertion that capitalism is a religion, would not the most radical critique—and in fact the only possible, plausible critique—of capitalism be one articulated by religion? This is why, with the help of Augustine, I am working on a response to the question posed. The capitalist matrix within which imperial practices function can be criticized relevantly only if the critique embraces a certain theology, for Empire will otherwise always prevail, as it has until now, thanks to its diabolic adaptability to the market.

This is why a measured dose of voluntary, disciplined asceticism is necessary, from which rough fragments of efficacious truths may surface and heal our desire, as Augustine says, since we will guide our desire not to something beautiful, desirable, and transitory, but to Beauty itself, immutable Truth itself, and Bliss

itself. This is why we need asceticism, as only asceticism can re-direct desire towards eternal plenitude. For ascetic exercise is not the destruction of desire as is suggested by various forms of Bud-dhism. Augustine's understanding of ascetic practice begins with a voluntary renunciation of desire for glory and thirst for power. After that follows the renunciation of submission to pleasure, the renunciation of a weakening of the soul and body, and renuncia-tion of the avaricious aspiration to greater wealth. The lust for glory is a nasty vice and an enemy of true devotion, says Augus-tine, calling on the words of the carpenter from Nazareth and the Apostles whose practice was to place the love of God above human glory. Ascetic exercise in ecclesial practices is a deliber-ately embraced discipline in terms of a goal that surpasses us, yet is also a vehicle. This is an important statement because there is no cheap and certainly no free radicalism. To be radical means to be prepared to pay the price, it means to make sacrifices, and in this case it means to accept and adopt a disciplined asceticism as a way of life. Although the armchair leftists and liberals with gen-erous academic salaries unanimously attacked and ridiculed him, I believe that in this instance Slavoj Žižek was right. Speaking of the film *300*, about the Battle of Thermopylae, Žižek in an entirely different context offered an important fact, quoting Badiou:

> We need a popular discipline. I would even say . . . that "those who have nothing have only their discipline." For the poor, those with no financial or military means, those with no power, all they have is their dis-cipline, their capacity to act together. This discipline is already a form of organization.[23]

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23   See Slavoj Žižek, "The True Hollywood Left," available at http://www.lacan .com/zizhollywood.htm

Within the global Imperial matrix which offers only a binary capitalist taxonomy (included-excluded, outside-inside, the haves and have-nots) there is little room left for improvisation, unless we constantly question this division with a certain asceticism, as Augustine suggests. We could understand Augustine's vision of ecclesial practice, in contrast to the Babylonian virtues, as a synthesis of nomadism and asceticism, as a joint "therapeutic" journey to the City of God. Nomadism and the ascetic exercise of ecclesial practices thereby become the fundamental coordinates that help us ground the political subject, interpreting in a new way the desertion and exodus of which Hardt and Negri speak. Such a political subject would be revolutionary, and capitalist rationality would not be able to tame it. In different terms, and in a Badiou-like fashion, ecclesial practice recognizes that "It is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognizes as existent."[24]

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24   I should say here that in a subsequent version Badiou changed the formulation of this sentence. In his "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art" published in *Lacanian Ink*, no. 23 (see the excerpt available at http://www.lacan.com/frameXXIII7.htm) the phrase used was "which Empire already recognizes as existent." Three years later in *Polemics*, a book of articles and interviews, the same fifteen theses appear but somewhat changed and redefined in title and substance. The later article is called "Third Sketch of a Manifesto of Affirmationist Art." In the edited version of the article the word *Empire* has been replaced by the word *West*, so that now it reads "what the West declares to exist." See Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 148. I prefer the earlier version, referring to the fifteenth thesis of the Badiou manifesto (Badiou, "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art," 119).

3

A Glance into the Archives of Islam
Žižek

What is Islam, this disturbing excess that represents the East for the West and the West for the Far East? In his *La psychanalyse à l'épreuve de l'Islam*, Fethi Benslama undertakes a systematic search for the "archive" of Islam, for its obscene secret mythical support which *ne cesse pas de ne pas s'écrire* and as such sustains the explicit dogma.[25] Is the story of Hagar, for example, not Islam's "archive," relating to Islam's explicit teaching in the same way the Jewish secret tradition of Moses relates to the explicit teachings of Judaism? In his discussion of the Freudian figure of Moses, Eric Santner introduces the key distinction between symbolic history (the explicit mythical narratives and ideologico-ethical prescriptions that constitute the tradition of a community, what Hegel would have called its "ethical substance") and its obscene Other, the unacknowledgeable "spectral," fantasmatic secret history that effectively sustains the explicit symbolic tradition, but has to remain foreclosed if it is to be operative.[26] What Freud endeavors to reconstitute in his

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25 Fethi Benslama, *La psychanalyse à l'épreuve de l'Islam* (Paris: Aubier, 2002). Numbers in parentheses later in this text refer to pages in this book.

26 See Eric Santner, "Traumatic Revelations: Freud's Moses and the Origins of Anti-Semitism," in Renata Salecl, ed., *Sexuation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

Moses book (the story of the murder of Moses, etc.) is just such a spectral history that haunts the space of the Jewish religious tradition. One becomes a full member of a community not simply by identifying with its explicit symbolic tradition, but only when one also assumes the spectral dimension that sustains it, the undead ghosts that haunt the living, the secret history of traumatic fantasies transmitted "between the lines," through the lacks in and distortions of the explicit symbolic tradition. Judaism's stubborn attachment to the unacknowledged and violent founding gesture—which haunts the public legal order as its spectral supplement—enabled the Jews to persist and survive for thousands of years without a land or a common institutional tradition: they refused to give up their ghost, to cut off the link to their secret, disavowed tradition. The paradox of Judaism is that it maintains fidelity to the violent founding Event precisely by *not* confessing or symbolizing it: this "repressed" status of the Event is what gives Judaism its unprecedented vitality.

What, then, is the repressed Event which gives vitality to Islam? The key is provided by the answer to another question: How does Islam, the third Religion of the Book, fit into this series? Judaism is the religion of genealogy, of the succession of generations; so when, in Christianity, the Son dies on the cross, this means that the Father also dies (as Hegel was fully aware)—the patriarchal genealogical order as such dies, and the Holy Spirit, introducing a post-paternal community, no longer fits into the family series. In contrast to both Judaism and Christianity, Islam excludes God from the domain of the paternal logic: Allah is not a father, not even a symbolic one—God is one, he is neither born nor does he give birth to creatures. *There is no place for a Holy Family in Islam*. This is why Islam places so much emphasis on the fact that Muhammad himself was an orphan; this is why, in Islam, God intervenes precisely at those moments of the suspension, with-

drawal, failure, or "black-out" of the paternal function (when the mother or the child are abandoned or ignored by the biological father). What this means is that God remains thoroughly in the domain of the impossible-Real: he is the impossible-Real outside father, so that there is a "genealogical desert between man and God" (320). For Freud, this was the problem with Islam, since his entire theory of religion was based on the parallel between God and the father. More importantly even, this inscribes politics into the very heart of Islam, since the "genealogical desert" renders it impossible to ground a community in the structures of parenthood or other blood-ties: "the desert between God and Father is the place where the political institutes itself" (320). With Islam, it is no longer possible to ground a community in the mode of *Totem and Taboo*, through the murder of the father and the ensuing guilt that brings the sons together—thence Islam's unexpected actuality. This problem lies at the very heart of the (in)famous *umma*, the Muslim "community of believers"; it accounts for the overlapping of the religious and the political (the community should be grounded directly in God's word), as well as for the fact that Islam is "at its best" when it grounds the formation of a community "out of nowhere," in the genealogical desert, as an egalitarian revolutionary fraternity—no wonder Islam often appeals to young men who find themselves deprived of a traditional family safety network. And, perhaps, it is this "orphanic" character of Islam which accounts for its lack of inherent institutionalization:

> The distinctive mark of Islam is that it is a religion which did not institutionalize itself, it did not, like Christianity, equip itself with a Church. The Islamic Church is in fact the Islamic State: it is the state which invented the so called "highest religious authority"

and it is the head of state who appoints the man to occupy that office; it is the state which builds the great mosques, which supervises religious education, it is the state again which creates the universities, exercises censorship in all the fields of culture, and considers itself as the guardian of morality.[27]

We can see here again how both the best and the worst are combined in Islam: it is precisely because Islam lacks an inherent principle of institutionalization that it was so vulnerable to being co-opted by state power, which did the work of institutionalization for it. Therein resides the choice that confronts Islam: direct "politicization" is inscribed into its very nature, and this overlapping of the religious and the political can be achieved either in the guise of statist co-option or in the guise of *anti-statist* collectives.

In contrast to Judaism and Islam, in which the sacrifice of the son is prevented at the last moment (the angel intervenes to stop Abraham killing Isaac), *only Christianity opts for the actual sacrifice (killing) of the son* (268). This is why, although Islam recognizes the Bible as a sacred text, it has to deny this fact: in Islam, Jesus did not really die on the cross. As the Qur'an (4.157) puts it: "[The Jews] said (in boast), 'We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah'; but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them." There is effectively in Islam a consistent anti-sacrificial logic: in the Qur'an's version of Isaac's sacrifice, Abraham's decision to kill his son is read not as the ultimate indication of his willingness to do God's will, but as a consequence of Abraham's *wrong interpretation of his dream*: when the angel prevents the act, his message is that Abraham got it wrong, that God did not really want him to do it (275).

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27   Moustapha Safouan, *Why Are the Arabs Not Free?: The Politics of Writing* (unpublished manuscript).

Insofar as, in Islam, God is an impossible-Real, this works both ways with regard to sacrifice: it can work against sacrifice (there is no symbolic economy of exchange between the believers and God, God is the pure One of Beyond), but also in favor of sacrifice, as when the divine Real turns into the superego figure of obscure gods that constantly demand blood, as Lacan once put it. Islam seems to oscillate between these two extremes, with the obscene sacrificial logic culminating in its re-description of the story of Abel and Cain. Here is how the Qur'an reports on

> the truth of the story of the two sons of Adam. Behold! they each presented a sacrifice (to Allah): It was accepted from one, but not from the other. Said the latter: "Be sure I will slay thee." "Surely," said the former, "Allah doth accept the sacrifice of those who are righteous. If thou dost stretch thy hand against me, to slay me, it is not for me to stretch my hand against thee to slay thee: for I do fear Allah, the cherisher of the worlds. For me, I intend to let thee draw on thyself my sin as well as thine, for thou wilt be among the companions of the fire, and that is the reward of those who do wrong." The (selfish) soul of the other led him to the murder of his brother: he murdered him, and became (himself) one of the lost ones. (5.27–30)

So it is not only Cain who wants the killing: Abel himself actively participates in this desire, provoking Cain to do it, so that he (Abel) would get rid of his own sins also. Benslama is right to discern here traces of an "ideal hatred," different from the imaginary hatred of aggression towards one's double (289): the victim itself actively desires the crime whose victim it will be, so that, as

a martyr, it will enter Paradise, sending the perpetrator to burn in hell. From today's perspective, one is tempted to play with the anachronistic speculation on how the "terrorist" logic of the martyr's wish to die is already here, in the Qur'an—although, of course, one has to locate the problem in the context of modernization. As is well known, the problem of the Islamic world is that since it was exposed to Western modernization abruptly— without adequate time to "work through" the trauma of its impact, to construct a symbolic-fictional space or screen for it— the only possible reactions to this impact were either a superficial modernization, an imitation destined to fail (the regime in Iran under the Shah), or, with the failure of the proper symbolic space of fictions, a direct recourse to the violent Real, an outright war between Islamic Truth and the Western Lie, with no space for symbolic mediation. In this "fundamentalist" solution (a modern phenomenon with no direct links to Muslim traditions), the divine dimension reasserts itself in its superego-Real, as a murderous explosion of sacrificial violence required to pay off the obscene superego divinity.

A further key distinction between Judaism (together with its Christian continuation) and Islam turns on their respective attitudes to Abraham. Judaism chooses Abraham as the symbolic father, i.e., adopts the phallic solution of the paternal authority, of the official symbolic lineage, discarding the second woman, and enacting a "phallic appropriation of the impossible" (153). Islam, on the contrary, opts for the lineage of Hagar, for Abraham as the biological father, maintaining the distance between father and God, and keeping God in the domain of the Impossible (149).[28]

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28   Of course, one can claim that already in Genesis there is an implicit under-
      mining of its own official ideology at work, where God intervenes to save
      Hagar's son, promising him a great future—Genesis does (also) take the side
      of the other woman who was reduced to an instrument of procreation.

Both Judaism and Islam repress their founding gestures—how? As the story of Abraham and his two sons by two different women shows, in both Judaism and Islam, the father can become father, can assume the paternal function, only through the mediation of *another* woman. Freud's hypothesis is that the repression in Judaism concerns the fact that Abraham was a foreigner (an Egyptian), not a Jew—it is the founding paternal figure, the one who brings revelation and establishes the covenant with God, that has to come from the outside. With Islam, the repression concerns a woman (Hagar, the Egyptian slave who gave Abraham his first son): although Abraham and Ishmael (the progenitor of all Arabs, according to the myth) are mentioned dozens of times in the Qur'an, Hagar goes unmentioned, erased from the official history. As such, however, she continues to haunt Islam, her traces surviving in rituals, like the obligation of the pilgrims to Mecca to run six times between the two hills of Safa and Marwah, in a kind of neurotic repetition/reenactment of Hagar's desperate search in the desert for water for her son.

Here, from Genesis, is the story of Abraham's two sons, the key umbilical link between Judaism and Islam—first, the birth of Ishmael:

> Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had not given birth to any children, but she had an Egyptian servant named Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, "Since the Lord has prevented me from having children, have sexual relations with my servant. Perhaps I can have a family by her." Abram did what Sarai told him.
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> So after Abram had lived in Canaan for ten years, Sarai, Abram's wife, gave Hagar, her Egyptian servant, to her husband to be his wife. He had sexual relations with Hagar, and she became pregnant. Once Hagar

realized she was pregnant, she despised Sarai. Then Sarai said to Abram, "You have brought this wrong on me! I allowed my servant to have sexual relations with you, but when she realized that she was pregnant, she despised me. May the Lord judge between you and me!"

Abram said to Sarai, "Since your servant is under your authority, do to her whatever you think best." Then Sarai treated Hagar harshly, so she ran away from Sarai. The Lord's angel found Hagar near a spring of water in the desert—the spring that is along the road to Shur. He said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?" She replied, "I'm running away from my mistress, Sarai."

Then the Lord's angel said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her authority. I will greatly multiply your descendants," the Lord's angel added, "so that they will be too numerous to count." Then the Lord's angel said to her, "You are now pregnant and are about to give birth to a son. You are to name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard your painful groans. He will be a wild donkey of a man. He will be hostile to everyone, and everyone will be hostile to him. He will live away from his brothers."

So Hagar named the Lord who spoke to her, "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "Here I have seen the one who sees me!" That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi. (It is located between Kadesh and Bered.)

So Hagar gave birth to Abram's son, whom Abram named Ishmael. (Genesis 16:1–15)

After the miraculous birth of Isaac (whose immaculate conception seems to point forward to Christ—God "visited Sarah" and made her pregnant), when the child was old enough to be weaned, Abraham prepared a great feast:

> But Sarah noticed the son of Hagar the Egyptian—the son whom Hagar had borne to Abraham—mocking. So she said to Abraham, "Banish that slave woman and her son, for the son of that slave woman will not be an heir along with my son Isaac!"
>
> Sarah's demand displeased Abraham greatly because Ishmael was his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be upset about the boy or your slave wife. Do all that Sarah is telling you because through Isaac your descendants will be counted. But I will also make the son of the slave wife into a great nation, for he is your descendant too."
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> Early in the morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He put them on her shoulders, gave her the child, and sent her away. So she went wandering aimlessly through the wilderness of Beer Sheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she shoved the child under one of the shrubs. Then she went and sat down by herself across from him at quite a distance, about a bowshot away; for she thought, "I refuse to watch the child die." So she sat across from him and wept uncontrollably.
>
> But God heard the boy's voice. The angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and asked her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Don't be afraid, for God has heard the boy's voice right where he is crying. Get up! Help the boy up and hold him by the hand, for I will make

him into a great nation." Then God enabled Hagar to
see a well of water. She went over and filled the skin
with water, and then gave the boy a drink. (Genesis
21:10–19)

In Galatians, Paul provides the Christian version of the story of
Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar:

Tell me, you who want to be under the law, do you not
understand the law? For it is written that Abraham
had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by
the free woman. But one, the son by the slave woman,
was born by natural descent, while the other, the son
by the free woman, was born through the promise.
These things may be treated as an allegory, for these
women represent two covenants. One is from Mount
Sinai bearing children for slavery; this is Hagar. Now
Hagar represents Mount Sinai in Arabia and corre-
sponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery
with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and
she is our mother. For it is written: "Rejoice, O barren
woman who does not bear children; break forth and
shout, you who have no birth pains, because the chil-
dren of the desolate woman are more numerous than
those of the woman who has a husband." But you,
brothers and sisters, are children of the promise like
Isaac. But just as at that time the one born by nat-
ural descent persecuted the one born according to the
Spirit, so it is now. But what does the scripture say?
"Throw out the slave woman and her son, for the son
of the slave woman will not share the inheritance with
the son of the free woman." Therefore, brothers and

sisters, we are not children of the slave woman but of the free woman. (Galatians 4:21–31)

Paul stages here a clear symmetrical confrontation: Isaac versus Ishmael equals the symbolic father (Name-of-the-Father) versus the biological (racial) father, "the origin through name and spirit versus origin through substantial transmission of life" (147), child of the free woman versus child of the slave, child of spirit versus child of flesh. This reading, however, has to simplify the biblical narrative on (at least) three crucial points:

(1) God's obvious care for Hagar and Ishmael, his intervention to save Ishmael's life.

(2) The extraordinary characterization of Hagar as not simply a woman of flesh and lust, a worthless slave, but as the one who *sees* God ("So Hagar named the Lord who spoke to her, 'You are the God who sees me,' for she said, 'Here I have seen the one who sees me!'"). Hagar as the excluded second woman, outside the symbolic genealogy, stands not only for the pagan (Egyptian) fertility of Life, but also for a direct access to God—she sees God himself seeing, which was not given even to Moses, to whom God had to appear as a burning bush. As such, Hagar announces the mystical/feminine access to God (developed later in Sufism).

(3) The (not only narrative) fact that the choice (between flesh and spirit) cannot ever be confronted directly, as a choice between the two simultaneous options. For Sarah to have a son, Hagar has first to have hers, i.e., there is a necessity of succession, of repetition, here, as if, in order to choose spirit, we first have to choose flesh—only the second son can be the true

son of spirit. This necessity is what symbolic castration is about: "castration" means that direct access to Truth is impossible—as Lacan put it, *la vérité surgit de la méprise*, the way to Spirit is only through Flesh, etc. Recall Hegel's analysis of phrenology which closes the chapter on "Observing Reason" in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*: Hegel resorts here to a metaphor which concerns precisely the phallus, the organ of paternal insemination, in order to explain the opposition of the two possible readings of the proposition "the Spirit is a bone" (the vulgar materialist "reductionist" reading—the shape of our skull effectively and directly determines the features of a man's mind—and the speculative reading—the Spirit is strong enough to assert its identity with the most inert stuff and to "sublate" it, i.e., even the most inert stuff cannot escape the Spirit's power of mediation). The vulgar materialist reading is like the approach which sees in the phallus only the organ of urination, while the speculative reading is also able to discern in it the much higher function of insemination (i.e., precisely "conception" as the biological anticipation of the concept):

> The depth which the Spirit brings forth from within—but only as far as its picture-thinking consciousness where it lets it remain—and the ignorance of this consciousness about what it really is saying, are the same conjunction of the high and the low which, in the living being, Nature naively expresses when it combines the organ of its highest fulfillment, the organ

> of generation, with the organ of urination.
> The infinite judgment, qua infinite, would
> be the fulfillment of life that comprehends
> itself; the consciousness of the infinite
> judgment that remains at the level of pic-
> ture-thinking behaves as urination.[29]

A close reading of this passage makes it clear that Hegel's point is *not* that, in contrast to the vulgar empiricist mind which sees only urination, the proper speculative attitude has to choose insemination. The paradox is that to choose insemination directly is the infallible way to miss it: it is not possible to choose directly the "true meaning"; one *has* to begin by making the "wrong" choice (of urination)—the true speculative meaning emerges only through the repeated reading, as the after-effect (or by-product) of the first, "wrong," reading . . . as, we may add, Sarah can have her child only after Hagar has had hers.

Where, precisely, is castration here? Prior to Hagar's entry on the scene, Sarah, the phallic-patriarchal woman, remains barren, infertile, precisely because she is too powerful/phallic; so the opposition is not simply the opposition of Sarah, fully submitted to phallic-patriarchal order, and Hagar, independent and subversive; it is inherent to Sarah herself, in her two aspects (phallic arrogance, maternal service). It is Sarah herself who is too powerful and bossy, who has to be humiliated through Hagar in order to receive a child and thereby enter the patriarchal genealogic order. This castration of hers is signaled through the change of her name, from Sarai to Sarah. Is not Abraham, however, also castrated? With Hagar, he is able to conceive a child directly/ biologically, but outside the proper genealogy of the symbolic

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29   G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 210.

lineage; conception within that lineage becomes possible only through the external intervention of God, who "visits Sarah"—this gap between symbolic and biologic paternity *is* castration.

The choice within Islam of Hagar, the independent seer of God, over the docile housewife Sarah, provides the first hint of the insufficiency of the standard notion of Islam, that of an extreme masculine monotheism, a collective of brothers from which women are excluded and have to be veiled, since their "monstration" is as such excessive, disturbing or provocative to men, diverting them from their service to God. Recall the ridiculous Taliban prohibition of metal heels for women—as if, even when entirely covered with cloth, the clicking sound of their heels would still provoke men . . . There is, however, a whole series of features which disturb this standard notion.

First, the need to keep women veiled implies an *extremely sexualized* universe in which the very encounter with a woman is a provocation that no man will be able to resist. Repression has to be so strong because sex itself is so strong—what kind of a society is this in which the click of metal heels can make men explode with lust? According to a newspaper report a couple of years ago, an unrelated young woman and man were trapped for a couple of hours in a wire-gondola when the machine broke down. Although nothing happened, the woman killed herself afterward: the very fact of being alone with a foreign man for hours had rendered the idea that "nothing happened" unthinkable.[30] No wonder that, in the course of analyzing the famous

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30   What seems to characterize the Muslim symbolic space is an immediate conflation of possibility and actuality: what is merely possible is treated (reacted against) as if it actually took place. At the level of sexual interaction, when a man finds himself alone with a woman, it is assumed that the opportunity was taken, that the sexual act took place. At the level of writing, this is why Muslims are prohibited to use toilet paper: it *may have been* that verses of Qur'an were written or printed on it . . .

"Signorelli" dream in his *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud reports that it was an old Muslim from Bosnia and Herzegovina who imparted to him the "wisdom" of the notion that sex is the only thing that makes life worth living: "Once a man is no longer able to have sex, the only thing that remains is to die."

Second, there is the very pre-history of Islam, in which Hagar, though unmentioned in the Qur'an, is the primordial mother of all Arabs; plus the story of Muhammad himself, with Khadija (his first wife) as the one who enabled him to draw the line of separation between truth and lie, between the messages from angels and those from demons. There are cases where the divine messages Muhammad received come dangerously close to self-serving fabrications, the best-known among them being his marriage with Zaynab, his adopted son Zayd's wife. After seeing her half-naked, Muhammad began to covet her passionately; after Zayd became aware of it, he dutifully "repudiated" (divorced) her, so that his stepfather could move in and marry her. Unfortunately, under customary Arab law, such a union was prohibited, but—surprise, surprise!—Muhammad soon received a timely revelation in which Allah exempted Muhammad from the law (Qur'an 33.37, 33.50). There is even an element of the *Ur-Vater* in Muhammad here, of the father figure who possesses all the women in his large family.

However, a good argument for Muhammad's basic sincerity is that he himself was the first to doubt radically the divine nature of his visions, dismissing them as hallucinatory signs of madness or as cases of demonic possession. His first revelation occurred during his Ramadan retreat outside Mecca: he saw the archangel Gabriel, calling upon him to "Recite!" (*Qarâ'*, whence *Qur'ân*). Muhammad thought he was going mad, and since he didn't want to spend the rest of his life as Mecca's village idiot, preferring death to disgrace, he decided to throw himself from

a high rock. But then the vision repeated itself: he heard a voice from above saying: "O Muhammad! Thou art the apostle of God and I am Gabriel." But even this voice did not reassure him, so he slowly returned to his house and, in deep despair, asked Khadija, his first wife (as well as the first believer in him): "Wrap me in a blanket, wrap me up in a blanket." She wrapped him up, and Muhammad told her what had happened to him: "My life is in danger." Khadija dutifully solaced him.

When, during the following visions of the archangel Gabriel, Muhammad's doubts persisted, Khadija asked him to notify her when his visitant returned, so that they could verify whether it really was Gabriel or an ordinary demon. So, the next time, Muhammad said to Khadija: "This is Gabriel who has just come to me." Khadija replied: "Get up and sit by my left thigh." Muhammad did so, and she said: "Can you see him?" "Yes." "Then turn round and sit on my right thigh." He did so, and she said: "Can you see him?" When he said that he could, Khadija asked him to move and sit on her lap, and, after disclosing her form and casting aside her veil, asked again: "Can you see him?" And he replied: "No." She then comforted him: "Rejoice and be of good heart, he is an angel and not a Satan." (There is a further version of this story in which, in the final test, Khadija not only revealed herself, but made Muhammad "come inside her shift" [penetrate her sexually], and thereupon Gabriel departed. The underlying assumption is that, while a lustful demon would have enjoyed the sight of copulation, an angel would politely withdraw from the scene.) Only after Khadija had provided him with this proof of the genuineness of his meeting with Gabriel was Muhammad cured of his doubts and able to embark upon his career as God's spokesman.[31]

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31   The only later occasion on which demonic intervention spoils his visions is the famous episode of the "Satanic verses."

Muhammad thus first experienced his revelations as signs of poetic hallucinations—his immediate reaction to them was: "Now none of God's creatures was more hateful to me than an ecstatic poet or a man possessed." The one who saved him from this unbearable uncertainty, as well as from the fate of being a social outcast, was Khadija, the first believer in his message, the first Muslim, and *a woman*. In the above scene, she is the Lacanian "big Other," the guarantee of the Truth of the subject's enunciation, and it is only by way of this circular support, through someone who believes in him, that Muhammad can believe in his own message and thus serve as a messenger of Truth to believers. Belief is never direct: in order for me to believe, somebody else has to believe in me, and what I believe in is this others' belief in me. Recall the proverbial doubtful hero or leader, who, though himself desperate, fulfills his mission because others (his followers) believe in him, and he cannot bear the prospect of disappointing them. Is there a stronger pressure than that we experience when an innocent child looks into our eyes and says: "But I believe in you"?

Years ago, some feminists (in particular Mary Ann Doane) accused Lacan of privileging male desire: only men can fully or directly desire, while women can only desire to desire, hysterically imitate desire. With regard to belief, we can turn things around: women believe, while men believe those who believe in them.[32] The underlying topic is here that of the *objet petit a*: the other who "believes in me" sees in me something more than

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32 I once had a dream, the usual disgustingly self-indulgent one about getting some big prize; my initial reaction, *in the dream*, was that this could not be true, that it was only a dream; the rest of the dream then consisted of my (ultimately successful) effort to convince myself, by way of pointing to a series of indications, that it was not just a dream, but reality—the interpretive task here is to discover who was the woman hidden in the dream, who was my Khadija.

myself, something of which I myself am not aware, the *objet a* in me. According to Lacan, women are for men reduced to the *objet a*. But what if it is the other way around? What if a man desires his object of desire, unaware of the cause that makes him desire it, while a woman is more directly focused on the cause of desire (*objet a*)?

This feature should be given all its due: a woman possesses a knowledge about the truth which precedes even the prophet's own knowledge. What further complicates the picture is the precise mode of Khadija's intervention: the way she was able to draw the line between truth and lie, between divine revelation and demonic possession, by *putting forward (interposing) herself, her disclosed body, as the untruth embodied*, as a temptation to a true angel. Woman: a lie which, at its best, knows itself as a lie embodied. Opposite of Spinoza, for whom truth is its own and the lie's index—here the lie is its own and truth's index.

This is how Khadija's demonstration of truth is achieved through her provocative "monstration" (disclosure, exposure) (207). One thus cannot simply oppose the "good" Islam (reverence of women) and the "bad" Islam (veiled oppressed women), and the point is not simply to return to the "repressed feminist origins" of Islam, to renovate it in its feminist aspect by way of this return: these repressed origins are simultaneously the very origins of the repression of women. Repression does not just repress the origins, it has to repress *its own* origins. The key element for the genealogy of Islam is this slippage between the woman as the only one who can verify Truth itself and the woman who by her nature lacks reason and faith, who cheats and lies and provokes men, interposing herself between them and God as a disturbing stain, and who therefore has to be erased, rendered invisible and controlled, since her excessive enjoyment threatens to engulf men.

Woman as such is an ontological scandal, her public exposure is an affront to God. She is not simply erased, but re-admitted in a closely controlled universe whose fantasmatic foundations are most clearly discernible in the myth of the eternal virgin: the (in)famous *houris*, the virgins awaiting martyrs in Paradise who never lose their virginity, since after every penetration their hymen is magically restored. The fantasy is here that of the undivided and undisturbed reign of the phallic *jouissance*, of a universe in which all traces of the feminine *autre jouissance* are erased (255–6). The profoundest reaction of a Muslim woman, when asked why she wears a veil voluntarily, is to say that she does so "out of her shame in front of God," in order not to offend God: there is, in a woman's exposure, an erectile protuberance, an obscenely intrusive quality, and this combination of visual intrusion and an enigmatic knowledge is explosive, disturbing the very ontological balance of the universe.

So how are we to read, against this background, administrative measures like the French State's prohibition on Muslim women wearing the veil in schools? The paradox is double here. First, the law prohibits something which it, too, qualifies as an erective exposure, a too-strong-to-be-permissible sign of one's identity that perturbs the French principle of egalitarian citizenship—wearing a veil is, from this French republican perspective, also a provocative "monstration." The second paradox is that *what this State prohibition prohibits is prohibition itself* (215), and, perhaps, this prohibition is the most oppressive of them all—why? Because it prohibits the very feature that constitutes the (socio-institutional) *identity* of the other: it de-institutionalizes this identity, changing it into an irrelevant personal idiosyncrasy. What such prohibiting of prohibitions creates is a space of universal Man for whom all differences (economic, politic, religious, cultural, sexual . . .) are indifferent, a matter of contin-

gent symbolic practices, etc. Is this space really gender-neutral? No—but not in the sense of the secret hegemony of male "phallocentric" logic: on the contrary, the space without a legitimate outside, the space not marked by any cut which draws a line of inclusion/exclusion, is a "feminine" non-All, and as such an all-encompassing space, a space with no outside, in which we are all located within a kind of "absolute femininity, a Woman-World" (217) embracing us all. In this universe, with its prohibition of prohibition, there is no guilt, but this absence of guilt is paid for by an unbearable rise of anxiety. The prohibition of prohibitions is a kind of "general equivalent" of all prohibitions, a universal and thereby universalized prohibition, a prohibition of all actual otherness: to prohibit the other's prohibition equals prohibiting his or her otherness (216). Therein resides the paradox of the tolerant multiculturalist universe of the multitude of lifestyles and other identities: the more it is tolerant, the more it is oppressively homogeneous. Martin Amis recently attacked Islam as the most boring of all religions, with its demand that believers perform again and again the same stupid rituals and learn by heart the same sacred formulas—he was deeply wrong: it is multicultural tolerance and permissiveness which stand for real boredom.

Back to the role of women in the pre-history of Islam and, one should add, the story of Muhammad's own conception, where we stumble again upon a mysterious "between-the-two-women." After working the clay on his land, Abdallah, the father-to-be, went to the house of another woman and made advances to her; she was willing but put him off on account of the clay that was on him. After leaving her and washing himself, he went to his wife Amina and had intercourse with her—thus Amina conceived Muhammad. Abdallah then went back to the other woman and asked her if she was still willing; she replied: "No. When you passed by me there was a white light between your eyes. I called

to you and you rejected me. You went to Amina and she has taken away the light." The official wife gets the child, the other knows—she sees in Abdallah more than Abdallah himself, the "light," something he has without knowing it, something that is in him more than himself (the sperm that would beget the Prophet), and it is this *objet a* that generates her desire. Abdallah's position is like the one of the hero in a detective novel who all of a sudden finds himself persecuted, even threatened with death because he knows something that can put a big criminal in danger, even though he himself (or she—it is more often a woman) doesn't know what this is. Abdallah, in his narcissism, confuses this *objet a* in himself with himself (he confuses the object and the cause of the woman's desire), which is why he returns to her afterward, wrongly assuming that she will still desire him.

This reliance on the feminine (and on the foreign woman at that) is Islam's repressed foundation, its un-thought, that which it endeavors to exclude, to erase or at least control through its complex ideological edifice, but which persists in haunting it, since it is the very source of its vitality. Why, then, is woman such a traumatic presence for Islam, such an ontological scandal that it has to be veiled? The true problem is not the horror of the shameless exposure of what lies beneath the veil, but, rather, the nature of the veil itself. One should link this feminine veil with Lacan's reading of the anecdote about the competition between two painters from ancient Greece, Zeuxis and Parrhasius, over who will paint the more convincing illusion.[33] Zeuxis produced such a realistic picture of grapes that birds were lured into picking at it. But Parrhasius won by painting a curtain on the wall of his room, so realistic that Zeuxis, when Parrhasius took him to see the painting, asked: "OK, now please pull aside the veil and show me what you painted!" In

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33   See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), 103.

Zeuxis's painting, the illusion was so convincing that the image was taken for the real thing; in Parrhasius's painting, the illusion resided in the very notion that what we see in front of us is just a veil covering up the hidden truth. This is also how, for Lacan, feminine masquerade works: she wears a mask to make us react like Zeuxis in front of Parrhasius's painting—*OK, put down the mask and show us what you really are!* Things are homologous in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, in which Orlando falls passionately in love with Rosalind who, in order to test his love, disguises herself as Ganymede and, now as a male companion, interrogates Orlando about his love. She even takes on the personality of Rosalind (in a redoubled masking, she pretends to be Ganymede playing at being Rosalind) and persuades her friend Celia (disguised as Aliena) to marry them in a mock ceremony. In this ceremony, Rosalind literally feigns to feign to be what she is: truth itself, in order to win, has to be *staged* in a redoubled deception. We can thus imagine Orlando, after the mock wedding ceremony, turning to Rosalind-Ganymede and telling her: "You played Rosalind so well that you almost made me believe you were her; you can now return to what you are and be Ganymede again."

It is not an accident that the agents of such double masquerades are always women: while a man can only pretend to be a woman, only a woman can pretend to be a man who pretends to be a woman, as only a woman can *pretend to be what she is* (a woman). To account for this specifically feminine status of pretending, Lacan refers to a *veiled* woman who wears a concealed fake penis in order to evoke the idea that she is the phallus: "Such is woman concealed behind her veil: it is the absence of the penis that makes her the phallus, the object of desire. Evoke this absence in a more precise way by having her wear a cute fake one under a fancy dress, and you, or rather she, will have plenty

to tell us about."[34] The logic here is more complex than it may appear: it is not merely that the obviously fake penis evokes the absence of the "real" penis. In a strict parallel with Parrhasius's painting, the man's first reaction upon seeing the contours of the fake penis is: "Take this ridiculous fake off and show me what you've got beneath!" The man thereby misses how the fake penis is the real thing: the "phallus" that the woman is is the shadow generated by the fake penis, i.e., the specter of the non-existent "real" phallus beneath the cover of the fake one. In this precise sense, the feminine masquerade has the structure of mimicry, since, for Lacan, in mimicry I do not imitate the image I want to mimic, but those features of the image which seem to indicate that there is some hidden reality behind it. As with Parrhasius, I do not imitate the grapes, but the veil: "Mimicry reveals something insofar as it is distinct from what might be called an *itself* that is behind."[35] The status of the phallus itself is that of mimicry. The phallus is ultimately a kind of stain on the human body, an excessive feature which does not fit the body and thereby generates the illusion of another hidden reality behind the image.

And this brings us back to the function of the veil in Islam: What if the true scandal this veil endeavors to obfuscate is not the feminine body hidden beneath it, but the *inexistence* of the feminine? What if, consequently, the ultimate function of the veil is precisely to sustain the illusion that there *is* something, the substantial Thing, behind the veil? If, following Nietzsche's equation of truth and woman, we transpose the feminine veil into the veil which conceals the ultimate Truth, the true stakes of the Muslim veil become even clearer. Woman is a threat because she stands for the "undecidability" of truth, for a succession of

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34   Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 310.

35   Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 99.

veils beneath which there is no ultimate hidden core; by veiling her, we create the illusion that there is, beneath the veil, the feminine Truth—the horrible truth of the feminine as lie and deception, of course. Therein resides the concealed scandal of Islam: only a woman, the very embodiment of the indiscernibility of truth and lie, can guarantee Truth. For this reason, she has to remain veiled.

This brings us back to our earlier topic: woman and the Orient. The true choice is not that between the Near-East masculine Islam and the Far-East more feminine spirituality, but between the Far Eastern elevation of woman into the Mother-Goddess, the generative-and-destructive substance of the World, and the Muslim distrust of woman which, paradoxically, in a negative way renders much more directly the traumatic-subversive-creative-explosive power of feminine subjectivity.

4

Every Book is Like a Fortress— Flesh Became Word
Gunjević

I'm just an American boy raised on MTV
And I've seen all those kids in the soda pop ads
But none of 'em looked like me
So I started lookin' around for a light out of the dim
And the first thing I heard that made sense was the word
Of Mohammad, peace be upon him

A shadu la ilaha illa Allah
There is no God but God

If my daddy could see me now—chains around my feet
He don't understand that sometimes a man
Has got to fight for what he believes
And I believe God is great, all praise due to him
And if I should die, I'll rise up to the sky
Just like Jesus, peace be upon him

We came to fight the Jihad and our hearts were pure and strong
As death filled the air, we all offered up prayers
And prepared for our martyrdom

But Allah had some other plan, some secret not revealed
Now they're draggin' me back with my head in a sack
To the land of the infidel

A shadu la ilaha illa Allah
A shadu la ilaha illa Allah[36]

The cartographers of Empire who drafted the borders of the world with human lives and barbed wire are not burdened by reading or printing books. But they are made uncomfortable by unpredictable and dangerous readers whom Empire deliberately tried to make illiterate by creating for them an illusion of liberty, human rights, and democracy. One such unusual reader was a young man with an ordinary name, John Walker Lindh. His life is described by Steve Earle (who for years was himself on the margins of the law) in the marvelous song *John Walker's Blues*. John Walker was the American Taliban arrested in Afghanistan after a bungled attempt at martyrdom. In the struggle against his former countrymen and their allies, John Walker did not succeed in dying for Allah. What irony! He was raised on MTV, as the song says, and having heard the words of the Prophet Muhammad (which was the first thing that had ever made sense to him), the young Walker embraced Islam and readily responded to the call of the Afghanistan "McJihad." Instead of dying in the struggle against the infidels, however, he ended up shackled in chains behind barbed wire. The Good Allah had another plan, known only to him, for this unhappy young man. Walker is a paradigmatic figure. His unsuccessful martyrdom confirms what we have already learned from Louis Althusser: There is no such thing as an innocent reading, and each of us must say what reading we are guilty of. This assertion of Althusser's

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36   Steve Earle, "John Walker's Blues," from *Jerusalem* (Artemis Records, 2002).

applies nowhere so aptly as it does to reading the Qur'an. If we decide to read the Qur'an as John Walker did we expose ourselves to multiple perils. Not because the Qur'an sanctions the reading of "dangerous" books such as *The Satanic Verses*, *My Name is Red*, or *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, but because the Qur'anic text is a referential field, a hermeneutic key, and a parameter sanctioning dangerous readers. What happens when a non-Muslim reads the Qur'an, as the Qur'an itself bans non-Muslims from reading the holy text? Only if we persist in flouting this ban can we understand what we did not wish to know. Precisely what we have learned to deny serves as the Royal Road to our understanding. Every book is like a fortress that cannot be conquered from without. Otherwise we would find sufficient the required reading assigned to us in school. There can be nothing gained from reading under pressure. If every book is a fortress, it must be conquered from within: there must be a desire to master the text by subjective intention. Only that kind of reading becomes, and we say this with a tinge of wry anachronism, a class struggle. Hence reading is primarily a multiple form of communication and a *locus* of ideological struggles, as has already been shown by Roland Barthes.[37]

If we venture on such a reading in the context of class we must

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37 Today the practice of reading embodies a reaction to the terror of the media. The role of "media terror" within Empire is threefold. First, a constant terrorizing with images of violence designed to destroy reading and thinking. Second, the terror of the image systematically undermines and redefines our past by saturating and inundating us with vast amounts of information, impossible to process. And third, through terrorizing by the use of violent images the intention is to permanently inject amnesia in a *dromological* manner in order to create a violent matrix of "new forms of literacy" which impose illiteracy and catatonia. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau writes that "Barthes distinguished three types of reading: the one that stops at the pleasure afforded by words, the one that rushes on to the end and 'faints with expectation,' and the one that cultivates the desire to write: erotic, hunting, and initiatory modes of reading. There are others, in dreams, battle, autodidacticism, etc." (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 176.

find aids and fellow travelers to ease the scaling of such textual fortresses. My suggestion here is that aids be found to help us in reading the Qur'anic text largely because reading in a time dominated by the "image" is no longer something done at leisure, or as the privilege of a ruling minority, but as an everyday practice of resistance to the networked systems of power and control. This is why strategies of reading have become a fundamental category of political strategies. Let us start with the call to read the Qur'an in Sura 96:1–5 in order to point to a possible strategy of reading. This is also the first Qur'anic sura that was published.

> Read in the Name of your Lord Who has created
> He has created man from a clot
> Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous
> He Who has taught (writing) by the pen
> He has taught man what he knew not.

The Qur'anic text in a particular way both interiorizes and summarizes the reading that is described here. Seemingly, the text intends to obstruct the universal reading to which the reader is called because the Qur'an is to be learned by heart, internalized so that it can always be recited. The word is one with the book. That is why we should not be surprised by the words of Sufi Abul Qasim Gurgani who compares man to the book, asserting that man is the book in which all divine and natural books are joined. By reading the Qur'an and memorizing it, the flesh of the text becomes the soul of the reader. The flesh of the text simultaneously becomes the word and model of communication. From this it follows that the substance of the Qur'anic message is exceptionally important if there is an imperative for readers to memorize the text. Although this call is issued only to Muslims, why do we non-Muslims not take seriously enough the call to read the Qur'an? If for no other

reason, then so that we do not bungle our lives as John Walker did, we do not become a *homo sacer*. It is not enough to hide behind one's defeats seeking stupid justifications and cheap excuses by invoking kismet, a word that appears nowhere in the Qur'an, a word invented by Karl May, German author of the *Winnetou* series of adventure novels set in the American Old West.

Someday when we get around to writing a genealogy of our failures, inadequacies, and disappointments, an important place in such a study will be the books we never read, for whatever reason. Aside from the music we never listened to, the movies we never watched, or the old archives and maps we never explored, the books we never read will be one of the indicators of our anachronisms and our flawed humanity. When our imagined defense systems crumble and we are betrayed by our own mechanisms of denial, only then will reading preserve the dignity of the loser. Is this not in fact the case today when we seem to be fighting a battle that has already been lost? If we believe we should be saving whatever can be saved, we must accept the reading of the texts we love to hate. The Qur'an is certainly one. Someone should voluntarily be responsible for reading and interpreting such books. This is certainly a text which is too valuable and it should be taken, literally wrested, from the grip of the fundamentalists. Christian fundamentalists read the Qur'anic text as if it were a terrorism handbook. In reading the Qur'an, Islamic fundamentalists mean to have monochromatic control of the text, and with their literal, superficial, ultra-modern interpretations they intend to mutilate it, destroying the entire book in the process. Every fundamentalist, literal reading of a text rebels against modernism, but this rebellion remains lodged within the field of reference of the discourse against which it rebels. An historical exegesis of the Qur'an is not a relativizing of the message or a dangerous

lunge at eternal truths; it is an aid facilitating the reading even for someone who is not a Muslim.

At the outset Maxime Rodinson may be of help to us. He reads the Qur'an as being, without question, Allah's word, transmitting the message of downtrodden, despised, and battered humankind. It is a message to those who have been the butt of sins and who have, full of defiance, stood up to subjection and injustice. Humankind has found a clear appeal for justice and equality in the message of the Qur'an. People have turned the word of solace into a tool to gird them in their struggle against injustice. For Muslims around the world who believe in the verbal inspiration of the Qur'an, there can be no doubt: the Qur'an is a complex text which cannot be reduced to a mere struggle of the downtrodden demanding a redistribution and implementation of justice. The Qur'an is more than a political manifesto just as Islam is more than a religion. God is not made flesh as in Christianity, but instead his word is made book. More poetically put, God's word is *bookified*. The first sura of the Qur'an, al-Fatihah, is not just a prayer performed by an observant Muslim during his five obligatory daily prayers, it also illuminates the substance of the Qur'an and speaks its message. In fact, in this third sura to be published, according to Islamic teachings, after Suras 96 and 74, lies the essence of the Qur'an:

> Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds:
> The Beneficent, the Merciful:
> Master of the Day of Judgment.
> Thee (alone) we worship; Thee (alone) we ask for help.
> Show us the straight path:
> The path of those whom Thou hast favored; Not (the path)
> of those who earn Thy anger nor of those who go astray.

Although reminiscent of the creed, the al-Fatihah is largely a

sort of doxological hymn. If we are after the Islamic creed, we must go to the Shahada. The Shahada is a declaration of faith in the form of an acknowledgment with both an affirmative and a negative piece. The Shahada and the al-Fatihah are the cores about which the Qur'anic text speaks. In the Shahada declaration we have a synthesis of the whole Islamic theology of revelation and of Islamic practice: "There is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God." This formula may seem simple to us, who have "never been modern" as Bruno Latour says, but there is nothing more complex. This is why asking the right questions matters. A question that might be raised by an uninformed reader of Jorge Luis Borges about the Prophet Muhammad would be naïve only at first glance: "If Muhammad the messenger is a prophet, as the Qur'an says he is, why did he not perform miracles and why had the Torah and the Gospels not prophesied his coming?" The answer is Derridian: *There is no truth outside the text*. The answer lies in the book. The Qur'an is the primordial miracle of Islam. The proof of Muhammad's being a messenger is the miraculous metaphysical beauty of the book that God revealed to the prophet.[38] The God about whom the

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38   "[I]t was not the contents of the Qur'an, but its linguistic form, that Muslims came to look upon as supernatural and therefore completely inimitable. God speaks Arabic, and God never makes a mistake. The consequences of this belief were incalculable: Grammar, rhetoric, and poetics were oriented to the Qur'an. What had once been the language of an ecstatic (who later had to legislate for his community), a text that had been thoroughly rearranged in the 'Uthman recension' and in many cases joined together with nothing more than fragments and remnants, now becomes the supreme stylistic norm. Now the language had been fixed for all eternity, it couldn't change except for the worse. Even today the Arabs are struggling with this dilemma: They revere a language that many of them have not perfectly mastered and some of them not at all; and they speak dialects which they can view only as the result of decadence, not of natural growth." Josef van Ess, "Muhammad and the Qur'an: Prophecy and Revelation," in Hans Küng, Josef van Ess, Heinrich von Stietencron, Neinz Bechert, eds., *Christianity and World Religions: Paths to Dialogue*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 16–17.

Qur'an speaks is ineffably transcendent. Everything is subordinated to his unquestioning will, and man is answerable to God. On Judgment Day he will be taken to account for his deeds and his misdeeds. To subordinate oneself to God's will is not always easy because, in the history of Islam, God's will was *incarnated* too many times in the political institution of the caliphate whose voluntarism became a legal category within which the full reality of the Islamic theocratic state was interpreted and constructed. This voluntaristic conceptualization of reality had vast repercussions for the life of the individual, his salvation, and the political reality of the Islamic community. Let us leave aside for a moment the common knowledge we can find in every popular book about Islam. Let us dwell instead on that which is often forgotten or deliberately ignored.

The Qur'an greatly praises human reason. Almost an eighth of the Qur'an problematizes the question of reason as juxtaposed to fatalism—nothing more than a cheap and resigned excuse for those who have not recognized and taken advantage of their chance. A large segment of the Qur'an is dedicated to the theme of study. It is more like the psalms than the Pentateuch or the Gospels. Qur'an literally means recital, book, or even reading. Reciting the Qur'an is considered the most subtle and supreme artistic expression in Islam. With its 114 suras and 6236 verses the Qur'anic text does not have the obvious link to narrativity that the Pentateuch has or, for that matter, the prophecies of an Amos, a Jeremiah, or a Jonah. The Qur'anic suras are similar in part to some aspects of the wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Book of Proverbs. There are suras resembling the Book of Revelation. Apocalyptic themes are not ephemeral in the Qur'anic message, nor is Messianism—more pronounced in the Shi'ite interpretation, particularly in certain Shi'ite movements, and in Sufism.

If we aspire to candor, the absence of narrative structure, the unexpected repetitions, the impossibility of bringing the overly divergent themes together into a single whole, may confuse and exhaust even the most earnest reader. On the other hand, there are many branchings in the Qur'an. Different themes overlap that are related in the most unusual ways. If for no other reason, it should be read because its non-linearity cannot be easily explained, it should be read for its lack of cohesion, for its lack of a center, for the *chronological disorder of the text*. It is precisely this questionable and superficial asymmetry that we hold to be the most interesting and original quality of the text. That it is repetitive, fragmented, disjointed, that it cannot be reduced to the common denominator of a banal and obvious interconnection—these aspects are precisely what provoke non-Muslim readers and beckon them to explore the text. The Qur'an proposes a rhizomatic model of reading, which means we can approach it by reading selectively, or in fragments, from the end, the middle, or the beginning, without ever losing sight of the main message. This, of course, is by no means a drawback or a fault; to the contrary, it is what challenges and motivates the reader. The perspective is always clear and unambiguous, and it reads: *there is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God*. But the Qur'anic text itself includes other perspectives raising themes that are of interest to us, of which Stephen Schwartz, a recent convert to Islam, speaks. Schwartz suggests that the Qur'an is a guide to conduct and a source of legal wisdom which can be divided into two categories—those dealing with other religions (Sura 5:51) and those relevant to *jihad*, which has, on the one hand, reinforced the position and conviction of a pure Islamic society among Islamic fundamentalists of various provenances and, on the other, has been taken by

Islamophobes as proof of the deep-seated enmity harbored by Muslims towards all non-Muslims.[39]

Although there are less exclusive and more conciliatory attitudes towards "others" expressed in the Qur'an, contrasting with those upon which Schwartz has chosen to remark, the latter are the themes most often paraded to show the aggressive nature of Islam. But Schwartz is only partially right. The political and metaphysical complexity of the Qur'an cannot be reduced to a few key disputes. There are many more such disputes. This is a fact confirmed by Islamic exegetics and philosophers, particularly if one considers the very act of translating the Qur'anic text from Arabic into one of the Indo-European languages. The question of hermeneutics and commentary on the Qur'an opens up scores of new problems about which the eminent Bosnian scholar, Enes Karić, has the following to say:

> Islamic scholars are in agreement on one point: the Qur'an is a book which is read in *seven (or ten or fourteen)* ways. Muhammad himself made this possible and helped his early followers (*ashib*) understand the Qur'anic text. This does not contradict the fact that Islamic orthodoxy does not question the illiteracy of the Islamic prophet. The scribes to whom he dictated the revelation of the Qur'anic suras for more than twenty years understood that the Qur'an is a miraculous document that is not *revealed/concealed* with a single vocalization, a single consonantalization, a single punctuation.[40]

If there are seven, or ten, or fourteen ways of reading the

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39   Stephen Schwartz, *The Two Faces of Islam* (New York: Doubleday: 2002), 18.

40   Enes Karić, *Hermeneutika Kur'ana* (Zagreb: Hrvatsko filozofsko društvo, 1990), 127 (translation of quotation by Ellen Elias-Bursać).

Qur'an, then clearly there must be at least seven, or ten, or four-teen "key" disputes, especially if the reader is a non-Muslim. There will probably be a fifteenth interpretation, a sixteenth, or a seventeenth way to read it. Readers beware: The Qur'an is isotropic and there is no simple reading to lead us without pain and effort to the pleasure in reading of which Barthes speaks. The Qur'anic text is far from any idyllic notion that it might be readily understood. Precisely because it is devoid of any imposed system and artificial spatial cohesion, the Qur'anic text leaves us with multiple options for reading and interpretation. This is both a blessing and a curse, depending on who reads it and to what purpose. Without a trace of Western and Eurocentric affectation let us say that the Qur'an is *literally* a postmodern text. Before jumping to any conclusions we must not forget that Muhammad was himself illiterate. This is why it is important to be aware of the final Uthman recension of the Qur'anic text which brings to an end the formative period of the Islamic com-munity.[41] Speaking of constructing the Islamic community as

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41   Uthman's group of scholars, headed by Muhammad's scribe Zaid ibn Thabit, was guided by a logic about which readers today, particularly non-Muslims, can only surmise. Those suras which were revealed to the prophet at Mecca, which make faith in a single God their theme, speak of the unity of the Divine, good deeds, various prophesies, and promise future peace and seren-ity. The Medina revelations, meanwhile, take as their theme how the faithful should demonstrate their good deeds, how good deeds are to be done, how to discern good and evil and behave towards man, how prosperity comes, and how the prophecies are fulfilled. This structure in its consonantal form is no different from the one that Uthman read publicly. Its textual, rhythmic coherence leaves no room for changes, additions, abbreviation, or falsifica-tion of any kind. The beauty of the utterance is such that even those readers who know nothing of Arabic can appreciate it. For those who read (recite) the Qur'an in Arabic it is rich with rhyme, a refined style, and a simplicity of expression. The Qur'an is unique and that is why the attempt is made to recite it over and over again. We needn't be the least bit worried that, one day, we may see a film called *The Qur'an Da Vinci Code*. There is not a single Muslim in the world who in his worst nightmare could dream such an odious dream. Caricaturists are their worst headaches.

a political body, Hegel provides several important insights in his *Philosophy of History*.[42]

The phenomenon of Islam was a revolution in the Middle East which cleansed and enlightened the soul of the Arabs with an abstract One, making it the absolute subject of knowledge and the sole purpose of reality. Unlike Judaism in which Jehovah is the one God of one people, the God in Islam is God of everyone. Any particular race, any genealogy, all caste distinction and political claim of birth or possession legitimizing the primacy of the privileged vanishes. The object of Islamic subjectivity is pure adoration of the One containing activity through which all that is secular must be subjugated to the One. The object of Islam is purely and voluntaristically intellectual; no representations or images are tolerated. Islam is ruled by abstraction, the object of which is to earn the right to abstract service; this is why earning this right foments such intense fervor. Abstract and therefore all-comprehensive enthusiasm, restrained by nothing, finding its limits nowhere, and absolute indifference to all is at the core of fanaticism, as Hegel would instruct us. This *fanaticism* for abstract thought sustains a negative position towards the established order of things. It is the essence of fanaticism to bear only a desolating destructive relation to the concrete.[43]

The image of Islam as a violent ideology transcending theology, law, and politics can be interpreted through events that happened after the prophet's death. Three of the four caliphs were perfidiously murdered by former fellow adherents. Is this not a serious intimation of the violence inherent to the

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42   Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1900).

43   Muhammed Khair, "Hegel and Islam," *The Philosopher*. 90:2 (2002), http://www.the-philosopher.co.uk/hegel&islam.htm

Islamic community at its origins? Hegel considers such fanaticism capable of any elevation, an elevation free from all petty interests that appertain to the virtues of magnanimity and valor. The simple spirit of the Arab Bedouins is an excellent host for the formlessness which worships the One, believes in it, gives alms, rejects physical and racial particularities, undertakes pilgrimages. This should mean that every Muslim is aware of the nomadic dislike of all particular possessions in this world. This is what Muslims are like, says Hegel, resembling their prophet who is not above human frailties. And precisely as such Muhammad is a paradigmatic example for Muslim believers, as Hegel remarks. A prophet yet still a man, Muhammad succeeds with his powerful example and authority to legitimize radical monotheism. These thoughts of Hegel's from *The Philosophy of History* have become common knowledge when one is conceptualizing Islam and the Prophet Muhammad from a philosophical perspective. Long before the unfortunate caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad, a deeply rooted scorn smoldered in the West towards any form of Islamic values, towards everything Islamic. The Muslims were not, of course, the only ones responsible for this perception of Islam. In the eighth century, John of Damascus in his hereziological studies presented Islam as if it were yet another Christian heresy. Infernologist Dante placed the prophet/messenger Muhammad and his cousin Ali in the eighth circle of hell, or, more precisely, in its ninth chasm wherein were the sowers of political and religious discord:

> Whilst eagerly I fix on him my gaze,
> He eyed me, with his hands laid his breast bare,
> And cried, "Now mark how I do rip me: lo!
> How is Mohammed mangled: before me

> Walks Ali weeping, from the chin his face
> Cleft to the forelock . . . [44]

> For stepping, spake Mohammed, on the ground
> Then fix'd it to depart.[45]

Islam (and its prophets who have meanwhile been completely identified) has never stopped representing a threat to the Christian West. The same is thought of Islam today but only right-wing extremists voice such Eurocentric things in public. Islam is perceived to be a despotic, theocratic, violent, and *anti-modern* religion. The quintessential symbol of fanatical and primitive Islam in the cultural archive of the West is Omar's unforgiveable destruction of the Alexandria library, which set humankind back centuries. This is perceived as a terrible crime of Islamic savagery. The cultural inferiority of the West in the early Middle Ages further exacerbated this image. Even though it was the Arabs who brought Aristotle to Europe, Islam remained the irrational Other. Arabic philosophy, which through Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd indirectly shaped Scholasticism, did alter the image of Islam in the Western world. Classic Western Scholasticism with all its political deviations would never have existed had it not been for the Arabs. The Christian and Arabic theocracies in the Middle Ages were not so different as they might have seemed at first glance. Their likenesses were far too great to be coincidental. That is why Islam and its prophet were the objects of such a fierce theological and political apologetic campaign for centuries, the intensity of which did not diminish. Suffice it to consider what the Christian apologists dreamed up about the Qur'an and Muhammad to see

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44   Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, *Hell*, trans. Rev. H.F. Cary (London: Cassell & Company Ltd., 1892), XXVIII, 28–31.

45   Ibid., XXVIII, 60–1.

clearly where this colonial disdain for Islam comes from. Luther should be mentioned here; he saw the spread of Islam as punishment for our sins. He considered the Sultan in Istanbul more devout than the Pope in his day. It is therefore hardly surprising that people such as Tariq Ramadan are being tagged as hypocrites with a clear plan for the Islamification of Europe with their "openly liberal views." A third option must be found between Christian fundamentalism and Islamic liberalism, both of which wrongly perceive the Prophet Muhammad.

A great deal is being written about Muhammad these days. The widely accepted wisdom about him is that the messenger balanced apocalyptic mysticism and political activism with his own life in a prophetic way. This balancing act was the fruit not only of Allah's mercy but also of Muhammad's contemplative disposition. After exhausting and protracted travels, the future prophet often fled the city for secluded spots to contemplate the meaning of life, death, and the question of good and evil. In the year 610–11, on the twenty-seventh day of the month of Ramadan, while meditating in a cave on Mount Hira, Muhammad had his first vision. This vision could be described as a "sudden break," "the breaking of the dawn." It appeared as if it were daybreak, sunrise. This is how Muhammad experienced the all-permeating presence of the Being who had addressed him. Islamic thinkers agree unanimously that the being who communicated with Muhammad was the angel Gabriel, speaking to him in God's name.

But Muhammad wasn't sure what was happening. He was appalled by the numinous experience which "fascinated and terrified." How could he not have been shaken when he heard the clear divine imperative: Read! Did not the Almighty know he was illiterate? And again: Read! We cannot begin to imagine how Muhammad must have felt. The peremptory "Read!" was an invitation to receive instruction and obey God, the only one

who teaches man of that which transcends the imagination. By pledging his obedience to God and submitting humbly to his will Muhammad would serve as an example for millions of Muslims. His wife Khadija resolved his bewilderment in a practical way. She sent Muhammad to Waraqa, who was not only her much older god-fearing relative, but also a *hanif*, an educated man, a polyglot familiar with the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. Waraqa encouraged Muhammad, and with Khadija became an important source of support for him from the very first of the revelations. The revelations continued for the next twenty-three years.

Visions, ecstasies, and mystical journeys followed one upon the other at lesser and greater intervals. There was a mystical night journey, the *mi'raj*, in which the Prophet Muhammad visited the seven heavens where he met all the prophets who had come before him and saw what eyes cannot see, heard what ears cannot hear, and grasped what the mind cannot understand. During their encounter God told the prophet that he required of believers that they pray five times a day. This journey would become an inexhaustible theme for Islamic mystics and poets through the centuries, particularly Sufi thinkers. At first the prophet hid his revelations, as does every mystic, and then he began to share them with the small, intimate circle of his immediate family.[46] The Prophet Muhammad was a complex person,

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46   Gradually at first, and then as the community grew, Muhammad, receiving instructions from God himself, began to speak more and more clearly and eloquently in public to the people of Mecca. God spoke in Arabic and that was the first time that God had communicated with Arabs in their native tongue. The Bible had not yet been translated into Arabic, and the Jews and Christians thought of the Arabs as savages and primitives of the worst kind. The Christians were especially scornful of the Arabs because they did not even have their own church, as Rodinson remarks, but there were non-Orthodox Christian monasteries along the Arabic coast which were under Persian patronage. It was only Jacobite and Nestorian missionaries and polyglots who gave sermons with great passion and enthusiasm as they passed through Mecca on their way to the Far East.

rife with contradictions, who dedicated himself with equal fervor to attacks of asceticism, politics, warfare, and pleasures. He was cunning but had no gift for oratory, he was reticent, courageous, nervous, proud, virtuous. He had a tendency to make inexcusable political blunders and forgave the stupidity and blunders of his fellow believers. This did not prevent him from voicing poetic images from his own ecstasies that seduce us still today. These raptures tug at us modestly to read the Qur'an. But how to do so? How to scale this fortress, this impassable text which defies all the canons we have learned for reading? To whom can we turn for help? As always when on the lookout for help, we find it where we least expect it. In this case help can come from the Sufis and Alain Badiou, two unrelated allies who may be able to provide the constitutive elements for a reading strategy. So I am proposing here a possible model for reading the Qur'an that would consist of two options converging into a single strategy within the contemporary geopolitical constitution of Empire. The first option relates to the poetics of Sufi metaphysics which is always on the border of Islamic orthodoxy. As I lack the space I will not further pursue its genealogy here. The second option is a materialistic one that I came upon unexpectedly in Badiou's work: his heterodoxical reading of Paul's epistles.

The Qur'an could be read in a Sufi key, following the path of what one of the greatest Islamic philosophers and Sufis, Ibn Arabi, accomplished, and in this instance we could append to him some Shi'ite thinkers as well. Three metaphors are key for the Sufi practice of reading both reality and texts: veil, mirror, and ocean. All three metaphors can be found in the poetic metaphysics of Ibn Arabi's vast opus in which his account of mystical elevation and union with God on the other side would seem at first glance to be a pantheistic matrix. In Ibn Arabi's metaphysics, God is a verb and the Qur'an is seen as a book whose author is, of course,

God who created both book and reader, meaning us. The reading of this text, and of nature, is about removing the veil and about the mirror which reflects not only the purity of our soul, but the light of God's nearness shining in the world—an ocean of Divine love. For Sufis, all prophetic speech, including Muhammad's, is full of metaphors so that every person can understand it. Metaphors make it easier to grasp, while the prophets are aware of the degree of insight of those who truly understand.

> By the same token, everything that the prophets have brought from knowledge is clothed in forms accessible to the most widespread mental abilities, so that one who does not enter into the depth of things stops at that part, seeing it as something which is the most beautiful thing there is, while a man of a more sensible understanding, a diver who seeks pearls of wisdom, knows how to explain why the divine Truth was clothed in such and such an earthly guise; he gauges the raiment and the fabric from which it is made and by it sees all that it conceals and thereby attains knowledge that remains inaccessible for those who did not enjoy awareness of this order.[47]

Here, along with Ibn Arabi, we can mention other Sufis who speak, as he does, of the stages of development and the ladders for beings such as Rumi and Attar, or they speak of the stations of elevation to God, such as with al Harawi for whom the perfect Sufi becomes a mirror of God's attributes. Al Harawi speaks of ten sections, calling them the ten stations. These are the stations of beginning, gateway, conduct, virtuous habits, rudiments,

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47   Ibn Arabi, in Eva de Meyerovitch, *Anthologie du soufisme* (Paris: Sinbad, 1998) 133 (translated from a Croatian version by Ellen Elias-Bursać).

valley, mystical experience, guardianship, facts, and supreme sojourns.[48] Each of these stations has ten parts which practitioners in a community must master in order to ascend to a higher station. The Sufi brotherhood as an important reading community can help us in reading the Qur'an in a way that is orthodox yet at the same time not orthodox, meaning that it stands in a paradoxical "in between" place. People such as Ibn Arabi are still being accused of unorthodoxy after seven hundred years, yet the context of the "multinational interconfessional" Spain in which this great philosopher lived decodes and eases the reading of the Qur'anic text. Although I am taking Ibn Arabi as a paradigm for the reader, I could list untold numbers of other Sufi authors, men and women, who, such as Rabia from Basra or Shihab al Din Surawardi, shine their unusual metaphysics of light on the pages of the Qur'an.

Alain Badiou can help us just as much in this reading. We will make use of Badiou's conclusions and arguments about Paul the Apostle in order to construct an ad hoc reading of Qur'anic texts. This means that we will apply Badiou's critique of Paul, with a twist, to the Prophet Muhammad and the discourse he established. In Badiou's opinion, as we know, Paul with his epistles constructed a new universalistic discourse which would have far-reaching consequences for world history. Badiou refers to Paul's texts as *interventions* and that is why Paul, for him, is a poet-thinker of events and a militant figure. Paul wants to subtract the truth from the communitarian project of a people, a race, an empire; he means to separate the process of truth from history and concrete culture. Paul is an antiphilosopher who is searching for a theory to structure the subject by stripping it of every identity; Paul constitutes a subject which is legitimized by

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48   Al Harawi, in ibid.

event. The focus on event assumes the subject's faithfulness to what is being declared. Truth is evental, singular, subjective, and consists of fidelity to the declaration of the event. Truth is a procedure which does not function by degree, which transcends illumination and as such is independent of the apparatus of opinion entrenched by, in Paul's case, the Roman Empire.

By the same token, truth is not illumination but is diagonal relative to all communitarian subsets. The process of truth does not permit entering into competition with established structural, axiomatic, or legal opinions. For the truth process to be universal it must be supported by an immediate subjective consciousness of its own singularity through an operation which Badiou defines as fidelity, perseverance, and love—nothing more than a materialistic interpretation of faith, hope, and charity. Paul, according to Badiou, established the Christian discourse by criticizing Greek and Jewish discourses, pursuing a diagonal trajectory, and relying on his own experience which was not legitimized by a single institution or law. Counter to the Greeks who seek wisdom, Paul constructs a radical antiphilosophy that questions cosmic and natural laws. Unlike a philosophy which sets out to explain, Paul's antiphilosophy discloses; hence Badiou, unsurprisingly, compares Paul to Pascal, for whom ridiculing philosophy was in itself a form of philosophy. Paul embraces madness and powerlessness because God, as Paul says in his first epistle to the Corinthians, had chosen *the things that are not—to nullify the things that are.* No wonder Paul met with little success in Athens. He had the same experience with the Jews of the Diaspora.

The Jewish discourse introduces the subjective figure of the prophet. Jews seek a sign and a miracle. Their perception of exception defies the totality of the cosmic order, so important for the Greeks. Paul's Announcement for the Jews is a scandalous blasphemy because they think that Paul with his apostolic discourse

is negating God's law. Just as the Greeks, who at an important symbolic level define themselves as all non-Jews, feel that the cosmic law of *logos* is key, so for the Jews the revelation on Sinai and the Union confirming the Law are what matter. Paul here turns things around, creating his own project that transcends both discourses. As Badiou explains:

> It is in fact of utmost importance for the destiny of universalist labor that the latter be withdrawn from conflicts of opinion and confrontations between customary differences. The fundamental maxim is "*me eis diakriseis dialogismon*" "do not argue about opinions" (Rom. 14:1).
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> This injunction is all the more striking in that *diakrisis* means primarily "discernment of differences." Thus, it is to the imperative not to compromise the truth procedure by entangling it in the web of opinions and differences that Paul is committed. It is certainly possible for a philosophy to argue about opinions; for Socrates, this is even what defines it. But the Christian subject is not a philosopher and faith is neither an opinion, nor a critique of opinion. Christian militantism must traverse worldly differences indifferently, and avoid all casuistry over customs.[49]

Both these discourses, the Greek and the Jewish, were two aspects, for him, of the same reality, two faces of the same figure of the *Master*, as Badiou puts it in Lacanian terms. The universal logic of salvation cannot be based on a totality as thematized by philosophy nor on the exceptions to totality as thematized by the

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49   Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003), 100.

Hebrew Bible, i.e., the Law. The logic of salvation is based on an event that is trans/cosmic and antinomian. But this trans/cosmic and antinomian event in the logic of salvation should be understood properly. It is not enough to be a philosopher who knows the eternal truths nor is it enough to be a prophet who knows the univocal sense of the future. One must become an apostle, a militant of truth who faithfully declares the event of a radical new possibility dependent on nothing but an evental grace, as Badiou puts it enigmatically. In other words, an apostle knows little in relation to the philosopher and the prophet. The apostle is certain of what he has learned because he is certain that only by affirming his own ignorance can he pursue the madness of his narrative.

But what is of exceptional importance for us at this point is the "fourth discourse," which Paul mentions modestly only in a few places. This is the mystical discourse. What is referred to as the fourth discourse is a discourse of subjective exaltation permeated by a quiet mystical intimacy of unspeakable words. Paul is an overly intelligent person who refuses to call on private declarations to support the evental grace of the universal Announcement. Paul is no demagogue nor is he a fundamentalist. What is unutterable must so remain. There is no point to persuading his readership of his private ecstasies, though Paul undoubtedly experienced them. Paul feels that attempting to do so might harm the entire project which had gathered only a handful of god-fearing adherents and sympathizers. The radical novelty of the Christian Announcement had to be preserved from proving wisdom and invoking prophetic signs. And the Christian Announcement had to be preserved from references to private phenomena such as ecstatic trances, mystical experiences, and initiation into a supernatural *gnosis*. Wisdom and miracle-working give way to Announcement which becomes the source of power. I hold these insights of Badiou's to be important.

Referring to Hegel's *Logic*, Badiou maintains that Hegel shows how "the absolute Knowledge of a ternary dialectic requires a fourth term."[50] Might not this fourth term, as Hegel calls it, be brought into connection with Islamic discourse? Is not this discourse, as we have seen, the discourse of ecstasy? Is not this the discourse of subjective exaltation, of the subject moved by a miracle? Is this not Muhammad's discourse of non-discourse? Is this not a mystical text which the prophet received in a variety of ecstasies in a temporal discontinuity lasting more than twenty years? With a dose of reserve, I answer these questions in the affirmative. I feel it sufficient that a fourth discourse be opened for the space of Islam within which non-Muslims can read the Qur'an in an entirely new way. I hold that it is exceptionally important to read the Qur'an as a mystical text which, with its poetic-mystical insights, incorporates ecstatic discourse. This is an extremely radicalized form of what Paul describes as exalted speech, a non-discourse that is addressing us.

In his own ingenious way Nietzsche remarked on this in *The Antichrist*, juxtaposing Paul and Muhammad by arguing that the prophet *borrowed* everything from Paul. We will not err if we attribute Muhammad's mystical ecstasies to the discourse of non-discourse, to the intimate and quiet discourse that after twenty-three years would become text. If we understand the Qur'anic text in this manner we arrive at a place in which our reading can be a source of unusual *blessing*, a blessing we receive by this reading arising from the fact that we will understand the Qur'an better, which I believe to be important. Our reading in this key will be less pretentious, less circumscribed by the juridical, and certainly less pompous in terms of modernity. What might be unusual and confusing in the blessing is that after such

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50   Ibid., 41.

a reading we might feel the way we do after reading Jacques Derrida's texts in which the truth is always deferred. Clearly with such a reading we are lurching towards a canonical reading of the Qur'an itself, one in essential conflict with all those Islamic readers who read the text primarily in juridical and modernistic terms. Such readings today are popular in the rural madrasas of the Wahabi and other fundamentalist enclaves throughout Empire in which apostates are put to death, despite the fact that the Qur'an says there must be no coercion in questions of faith. The difference is, as always, in the interpretation of the verses.

If we read the Qur'anic text as the mystical discourse of an ecstatic, as proposed in part by Fethi Benslama, Christian Jambet, and Slavoj Žižek, then Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis is not merely common knowledge but can serve as an interpretative key which will help us more than mere philology. This is largely because Lacan says we must seek the truth of the text in error, in dream, in repetition, and in discontinuities. These, as we know, are the standard tools of psychoanalysis. Here, for a moment, we can agree with Lacan's assertion that discontinuity is an important way in which the unconscious appears to us as a phenomenon. Is not discontinuity, as we have already seen, one of the fundamental characteristics of the Qur'anic text? Repetition, discontinuities, and oneiric ecstasies tell us about the deep fissures in the text through which shines the force of the unconscious. The unconscious shining ecstatically through imagination and language is the most significant and authoritative part of the Qur'anic text, as confirmed by the need for psychoanalytical tools when interpreting it; in this case the unconscious is literally structured as language and as text. This is a fact we must keep in mind while reading the Qur'an.

Lacan further states in his Écrits that what is most important begins with reading the text, reading what is given us in the

processing and rhetoric of dream. These are the models through which the subject creates his or her own speech patterns and story. We must understand these models whether they be pleonasms, syllepses, regressions, repetitions, syntactical changes, metaphors, catachreses, allegories, or metonymies. We must learn to read demonstrative intentions, breaking through convictions and seductive illusions to understand the speech of the subject. If we see that our unconscious is a chapter of our history filled with metaphoric lies, then truth may be found inscribed on monuments, in archival documents, in semantic evolution, legends, and traditions. The cultural artifacts Lacan lists were applied to subjects of the psychoanalytical method that played a huge role in shaping and orienting modern subjectivity. And this subjectivity is the place where history is written which will one day be staged publicly. As Lacan puts it, history will be staged in an outside forum of which we, in the worst possible way today, are ourselves witnesses.

If we do not want to become a *homo sacer*, as John Walker did, we need to read the Qur'an. John Walker was not just an unfortunate paradigm of a Western Muslim about whom people like Tariq Ramadan have little to say, in fact he is a poor parody of the modern tragic hero. The image of him bound in chains, so thin, staring dully into the distance, clearly giving himself voluntarily over to death, is nothing more than a graphic example of the *homo sacer* as Agamben uses the term. Reading is not without its perils nor is it a trivial activity. It is the beginning of an ideological battle being waged within Empire. This can be applied to the case of a non-Muslim reading of the Qur'an, the fall-out from which is obvious in the case of John Walker. In the ideological struggle we must make a serious effort not to knuckle under and submit to the temptations of the Messianic complex on the one hand or become a *homo sacer* on the other. Reading the Qur'an

can help us pedagogically to keep from getting trapped in both ways, which would be pernicious even in the short term. This is precisely what Empire wants least: that we should get to know those whom Empire has named our enemies. The *Muslim* of whom Agamben speaks in his moving text about the *Remnants of Auschwitz* has again become the homeless witness of what Empire is doing, and therefore the *Muslim* must be made not only a witness but primarily an enemy to be bludgeoned. This is why reading the Qur'an matters, so that we don't fall for the false alternatives of Empire which see in the Qur'anic text only Messianism and homosacerism, two images of violence which can have staggering consequences and iterations over which we can easily lose control. Such consequences may turn against us. Things can slip out of hand, as in the Borges story below, in which well-intentioned advice turns into its opposite with alarming repercussions:[51]

In 1517, Fray Bartolome de las Casas, feeling great pity for the Indians who grew worn and lean in the drudging infernos of the Antillean gold mines, proposed to Emperor Charles V that Negroes be brought to the isles of the Caribbean, so that *they* might grow worn and lean in the drudging infernos of the Antillean gold mines. To that odd variant on the species *philanthropist* we owe an infinitude of things: W.C. Handy's blues; the success achieved in Paris by the Uruguayan attorney-painter Pedro Figari; the fine runaway-slave prose of the likewise Uruguayan Vicente Rossi; the mythological stature of Abraham Lincoln; the half-million dead of the War of Secession; the $3.3 billion spent on military pensions; the statue of the imaginary semblance of Antonio (Falucho) Ruiz; the inclusion of the verb "lynch" in respectable

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51   Jorge L. Borges, "The Cruel Redeemer Lazarus Morell: The Remote Cause," in *A Universal History of Iniquity*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Classics 2004), 7.

dictionaries; the impetuous King Vidor film *Hallelujah*; the stout bayonet charge of the regiment of "Blacks and Tans" (the color of their skins, not their uniforms) against that famous hill near Montevideo; the gracefulness of certain elegant young ladies; the black man who killed Martin Fierro; that deplorable rumba *The Peanut-Seller*; the arrested and imprisoned Napoleonism of Toussaint L'Ouverture; the cross and the serpent in Haiti; the blood of goats whose throats are slashed by the *papalois* machete; the *habanera* that is the mother of the tango; the *candombe*. And yet another thing: the evil and magnificent existence of the cruel redeemer Lazarus Morell.

5

Only a Suffering God Can Save Us
Žižek

The key question about religion today is: Can all religious experiences and practices effectively be contained within the dimension of the conjunction of truth and meaning? The best starting point for such a line of inquiry is the point at which religion itself faces a trauma, a shock which dissolves the link between truth and meaning, a truth so traumatic that it resists being integrated into the universe of meaning. Every theologian sooner or later faces the problem of how to reconcile the existence of God with the fact of the Shoah or some similar excessive evil: How are we to reconcile the existence of an omnipotent and good God with the terrifying suffering of millions of innocents, like the children killed in the gas chambers? Surprisingly (or not), the theological answers build a strange succession of Hegelian triads. Those who want to leave divine sovereignty unimpaired and thus have to attribute to God full responsibility for the Shoah, first offer (1) the "legalistic" sin-and-punishment theory (the Shoah has to be a punishment for the past sins of humanity—or of the Jews themselves); they then pass on to (2) the "moralistic" character-education theory (the Shoah is to be understood along the lines of the story of Job, as the most radical test of our faith in God—if we survive this ordeal, our character will stand firm . . .); finally, they take refuge in a kind of "infinite judgment" which will save

the day after all common measure between the Shoah and its meaning breaks down, appealing to (3) the divine mystery theory (wherein facts like the Shoah bear witness to the unfathomable abyss of divine will). In accordance with the Hegelian motto of a redoubled mystery (the mystery God is for us has to be also a mystery for God himself), the truth of this "infinite judgment" can only be to deny God's full sovereignty and omnipotence.

The next triad is thus proposed by those who, unable to combine the Shoah with God's omnipotence (how could he have allowed it to happen?), opt for some form of divine limitation: (1) God is directly posited as finite or, at least, contained, not omnipotent, not all-encompassing: he finds himself overwhelmed by the dense inertia of his own creation; (2) this limitation is then reflected back into God himself as his free act: God is self-limited, he voluntarily constrained his power in order to leave the space open for human freedom, so it is we humans who are fully responsible for the evil in the world—in short, phenomena like the Shoah are the ultimate price we have to pay for the divine gift of freedom; (3) finally, self-limitation is externalized, the two moments are posited as autonomous—God is embattled, there is a counter-force or principle of demoniac Evil active in the world (the dualistic solution).

This brings us to the third position which goes beyond the first two (the sovereign God, the finite God): that of a suffering God—not a triumphalist God who always wins in the end, although "his ways are mysterious" since he secretly pulls all the strings; not a God who exerts cold justice, since he is by definition always right; but a God who—like the suffering Christ on the cross—is agonized, who assumes the burden of suffering, in solidarity with human misery.[52] It was already Schelling who wrote: "God is a life,

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52   See Franklin Sherman, "Speaking of God after Auschwitz," in Michael L. Morgan, ed., *A Holocaust Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

not merely a being. But all life has a fate and is subject to suffering and becoming. . . . Without the concept of a humanly suffering God . . . all of history remains incomprehensible."[53] Why? Because God's suffering implies that he is involved in history, affected by it, not just a transcendent Master pulling the strings from above: God's suffering means that human history is not just a theater of shadows, but the place of a real struggle, the struggle in which the Absolute itself is involved and its fate is decided. This is the philosophical background of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's deep insight that, after the Shoah, "only a suffering God can help us now"[54]—a proper supplement to Heidegger's "Only a God can save us!" from his last interview.[55] One should therefore take the statement that "the unspeakable suffering of the six million is also the voice of the suffering of God"[56] quite literally: the very excess of this suffering over any "normal" human measure makes it divine. Recently, this paradox was succinctly formulated by Jürgen Habermas: "Secular languages which only eliminate the substance once intended leave irritations. When sin was converted to culpability, and the breaking of divine commands to an offense against human laws, something was lost."[57]

Which is why secular-humanist reactions to phenomena like the Shoah or the gulag (amongst others) are experienced as insufficient: in order to reach the level of such phenomena,

53   F. W. J. Schelling, "Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom," in Ernst Behler, ed., *Philosophy of German Idealism* (New York: Continuum, 1987), 274.

54   Quoted by David Tracy in Morgan, ed., *A Holocaust Reader*, 237.

55   Martin Heidegger, "Only a God Can Save Us," in Richard Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

56   David Tracy, "Religious Values after the Holocaust," in Morgan, ed., *A Holocaust Reader*, 237.

57   Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 110.

something much stronger is needed, something akin to the old religious topic of a cosmic perversion or catastrophe in which the world itself is "out of joint"—when one confronts a phenomenon like the Shoah, the only appropriate reaction is to ask the perplexed question "Why did the heavens not darken?" (the title of Arno Mayor's book). Therein resides the paradox of the theological significance of the Shoah: although it is usually conceived as the ultimate challenge to theology (if there is a God and if he is good, how could he have allowed such a horror to take place?), it is at the same time only theology that can provide the frame enabling us to somehow approach the scope of the catastrophe—the fiasco of God is still the fiasco of *God*.

Recall the second of Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History": "The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one."[58] Can this "weak messianic power" still be asserted in the face of the Shoah? How does the Shoah point towards a redemption-to-come? Is not the suffering of the victims of the Shoah a kind of absolute expenditure which cannot ever be retroactively accounted for, redeemed, rendered meaningful? It is at this very point that God's suffering enters: what it signals is the failure of any *Aufhebung* of the raw fact of suffering. What echoes here, more than the Jewish tradition, is the basic Protestant lesson: there is no direct access to freedom/autonomy; between the master/slave exchange-relationship of man and God and the full assertion of human freedom, an intermediary stage of absolute humiliation has to intervene in which man is reduced to a pure object of the unfathomable divine caprice. Do the three main versions of Christianity not form a kind of Hegelian triad? In the succession of Orthodoxy, Catholi-

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58   Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 254.

cism, and Protestantism, each new term is a subdivision, split off from a previous unity. This triad of Universal-Particular-Singular can be designated by three representative founding figures (John, Peter, Paul) as well as by three races (Slavic, Latin, German). In the Eastern Orthodoxy, we have the substantial unity of the text and the corpus of believers, which is why the believers are allowed to interpret the sacred Text, the Text goes on and lives in them, it does not stand outside of living history as its exemplary standard and model—the substance of religious life is the Christian community itself. Catholicism stands for radical alienation: the entity which mediates between the founding sacred Text and the corpus of believers, the Church, the religious Institution, regains its full autonomy. The highest authority resides in the Church, which is why the Church has the right to interpret the Text; the Text is read during the Mass in Latin, a language which is not understood by ordinary believers, and it is even considered a sin for an ordinary believer to read the Text directly, by-passing the priest's guidance. For Protestantism, finally, the only authority is the Text itself, and the wager is on every believer's direct contact with the Word of God as it was delivered in the Text; the mediator (the Particular) thus disappears, withdraws into insignificance, enabling the believer to adopt the position of a "universal Singular," the individual in a direct contact with the divine Universality, by-passing the mediating role of the particular Institution. These three Christian attitudes also involve three different modes of God's presence in the world. We start with the created universe directly reflecting the glory of its Creator: all the wealth and beauty of our world bears witness to the divine creative power, and creatures, when they are not corrupted, naturally turn their eyes towards him . . . Catholicism shifts to a more delicate logic of the "figure in the carpet": the Creator is not directly present in the world, his traces are rather to be discerned

in details which escape the first superficial glance, i.e., God is like a painter who withdraws from his finished product, signaling his authorship merely with a barely discernable signature at the picture's edge. Finally, Protestantism asserts God's radical absence from the created universe, from this gray world which runs as a blind mechanism and wherein God's presence only becomes discernible in the direct interventions of Grace which disturbs the normal course of things.

This reconciliation, however, only becomes possible after alienation is brought to the extreme: in contrast to the Catholic notion of a caring and loving God with whom one can communicate, negotiate even, Protestantism starts with the notion of God deprived of any "common measure" shared with man, of God as an impenetrable Beyond who distributes grace in a totally contingent way. One can discern the traces of this full acceptance of God's unconditional and capricious authority in one of the last songs Johnny Cash recorded just before his death, "The Man Comes Around," an exemplary articulation of the anxieties contained in Southern Baptist Christianity:

> There's a man going around taking names
> And he decides who to free and who to blame
> Everybody won't be treated all the same
> There'll be a golden ladder reaching down
> When the Man comes around
>
> The hairs on your arm will stand up
> At the terror in each sip and in each sup
> Will you partake of that last offered cup?
> Or disappear into the potter's ground
> When the Man comes around

Hear the trumpets, hear the pipers
One hundred million angels singing
Multitudes are marching to the big kettledrum
Voices calling, voices crying
Some are born and some are dying
It's Alpha and Omega's kingdom come

And the whirlwind is in the thorn tree
The virgins are all trimming their wicks
The whirlwind is in the thorn tree
It's hard for thee to kick against the pricks

Till Armageddon no shalam, no shalom
Then the father hen will call his chickens home
The wise man will bow down before the throne
And at His feet they'll cast their golden crowns
When the Man comes around

Whoever is unjust let him be unjust still
Whoever is righteous let him be righteous still
Whoever is filthy let him be filthy still

The song is about Armageddon, the end of days when God will appear and perform the Last Judgment, an event presented as pure and arbitrary terror: God is presented almost as Evil personified, as a kind of political informer, a man who "comes around" and provokes consternation by "taking names," deciding who is saved and who lost. If anything, Cash's description evokes the well-known scene of people lined up for a brutal interrogation, and the informer pointing out those selected for torture: there is no mercy, no pardon of sins, no jubilation, we are all fixed in our roles, the just remain just and the filthy remain filthy. In

this divine proclamation, we are not simply judged in a just way; we are informed from outside, as if learning about an arbitrary decision, whether we were righteous or sinners, whether we are saved or condemned—the decision has nothing to do with our inner qualities. And, again, this dark excess of a ruthless divine sadism—in excess over the image of a severe but nonetheless just God—is a necessary negative, an underside, of the excess of Christian love over the Jewish Law: love which suspends the Law is necessarily accompanied by the arbitrary cruelty which also suspends the Law.

Martin Luther directly proposed an excremental definition of man: man is like a divine shit, he fell out of God's anus. One can, of course, pursue the question of how Luther was pushed towards his new theology by being caught in a violent, debilitating superego cycle: the more he acted, repented, punished and tortured himself, did good deeds, etc., the more he felt guilty. This convinced him that good deeds are calculated, dirty, selfish: far from pleasing God, they provoke God's wrath and lead to damnation. Salvation comes from faith: it is our faith alone, faith in Jesus as savior, which allows us to break out of the superego impasse. However, his "anal" definition of man cannot be reduced to a result of this superego pressure which pushed him towards self-abasement—there is more to it than that: it is only within this Protestant logic of man's excremental identity that the true meaning of incarnation can be formulated. In Orthodoxy, Christ ultimately loses his exceptional status: his very idealization, his elevation to a noble model, reduces him to an ideal image, a figure to be imitated (all men should strive to become God)—*imitatio Christi* is more an Orthodox than a Catholic formula. In Catholicism, the predominant logic is that of a symbolic exchange: Catholic theologians enjoy dwelling in scholastic juridical arguments about how Christ paid the price for our

sins, etc.—no wonder that Luther reacted to the lowest outcome of this logic, the reduction of redemption to something that can be bought from the Church. Protestantism, finally, posits the relationship between God and man as real, conceiving Christ as a God who, in his act of incarnation, freely identified himself with his own shit, with the excremental real that is man—and it is only at this level that the properly Christian notion of divine love can be apprehended, as the love for the miserable excremental entity called "man."

It is in this sense that, with regard to Christ, Hegel points forward to some key Kierkegaardian motifs (the difference between genius and apostle, the singular evental character of Christ) with his emphasis on the difference between Socrates and Christ. Christ is *not* like the Greek "plastic individual" through whose particular features the universal/substantial content directly transpires (as in the exemplary case of Alexander). What this means is that although Christ is Man-God, the direct identity of the two, this identity also implies an absolute contradiction: there is *nothing* "divine" about Christ, even nothing exceptional—if we observe his particular features, he is indistinguishable from any other human individual:

> If we consider Christ only in reference to his talents, his character and his morality, as a teacher, etc., we are putting him on the same plane as Socrates and others, even if we place him higher from the moral point of view. . . . If Christ is only taken as an exceptionally fine individual, even as one without sin, then we are ignoring the representation of the speculative idea, its absolute truth.[59]

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59 G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 325.

These lines rely on a very precise conceptual background. It is not that Christ is "more" than other model figures of religious or philosophical or ethical wisdom, real or mythical (Buddha, Socrates, Moses, Muhammad), "divine" in the sense of the absence of any human failings. With Christ, the very relationship between the substantial divine content and its representation changes: Christ does not represent this substantial content, God, he directly *is* God, which is why he no longer has to resemble God, to strive to be perfect and "like God." Recall the classic Marx brothers joke: "You look like Emmanuel Ravelli." "But I am Emmanuel Ravelli." "Well no wonder you look like him. But I still insist there is a resemblance." The underlying premise of this joke is that such an overlapping of being and resembling is impossible, there is always a gap between the two. Buddha, Socrates, etc., resemble Gods, while Christ *is* God. So when the Christian God "manifests himself to other men as an individual man, exclusive and single . . . like a man excluding all others,"[60] we are dealing with the singularity of a pure event, with contingency brought to an extreme—only in this mode, excluding all efforts to approach universal perfection, can God incarnate itself. This absence of any positive characteristics, this full identity of God and man at the level of properties, can only occur because another, more radical, difference makes any positive differential features irrelevant. This change can be nicely rendered as the shift from the upward movement of the becoming-essential of the accident to the downward movement of the becoming-accidental of the essence (119): the Greek hero, this "exemplary individual," elevates his accidental personal features into a paradigmatic case of the essential universality, while in the Christian logic of incarnation, the uni-

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60   G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 142. Numbers in parentheses later in the text refer to pages in this book.

versal Essence embodies itself in an accidental individual.

Another way to make this point is to say that the Greek gods appear to humans in human form, while the Christian God appears as human *to himself*. This is the crucial point: incarnation is for Hegel not a move by means of which God makes himself accessible or visible to humans, but a move in which God looks at himself from the (distorting) human perspective: "As God manifests himself to his own gaze, the specular presentation divides the divine self from itself, offering the divine the perspectival vision of its own self-presence" (118). Or, to put it in Freudian-Lacanian terms: Christ is God's "partial object," an autonomized organ without a body, as if God has plucked his eye out of his head and turned it to look at himself from the outside. We can guess, now, why Hegel insisted on the monstrosity of Christ.

Kino-Eye (*Kinoglaz*), Dziga Vertov's silent classic from 1924 (one of the highpoints of revolutionary cinema), takes as its emblem the eye (of the camera) as an "autonomous organ" wandering around the Soviet Union in the early 1920s, showing us snippets of life under the NEP ("new economic policy"). Recall the common expression "to cast an eye over something," with its literal implication of picking the eye out of its socket and throwing it around. Martin, the legendary idiot from French fairy tales, did exactly this when his mother, worried that he would never find a wife, told him to go to church and cast an eye over the girls there. So Martin first goes to the butcher to purchase a pig eye, and then throws it around over the girls at prayer in the church—no wonder he later reports to his mother that the girls were not too impressed by his behavior. This, precisely, is what revolutionary cinema should be doing: using the camera as a partial object, as an "eye" torn from the subject and freely thrown around—or, to quote Vertov himself: "The film camera drags the eyes of the audience from the hands to the feet, from

the feet to the eyes and so on in the most profitable order, and it organises the details into a regular montage exercise."[61]

We all know those uncanny moments in our everyday lives when we catch sight of our own image and this image is not looking back at us. I remember once trying to inspect a strange growth on the side of my head using a double mirror, when, all of a sudden, I caught a glimpse of my face in profile. The image replicated all my gestures, but in a weird uncoordinated way. In such a situation, "our specular image is torn away from us and, crucially, our look is no longer looking at ourselves."[62] It is in such weird experiences that one catches what Lacan called the gaze as *objet petit a*, the part of our image which eludes the mirror-like symmetrical relationship. When I see myself "from outside," from this impossible point, the traumatic feature is not that I am objectivized, reduced to an external object for the gaze, but, rather, that it is my gaze itself which is objectivized, which observes me from the outside, which, precisely, means that my gaze is no longer mine, that it is stolen from me. There is a relatively simple and painless eye operation which, nonetheless, involves a very unpleasant experience: under local anesthetic, i.e., with the patient's full awareness, the eye is taken out of the socket and turned around in the air a little bit (in order to correct the way the eye-ball is attached to the brain)—at this moment, the patient can for a brief moment see (parts of) himself from outside, from an "objective" viewpoint, as a strange object, the way he "really is" as an object in the world, not the way one usually experiences oneself as fully embedded "in" one's body. There is something divine in this (very unpleasant) experience: one

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61   Quoted in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, eds., *The Film Factory* (London: Routledge, 1988), 92.

62   Darian Leader, *Stealing the Mona Lisa: What Art Stops Us from Seeing* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 142.

sees oneself as if from a divine viewpoint, somehow realizing the mystical motto according to which the eye through which I see God is the eye through which God sees himself. Something homologous to this weird experience, applied to God himself, occurs in the incarnation.

In the Strugatsky brothers' novel *The Roadside Picnic*, on which Andrei Tarkovsky's masterpiece *Stalker* is based, the "Zones"—there are six of these secluded areas—are locations containing the debris of a "roadside picnic," i.e., of a short stay on our planet by some alien visitors who quickly left it, finding us uninteresting. In the novel, the Stalkers are more adventurous and down-to-earth than in the film, not individuals on a tormenting spiritual search, but deft scavengers organizing robbing expeditions, somehow like the proverbial Arabs organizing raiding expeditions into the Pyramids (another Zone) for wealthy Westerners—are the Pyramids not, according to popular science literature, effectively traces of an alien wisdom? The Zone is thus not a purely mental fantasmatic space in which one encounters (or onto which one projects) the truth about oneself, but (like the planet Solaris in Stanislav Lem's novel of the same name, the source for another Tarkovsky sci-fi masterpiece) the material presence, the Real of an absolute Otherness incompatible with the rules and laws of our universe. Because of this, at the novel's end, the Stalker, when confronted with the "Golden Sphere"—as the Room in which desires are realized is called—does undergo a kind of spiritual conversion, but this experience is much closer to what Lacan called "subjective destitution": an abrupt awareness of the utter meaningless of our social links, the dissolution of our attachment to reality itself—all of a sudden, other people are de-realized, reality itself is experienced as a confused whirlpool of shapes and sounds, so that we are no longer able to formulate our desire.

It is to this incompatibility between our own and the alien

universe that the novel's title (*The Roadside Picnic*) refers: the strange objects found in the Zones, and which fascinate humans, are in all probability simply the debris, the garbage left behind after aliens have briefly stayed on our planet, comparable to the rubbish a group of humans leaves behind after a picnic in a forest near a main road. The typical Tarkovskian landscape (of decaying human debris half reclaimed by nature) is in the novel precisely what characterizes the Zone itself from the (impossible) stand-point of the visiting aliens: what to us is a Miracle, an encounter with a wondrous universe beyond our grasp, is just everyday debris to the aliens. Is it then, perhaps, possible to draw the Brechtian conclusion that the typical Tarkovskian landscape (the human environment in decay reclaimed by nature) involves the view of our universe from an imagined alien standpoint? Again, the same goes for the incarnation: in it, the divine object coin-cides with human debris (a common destitute preacher social-izing with beggars, whores, and other social losers).

It is therefore crucial to note how the Christian modality of "God seeing himself" has nothing whatsoever to do with the har-monious closed loop of "seeing myself seeing," of an eye seeing itself and enjoying the sight in this perfect self-mirroring: the turn of the eye towards "its" body presupposes the separation of the eye from the body, and what I see through my externalized/ autonomized eye is a perspectival, anamorphically distorted image of myself: Christ is an anamorphosis of God.

Another indication of this externality of God with regard to himself is pointed out by G. K. Chesterton in his "The Meaning of the Crusade," where he quotes with approval the description he heard from a child in Jerusalem of the Mount of Olives: "A child from one of the villages said to me, in broken English, that it was the place where God said his prayers. I for one could not ask for a finer or more defiant statement of all that separates the Chris-

tian from the Moslem or the Jew."[63] If, in other religions, we pray to God, only in Christianity does God himself pray, that is to say, address an external unfathomable authority.

The crucial problem is how to think the link between the two "alienations"—the one of modern man from God (who is reduced to an unknowable In-itself, absent from the world subjected to mechanical laws), the other of God from himself (in Christ, in the incarnation)—they are *the same*, although not symmetrically, but as subject and object. In order for (human) subjectivity to emerge out of the substantial personality of the human animal, cutting links with it and positing itself as the I = I dispossessed of all substantial content, as the self-relating negativity of an empty singularity, God himself, the universal Substance, has to "humiliate" himself, to fall into his own creation, "objectivize" himself, to appear as a singular miserable human individual, in all its abjection, i.e., abandoned by God. The distance of man from God is thus the distance of God from himself:

> The suffering of God and the suffering of human subjectivity deprived of God must be analysed as the recto and verso of the same event. There is a fundamental relationship between divine kenosis and the tendency of modern reason to posit a beyond which remains inaccessible. The Encyclopaedia makes this relation visible by presenting the Death of God at once as the Passion of the Son who "dies in the pain of negativity" and the human feeling that we can know nothing of God.[64]

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63   G. K. Chesterton, "The Meaning of the Crusade," in *The New Jerusalem* available at http://www.online-literature.com/chesterton/new-jerusalem/11

64   Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 103.

This double kenosis is what the standard Marxist critique of religion as the self-alienation of humanity misses: "modern philosophy would not have its own subject if God's sacrifice had not occurred."[65] For modern subjectivity to emerge—not as a mere epiphenomenon of the global substantial ontological order, but as essential to Substance itself—the split, negativity, particularization, self-alienation, must be posited as something that takes place in the very heart of the divine Substance, i.e., the move from Substance to Subject must occur within God himself. In short, man's alienation from God (the fact that God appears to him as an inaccessible In-itself, as a pure transcendent Beyond) must coincide with the alienation of God from himself (the most poignant expression of which is, of course, Christ's "Father, father, why have you forsaken me?" on the cross): finite human "consciousness only represents God because God re-presents itself; consciousness is only at a distance from God because God distances himself from himself."[66]

This is why the standard Marxist philosophy oscillates between the ontology of "dialectical materialism," which reduces human subjectivity to a particular ontological sphere (no wonder that Georgi Plekhanov, the creator of the term "dialectical materialism," also designated Marxism as "dynamized Spinozism"), and the philosophy of praxis which, from the young Georg Lukács onward, takes as its starting point and horizon a collective subjectivity which posits/mediates every objectivity, and is thus unable to think its genesis from the substantial order—the ontological explosion, or "Big Bang," which gives rise to it.

So when Catherine Malabou writes that Christ's death is "at once the death of the God-man and the Death of the initial and immediate abstraction of the divine being which is not yet pos-

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65   Ibid., 111.
66   Ibid., 112.

ited as a Self,"[67] this means that, as Hegel pointed out, what dies on the cross is not only the terrestrial-finite representative of God, but God himself, the very transcendent God of beyond. Both terms of the opposition—Father and Son, the substantial God as the Absolute In-itself and the God-for-us, revealed to us—die, are sublated in the Holy Spirit.

The standard reading of this sublation—Christ "dies" (is sublated) as the immediate representation of God, as God in the guise of a finite human person, in order to be reborn as the universal/atemporal Spirit—remains all too short. The point this reading misses is the ultimate lesson to be learned from the divine incarnation: the finite existence of mortal humans is the only site of the Spirit, the site where Spirit achieves its actuality. What this means is that, in spite of all its grounding power, Spirit is a virtual entity in the sense that its status is that of a subjective presupposition: it exists only insofar as subjects act as if it exists. Its status is similar to that of an ideological cause like Communism or the Nation: it is the substance of the individuals who recognize themselves in it, the ground of their entire existence, the point of reference which provides the ultimate horizon of meaning to their lives, something for which these individuals are ready to give their lives, yet the only thing that really exists are these individuals and their activity, so this substance is actual only insofar as individuals believe in it and act accordingly. The crucial mistake to be avoided, therefore, is to read the Hegelian Spirit as a kind of meta-Subject, as a Mind, much larger than an individual human mind, aware of itself: once we do this, Hegel has to appear as a ridiculous spiritualist obscurantist, claiming that there is a kind of mega-Spirit controlling our history. Against this cliché, we should emphasize how Hegel is fully aware that "it

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67   Ibid., 107.

is in the finite consciousness that the process of knowing spirit's essence takes place and that the divine self-consciousness thus arises. Out of the foaming ferment of finitude, spirit rises up fragrantly."[68] This holds especially for the Holy Spirit: our aware-ness, the (self)consciousness of finite humans, is its only actual site, i.e., the Holy Spirit also rises up "out of the foaming ferment of finitude."

We can see apropos this case how sublation is not directly the sublation of otherness, its return into the same, its recupera-tion by the One (so that, in this case, finite/mortal individuals are reunited with God, returned to his embrace). With Christ's incarnation, the externalization/self-alienation of divinity, the passage from the transcendent God to finite/mortal individuals is a *fait accompli*, there is no way back—from now on, all there is, all that "really exists," are individuals, there are no Platonic Ideas or Substances whose existence is somehow "more real." What is "sublated" in the move from the Son to the Holy Spirit is thus God himself: after the crucifixion, the death of the incarnated God, the universal God returns as the Spirit of the community of believers, i.e., *He* is the one who passes from being a transcen-dent substantial Reality to a virtual/ideal entity which exists only as the "presupposition" of acting individuals. The standard perception of Hegel as an organicist holist who thinks that really existing individuals are just "predicates" of some "higher" sub-stantial Whole, epiphenomena of the Spirit conceived as a mega-Subject who effectively runs the show, totally misses this crucial point.

For Hegel, this co-dependence of the two aspects of kenosis— God's self-alienation and the alienation from God of the human individual who experiences himself as alone in a godless world,

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68   Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III, 233.

abandoned by God who dwells in some inaccessible transcendent Beyond—reaches its highest tension in Protestantism. Protestantism and the Enlightenment critique of religious superstitions are two sides of the same coin. The starting point of this entire movement is the medieval Catholic thought of someone like Thomas Aquinas, for whom philosophy should be a handmaiden of faith: faith and knowledge, theology and philosophy, supplement each other as a harmonious, non-conflictual distinction within (under the predominance of) theology. Although God in himself remains an unfathomable mystery for our limited cognitive capacities, reason can also guide us towards him by enabling us to recognize the traces of God in created reality— therein resides the premise of Aquinas's five versions of the proof of God (the rational observation of material reality as a network of causes and effects leads us to the necessary insight that there must be a primal Cause to it all, etc.). With Protestantism, this unity breaks apart: we have on the one side the godless universe, the proper object of our reason, and the unfathomable divine Beyond separated by a hiatus from it. When confronted with this break, we can do two things: either we deny any meaning to an otherworldly Beyond, dismissing it as a superstitious illusion, or we remain religious and exempt our faith from the domain of reason, conceiving it as an act of, precisely, pure faith (authentic inner feeling, etc.). What interests Hegel here is how this tension between philosophy (enlightened rational thought) and religion ends up in their "mutual debasement and bastardization" (109). Reason seems to be on the offensive and religion on the defensive, desperately trying to find a place for itself outside the domain under the control of Reason: under the pressure of the Enlightenment critique and the advance of science, religion humbly retreats into the inner space of authentic feelings. However, the ultimate price is paid by Enlightened Reason itself: its

defeat of religion ends with its self-defeat, its self-limitation, so that, at the conclusion of this entire movement, the gap between faith and knowledge reappears, but transposed into the field of knowledge (Reason) itself:

> After its battle with religion the best reason could manage was to take a look at itself and come to self-awareness. Reason, having in this way become mere intellect, acknowledges its own nothingness by placing that which is better than it in a faith outside and above itself, as a Beyond to be believed in. This is what has happened in the philosophies of Kant, Jacobi and Fichte. Philosophy has made itself the handmaiden of a faith once more.[69]

Both poles are thus debased: Reason becomes mere "intellect," a tool for manipulating empirical objects, a mere pragmatic instrument of the human animal, and religion becomes an impotent inner feeling which cannot ever be fully actualized, since the moment one tries to transpose it into external reality, one regresses to Catholic idolatry which fetishizes contingent natural objects. The epitome of this development is Kant's philosophy: Kant started out as the great destroyer, with his ruthless critique of theology, but ended up—as he himself put it—constraining the scope of Reason to create a space for faith. What he displays in a model way is how the Enlightenment's ruthless denigration and limitation of its external enemy (faith, which is denied any cognitive status—religion is a feeling with no cognitive truth value) inverts into Reason's self-denigration and self-limitation (Reason can only legitimately deal with the objects of phenom-

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69   G. W. F. Hegel. *Theologian of the Spirit*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 55–6.

enal experience, true Reality is inaccessible to it). The Protestant insistence on faith alone, on how the true temples and altars to God should be built in the heart of the individual, not in external reality, is an indication of how the anti-religious Enlightenment attitude cannot resolve "its own problem, the problem of subjectivity gripped by absolute solitude."[70] The ultimate result of the Enlightenment is thus the absolute singularity of the subject dispossessed of all substantial content, reduced to the empty point of self-relating negativity, a subject totally alienated from the substantial content, including *its own* content. And, for Hegel, the passage through this zero-point is necessary, since the solution is not provided by any kind of renewed synthesis or reconciliation between Faith and Reason: with the advent of modernity, the magic of the enchanted universe is forever lost, gray reality is here to stay. The only solution is, as we have already seen, the very redoubling of alienation, the insight into how my alienation *from* the Absolute overlaps with the Absolute's self-alienation: I am "in" God in my very distance from him.

It was without doubt Kierkegaard who pushed to extreme this divine parallax tension, best encapsulated in his notion of the "teleological suspension of the ethical." In "The Ancient Tragical Motif as Reflected in the Modern," a chapter in Volume I of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard proposed his fantasy of what a modern Antigone would have been.[71] The conflict is now entirely internalized: there is no longer a need for Creon. While Antigone admires and loves her father Oedipus, the public hero and savior of Thebes, she knows the truth about him (the murder of his father, his incestuous marriage). Her deadlock is that she is prevented

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70   Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, 114.
71   Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Volume I (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 137–162.

from sharing this accursed knowledge (like Abraham, who also could not communicate to others the divine injunction to sacrifice his son): she cannot complain, or share her pain and sorrow with others. In contrast to Sophocles' Antigone who acts (to bury her brother and thus actively assume her fate), she is unable to act, condemned forever to impassive suffering. This unbearable burden of her secret, of her destructive agalma, finally drives her to death, in which alone she finds the peace otherwise provided by symbolizing or sharing her pain and sorrow. Kierkegaard's point is that this situation is no longer properly tragic (again, in a similar way, Abraham is also not a tragic figure). Furthermore, insofar as Kierkegaard's Antigone is a paradigmatically modernist one, we can go on with this mental experiment and imagine a postmodern Antigone, with, of course, a Stalinist twist: in contrast to the modernist one, she would find herself in a position in which, to quote Kierkegaard himself, the ethical itself would be the temptation. One version would undoubtedly be for Antigone to publicly renounce, denounce, and accuse her father (or, in a different version, her brother Polynices) of his terrible sins, *out of her unconditional love for him*. The Kierkegaardian catch is that such a *public* act would render Antigone even more *isolated*, absolutely alone: no one—with the exception of Oedipus himself, if he were still alive—would understand that her act of betrayal was the supreme act of love . . . Antigone would thus be entirely deprived of her sublime beauty—all that would signal the fact that she was not a pure and simple traitor to her father, that she acted out of love for him, would become some barely perceptible repulsive tic, like the hysteric twitch of Sygne de Coufontaine's lips in Claudel's *The Hostage*—a tic that no longer belongs to the face, but is a grimace whose insistence disintegrates the unity of a face.

It is precisely on account of the parallax nature of Kierkegaard's thought that, apropos his "triad" of the Aesthetic, the Ethical, and

the Religious, one should bear in mind how the choice, the "either-or," is always between the two—either the first two (Aesthetic or Ethical) or the second two (Ethical or Religious). The true problem is not the choice between the aesthetic and ethical levels (pleasure versus duty), but between the ethical and its religious suspension: it is easy to do one's duty against one's desire for pleasure or egotistic interests; it is much more difficult to obey the unconditional ethico-religious call against one's very ethical substance. (This is the dilemma faced by Sygne de Coufontaine as well as the extreme paradox of Christianity as *the* religion of modernity: like Julia in Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, to remain faithful to one's unconditional Duty, one should indulge in what may appear to be an aesthetic regression or opportunistic betrayal.) In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard gives no clear priority to the Ethical, he merely confronts the two choices, that of the Aesthetic and of the Ethical, in a purely parallax way, emphasizing the "jump" that separates them, the lack of any mediation between them. The Religious is by no means the mediating "synthesis" of the two, but, on the contrary, the radical assertion of the parallax gap (or "paradox," the lack of common measure, the insurmountable abyss between the Finite and the Infinite). That is to say, what makes the Aesthetic or the Ethical problematic is not their respective positive characteristics, but their very formal nature: the fact that, in both cases, the subject wants to live a consistent mode of existence and thus disavows the radical antagonism of the human situation. This is why Julia's choice at the end of *Brideshead Revisited* is properly religious, even though, in its immediate appearance, it is a choice of the Aesthetic (passing love affairs) against the Ethical (marriage): what matters is that she has confronted and fully assumed the paradox of human existence. What this means is that her act involves a "leap of faith": there is no guarantee that her retreat into passing love affairs is not just that—a retreat from the Ethical to the Aesthetic

(in the same way there is no guarantee that Abraham's decision to kill Isaac is not a result of his private madness). We are never safely within the Religious, doubt forever remains, and the same act can be seen as religious or as aesthetic, in a parallax split which can never be abolished, since the "minimal difference" which transubstantiates (what appears to be) an aesthetic act into a religious one cannot ever be specified, located in a determinate property.

However, this very parallax split is itself caught in a parallax: it can be viewed as condemning us to permanent anxiety, but also as something inherently comical. This is why Kierkegaard insisted on the comical character of Christianity: Is there anything more comical than the incarnation, this ridiculous overlapping of the Highest and the Lowest, the coincidence of God, creator of the universe, with a miserable man?[72] Recall the elementary comic scene from a film: after the trumpets announce the King's entry into the royal hall, the surprised public sees a miserable crippled clown come staggering in . . . this is the logic of incarnation. The only proper Christian comment on Christ's death is thus: *La commedia è finita* . . . And, again, the point is that the gap that separates God from man in Christ is purely that of a parallax: Christ is not a person with two substances, immortal and mortal. Perhaps this would also be one way to distinguish between pagan Gnosticism and Christianity: the problem with Gnosticism is that it is all too serious in developing its narrative of an ascent towards Wisdom, that it misses the humorous side of religious experience—Gnostics are Christians who miss the joke of Christianity . . . (And, incidentally, this is why Mel Gibson's *Passion* is ultimately an anti-Christian film: it totally lacks this comic aspect.)

As is often the case, Kierkegaard is here unexpectedly close

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72   See Thomas C. Oden, ed., *The Humor of Kierkegaard. An Anthology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

to his official big opponent, Hegel, for whom the passage from tragedy to comedy concerns overcoming the limits of representation: while, in a tragedy, the individual actor represents the universal character he plays, in a comedy, he immediately *is* this character. The gap of representation is thus closed, exactly as in the case of Christ who, in contrast to previous pagan divinities, does not "represent" some universal power or principle (as in Hinduism, in which Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva, etc., all "stand for" certain spiritual principles or powers—love, hatred, reason): as this miserable human, Christ directly *is* God. Christ is not also human, apart from being a god; he is a man precisely insofar as he is God, i.e., the *ecce homo is* the highest mark of his divinity. There is thus an objective irony in Pontius Pilatus's *Ecce homo!*, when he presents Christ to the enraged mob: its meaning is not "Look at this miserable tortured creature? Do you not see in it a simple vulnerable man? Have you not any compassion for it?," but, rather, "Here is God himself!"

In a comedy, however, the actor does not coincide with the person he plays in the way that he plays himself on the stage, in the sense that he simply is what he really is on the stage. It is rather that, in a properly Hegelian way, the gap which separates the actor from his stage persona in a tragedy is transposed into the stage persona itself: a comic character is never fully identified with his role, he always retains the ability to observe himself from outside, "making fun of himself." (Recall the immortal Lucy from *I Love Lucy*, whose trademark gesture, when something surprised her, was to slightly bend her neck and cast a direct fixed gaze of surprise into the camera—this was not Lucille Ball, the actress, mockingly addressing the public, but an attitude of self-estrangement that was part of "Lucy," as a screen persona, herself.) This is how the Hegelian "reconciliation" works: not as an immediate synthesis or reconciliation of opposites, but as a redoubling of the gap or antagonism—the two opposed

moments are "reconciled" when the gap that separates them is pos-
ited as inherent to one of the terms. In Christianity, the gap that
separates God from man is not effectively "sublated" in the figure
of Christ as god-man, but only in the most tense moment of cruci-
fixion when Christ himself despairs ("Father, why have you forsaken
me?"): in this moment, the gap is transposed into God himself, as
the gap that separates Christ from God the Father; the properly dia-
lectical trick here is that the very feature which appeared to separate
me from God turns out to unite me with God.

For Hegel, what happens in comedy is that the Universal
appears "as such," in direct contrast to the merely "abstract"
universal which is the "mute" universality of the passive link
(common feature) between particular moments. In other words,
in comedy, universality directly *acts*—how? Comedy does not
rely on the undermining of our dignity with reminders of the
ridiculous contingencies of our terrestrial existence; it is, on the
contrary, the full assertion of universality, the immediate coin-
cidence of universality with the character's or the actor's singu-
larity. That is to say, what effectively happens when, in a comedy,
all universal features of dignity are mocked and subverted? The
negative force that undermines them is that of the individual,
the hero with his attitude of disrespect towards all elevated
universal values, and this negativity itself becomes the only
true remaining universal force. And does the same not hold for
Christ? All stable-substantial universal features are undermined,
relativized, by his scandalous acts, so that the only remaining
universality is the one embodied in him, in his very singularity.
The universals undermined by Christ are "abstract" substantial
universals (presented in the guise of the Jewish Law), while the
"concrete" universality is the very negativity of undermining
abstract universals.

According to an anecdote from the May '68 period, there was

a piece of graffiti on a Paris wall: "God is dead—Nietzsche." Next day, another piece of graffiti appeared below it: "Nietzsche is dead—God." What is wrong with this joke? Why is it so obviously reactionary? It is not only that the reversed statement relies on a moralistic platitude with no inherent truth; its failure goes deeper, and concerns the form of reversal itself. What makes the joke a bad one is the pure symmetry of the reversal—the underlying claim of the first graffiti: "God is dead. Signed by (the obviously living) Nietzsche," is turned around into a statement which implies: "Nietzsche is dead, while I am still alive. Signed by God." Crucial for the proper comic effect is not difference where we expect sameness, but, rather, sameness where we expect difference—which is why, as Alenka Zupančič[73] has pointed out, the properly comic version of the joke would have been something like: "God is dead. And, as a matter of fact, I don't feel too well either. . . ." Is this not a comic version of Christ's complaint on the cross? Christ dies on the cross not to be rid of his mortal form and rejoin the divine; he dies because he is God. No wonder, then, that in the last years of his intellectual activity Nietzsche used to sign his texts and letters as "Christ": the proper comic supplement to his proclamation that "God is dead" would have been to make Nietzsche himself add to it: "And I don't feel too well either. . . .

From here, we can also elaborate a critique of the philosophy of finitude which predominates today. The idea is that, against the big metaphysical constructs, we should humbly accept our finitude as our ultimate horizon: there is no absolute Truth, all we can do is accept the contingency of our existence, the unsur-

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73 On whose essay "The 'Concrete Universal,' and What Comedy Can Tell Us About It" (in Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Lacan: The Silent Partners* [London: Verso Books, 2006]) I rely here.

passable character of our being thrown into a situation, the basic lack of any absolute point of reference, the playfulness of our predicament. However, the first thing that strikes the eye here is the utmost seriousness of this philosophy of finitude, its all-pervasive pathos which runs against the expected playfulness: the ultimate tone of this philosophy of finitude is that of an heroic and ultra-serious confrontation with one's destiny—no wonder that the philosopher of finitude par excellence, Heidegger, is also the one philosopher who utterly lacks any sense of humor. Significantly, the *only* joke—or, if not joke then at least moment of irony—in Heidegger occurs in his rather bad taste quip about Lacan as "that psychiatrist who is himself in need of a psychiatrist" (in a letter to Medard Boss). (There is, unfortunately, also a Lacanian version of the philosophy of finitude when, in a tragic tone, we are informed that we must renounce our impossible striving for full *jouissance* and accept "symbolic castration" as the ultimate constraint on our existence: as soon as we enter the symbolic order, all *jouissance* has to pass through the mortification of the symbolic medium, every attainable object is already a displacement of the impossible-real object of desire which is constitutively lost. . . .) Arguably, Kierkegaard relied so much on humor precisely because he insisted on the relationship to the Absolute and rejected the limitation of finitude.

So what is it that this emphasis on finitude misses? How can we assert immortality in a materialist way, without any resort to spiritual transcendence? The answer is, precisely, *objet petit a* as the "undead" ("non-castrated") remainder which persists in its obscene immortality. No wonder the Wagnerian heroes want so desperately to die: they want to get rid of this obscene immortal supplement which stands for the libido as an organ, for the drive at its most radical, i.e., the death drive. In other words, the properly Freudian paradox is that what explodes the constraints of our finitude is the death drive itself. So when Badiou, in his dis-

paraging dismissal of the philosophy of finitude, talks about the "positive infinity" and, in a Platonic way, celebrates the infinity of the generic productivity opened up by the fidelity to an Event, what, from a Freudian standpoint, he fails to take into account is the obscene insistence of the death drive as the true material(ist) support of the "positive infinity."

Of course, according to the standard view of the philosophy of finitude, Greek tragedy signals the acceptance of the gap, failure, defeat, non-closure, as the ultimate horizon of human existence, while Christian comedy relies on the certainty that a transcendent God guarantees a happy final outcome, the "sublation" of the gap, the reversal of failure into final triumph. The excess of divine rage as the obverse of Christian love allows us to perceive what this standard view misses: that the Christian comedy of love can only occur against the background of the radical loss of human dignity, of a degradation which, precisely, undermines the tragic experience: to experience a situation as "tragic" is only possible when the victim retains a minimum of dignity. This is why it is not only wrong, but also ethically obscene, to designate a Muselmann in the concentration camp or a victim of a Stalinist show trial as tragic—their predicament is all too terrible to deserve this designation. "Comical" also stands for a domain which emerges when the horror of a situation exceeds the confines of the tragic. And it is at this point that the properly Christian love enters: not the love for man as a tragic hero, but a love for the miserable abject to which a man or woman is reduced after being exposed to the arbitrary outburst of the divine rage.

This comical dimension is what is missing today in the fashionable Oriental spirituality—our present predicament finds its perfect expression in *Sandcastles: Buddhism and Global Finance*, a documentary by Alexander Oey (2005), a wonderfully ambiguous work which combines commentaries from economist Arnoud

Boot, sociologist Saskia Sassen, and the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Dzongzar Khyentse Rinpoche. Sassen and Boot discuss the gigantic scope, power, and socioeconomic effects of global finance: capital markets, now valued at an estimated $83 trillion, exist within a system based purely on self-interest, in which herd behavior, often based on rumors, can inflate or destroy the value of companies—or whole economies—in a matter of hours. Khyentse Rinpoche counters them with ruminations on the nature of human perception, illusion, and enlightenment; his philosophico-ethical statement, "Release your attachment to something that is not there in reality, but is a perception," is supposed to throw new light on the mad dance of billion-dollar speculations. Echoing the Buddhist notion that there is no Self, only a stream of continuous perceptions, Sassen comments of global capital: "It's not that there are $83 trillion. It is essentially a continuous set of movements. It disappears and it reappears. . . ."

The problem here, of course, is how to read this parallel between Buddhist ontology and the structure of virtual capitalism's universe. The film tends towards the humanist reading: seen through a Buddhist lens, the exuberance of global financial wealth is illusory, divorced from objective reality—the very real human suffering created by deals made on trading floors and in boardrooms is invisible to most of us. If, however, one accepts the premise that the value of material wealth, and one's experience of reality, is subjective, and that desire plays a decisive role in both daily life and neo-liberal economics, is it not possible to draw from it the exact opposite conclusion? Is it not that our traditional lifeworld was based on the naïve-realist substantialist notion of an external reality composed of fixed objects, while the unheard-of dynamics of "virtual capitalism" confronts us with the illusory nature of reality? What better proof of the non-substantial character of reality than a gigantic fortune dissolving into nothing in a

couple of hours, due to a sudden false rumor? Consequently, why complain that financial speculations with futures are "divorced from the objective reality," when the basic premise of Buddhist ontology *is* that there is no "objective reality"? The only "critical" lesson to be drawn from the Buddhist perspective on today's virtual capitalism is thus that we are dealing with a mere theater of shadows, with non-substantial virtual entities, and, consequently, that we should not fully engage ourselves in the capitalist game, that we should play it with an inner distance. Virtual capitalism could thus act as a first step towards liberation: it confronts us with the fact that the cause of our suffering and enslavement is not objective reality itself (there is no such thing), but our Desire, our craving for material things, our excessive attachment to them; all one has to do, after one gets rid of the false notion of a substantial reality, is thus to renounce one's desire itself, to adopt the attitude of inner peace and distance . . . No wonder such Buddhism functions as the perfect ideological supplement to today's virtual capitalism: it allows us to participate in it with an inner distance, with our fingers crossed as it were.

For decades, a classic joke has circulated among Lacanians which exemplifies the key role of the Other's knowledge: a man who believes himself to be a seed grain is taken to a mental institution where the doctors do their best to convince him that he is not a grain but a man. However, after he is finally cured and allowed to leave the hospital, he immediately comes back, trembling with fear—there is a chicken outside the door and he is afraid it will eat him. "Dear fellow," says his doctor, "you know very well that you are not a grain of seed but a man." "Of course I know that," replies the patient, "but does the chicken know it?" Therein resides the true test of psychoanalytic treatment: it is not enough to convince the patient of the unconscious truth of his symptoms, the Unconscious itself must be brought to assume

this truth. It is here that Hannibal Lecter, that proto-Lacanian, was wrong: it is not the silence of the lambs but the ignorance of chickens that is the subject's true traumatic core . . . Does exactly the same not hold for the Marxian notion of commodity fetishism? Here is the very beginning of the famous subdivision 4 of Chapter 1 of *Capital*, on "The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret": "A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."[74]

These lines should surprise us, since they turn around the standard procedure of demystifying a theological myth, reducing it to its terrestrial base: Marx does not claim, in the usual way of Enlightenment critique, that critical analysis should demonstrate how what appears as a mysterious theological entity in fact emerged out of "ordinary" real-life processes; he claims, on the contrary, that the task of the critical analysis is to unearth the "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" in what appears at first sight to be just an ordinary object. In other words, when a critical Marxist encounters a bourgeois subject immersed in commodity fetishism, the Marxist's reproach to him is not, "The commodity may seem to you to be a magical object endowed with special powers, but it is really just a reified expression of relations between people." It is, rather, "You may think that the commodity appears to you as a simple embodiment of social relations (that, for example, money is just a kind of voucher entitling you to a part of the social product), but this is not how things really seem to you—in your social reality, by means of your participation in social exchange, you bear witness to the uncanny fact that a commodity really appears to you as a magical object

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74   Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990), 163.

endowed with special powers." In other words, we can imagine a bourgeois subject taking a course on Marxism where he is taught about commodity fetishism; however, once the course is over he comes back to his teacher, complaining that he is still the victim of commodity fetishism. The teacher tells him: "But now you know how things stand, that commodities are only expressions of social relations, that there is nothing magical about them!" To which the pupil replies: "Of course *I* know all that, but the commodities I am dealing with seem not to know it!" This is the very situation evoked by Marx in his famous fiction of commodities that start to speak to each other:

> If commodities could speak, they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange-values.[75]

So, again, the true task is to convince not the subject, but the chicken-commodities: to change not the way we speak about commodities, but the way commodities speak among themselves . . . Alenka Zupančič goes here to the end and imagines a brilliant example that refers to God himself:

> In the enlightened society of, say, revolutionary terror, a man is put in prison because he believes in God. By various means, but above all by means of an enlightened explanation, he is brought to the knowledge that God does not exist. When he is freed, the

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man comes running back and explains how scared he is of being punished by God. Of course he knows that God does not exist, but does God know too?[76]

And, of course, this is exactly what happened (only) in Christianity, when, dying on the cross, Christ utters his "Father, father, why did you forsake me?"—here, for a brief moment, God himself does not believe in himself—or, as G. K. Chesterton put it in emphatic terms:

> When the world shook and the sun was wiped out of heaven, it was not at the crucifixion, but at the cry from the cross: the cry which confessed that God was forsaken of God. And now let the revolutionists choose a creed from all the creeds and a god from all the gods of the world, carefully weighing all the gods of inevitable recurrence and of unalterable power. They will not find another god who has himself been in revolt. Nay (the matter grows too difficult for human speech), but let the atheists themselves choose a god. They will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation; only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist.[77]

It is in this precise sense that today's era is perhaps less atheist than any prior one: we are all ready to indulge in utter skepticism and cynical distance, the exploitation of others "without any illusions," the violation of all ethical constraints, extreme sexual practices, etc.—protected by the silent awareness that the big Other is ignorant of it:

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76   Zupančić, "The 'Concrete Universal'," 173.
77   G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 145.

> The subject is ready to do quite a lot, change radically, if only she can remain unchanged in the Other (in the Symbolic as the external world in which, to put it in Hegel's terms, the subject's consciousness of herself is embodied, materialized as something that still does not know itself as consciousness). In this case, belief in the Other (in the modern form of believing that the Other does not know) is precisely what helps to maintain the same state of things, regardless of all subjective mutations and permutations. The subject's universe will really change only at the moment when she attains the knowledge that the Other knows (that it does not exist).[78]

Niels Bohr, who gave the right answer to Einstein's "God doesn't play dice" ("Don't tell God what to do!"), also provided the perfect example of how a fetishist disavowal of belief works in ideology: seeing a horseshoe on his door, the surprised visitor said that he didn't believe in the superstition that it brings good luck, to which Bohr snapped back: "Of course not, but I've been told that it works even if one doesn't believe in it!" What this paradox makes clear is the way a belief is a reflexive attitude: it is never a case of simply believing—one has to believe in belief itself. Which is why Kierkegaard was right to claim that we do not really believe (in Christ), we just believe we believe—Bohr just confronts us with the logical negative of this reflexivity (one can also *not* believe one's beliefs . . .).

At this point, Alcoholics Anonymous meets Pascal: "Fake it until you make it." However, this causality by habit is more complex than it may appear: far from offering an explanation of how beliefs emerge, it itself calls for an explanation. The first thing

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78   Zupančič, "The 'Concrete Universal'," 174.

to clarify is that Pascal's "Kneel down and you will believe!" has to be understood as involving a kind of self-referential causality: "Kneel down and you will believe that you knelt down because you believed!" The second thing is that, in the "normal" cynical functioning of ideology, belief is displaced onto another, onto a "subject supposed to believe," so that the true logic is: "Kneel down and you will thereby *make someone else believe*!" One has to take this literally and even risk a kind of inversion of Pascal's formula: "You believe too much, or too directly? You find your belief too oppressing in its raw immediacy? Then kneel down, act as if you believe, and *you will get rid of your belief*—you will no longer have to believe yourself, your belief will already exist objectified in your act of praying!" That is to say, what if one kneels down and prays not so much to regain one's own belief but, on the contrary, to *get rid* of it, to gain a minimal distance from its over-proximity, a breathing space? To believe "directly"—without the externalizing mediation of a ritual—is a heavy, oppressive, traumatic burden, which, through a ritual, one has a chance of transferring onto an Other. If there is a Freudian ethical injunction, it is that one should have the courage of one's own convictions, one should dare to fully assume one's identifications. And exactly the same goes for marriage: the implicit presupposition (or, rather, injunction) of the standard ideology of marriage is precisely that there should be no love in it. The Pascalian formula of marriage is therefore not: "You don't love your partner? Then marry him or her, go through the ritual of a shared life, and love will emerge by itself!" but, on the contrary: "Are you too much in love with somebody? Then get married, ritualize your relationship in order to cure yourself of the excessive passionate attachment to replace it with boring daily customs—and if you find you cannot resist passion's temptation, there always are extra-marital affairs. . . ."

This brings us to so-called "fundamentalism," the opposite

of the "tolerant" attitude of displaced belief: here, the "normal" functioning of ideology in which the ideological belief is transposed onto the Other is disturbed by the violent return of the immediate belief—the fundamentalist "really believes it." Or do they? What if neo-obscurantist faith in all its forms, from conspiracy theories to irrational mysticisms, emerges when faith itself, the basic reliance on the big Other, the symbolic order, fails? Is this not the case today?

This brings us to the formula of fundamentalism: what is foreclosed from the symbolic (belief), returns in the real (of a direct knowledge). A fundamentalist does not believe, he *knows* directly. To put it in another way: liberal-skeptical cynicism and fundamentalism both *share* a basic underlying feature: the loss of the ability to believe in the proper sense of the term. For both of them, religious statements are quasi-empirical statements of direct knowledge: fundamentalists accept them as such, while skeptical cynics mock them. What is unthinkable for them is the "absurd" act of *decision* which installs every authentic belief, a decision which cannot be grounded in the chain of "reasons," in positive knowledge: the "sincere hypocrisy" of Anne Frank who, in the face of the terrifying depravity of the Nazis, in a true act of *credo quia absurdum*, asserted her belief in the fundamental goodness of all humans. No wonder that religious fundamentalists are among the most passionate digital hackers, and always prone to combine their religion with the latest scientific advances: for them, religious statements and scientific statements belong to the same modality of positive knowledge. (In this sense, the status of "universal human rights" is also that of a pure belief: they cannot be grounded in our knowledge of human nature, they are an axiom posited by our decision.) One is thus compelled to draw the paradoxical conclusion: in the opposition between traditional secular humanists and religious fundamentalists, it

is the humanists who stand for belief, while the fundamental-
ists stand for knowledge—in short, the true danger of funda-
mentalism does not reside in the fact that it poses a threat to
secular scientific knowledge, but in the fact that it poses a threat
to authentic belief itself.

6

The Thrilling Romance of Radical Orthodoxy— Spiritual Exercises
Gunjević

This is the thrilling romance of Orthodoxy. People have fallen into a foolish habit of speaking of orthodoxy as something heavy, humdrum, and safe. There never was anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy.[79]

Today we seldom reach for G. K. Chesterton when speaking of Christian orthodoxy as something at once romantic, thrilling, and perilous, yet these are the terms used to describe the contemporary Anglo-Catholic movement known as Radical Orthodoxy, an academic initiative begun at Cambridge University in the late 1990s. In a general sense we could speak of sensibility, metaphysical vision, cultural politics, and hermeneutic disposition. The *bricolage* of Radical Orthodoxy consists of seemingly "heterogeneous" tools such as participative ontology, illuminative epistemology, patrological exegesis, cultural reflection, liturgical aesthetics, political and "postmodern" theory. For himself, John Milbank says that he wishes "to articulate a more incarnational, participative, aesthetical, a more erotic, a more social-

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79   G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1995), 152.

ized, an even more platonized Christianity."[80] Milbank will also say that Radical Orthodoxy is a movement of mediation and protest. Whether this be intellectual, ecumenical, cultural, or political mediation, whether the protest be against insistence on pure faith or pure reason, Radical Orthodoxy protests, by way of mediation, the apparently extreme positions typical for modern thought. Radical Orthodoxy counters a theology that functions as an autistic idiolect of the Church as well as a theology that embraces the assumptions of secularism without questioning them. In comparison to other forms of modern theology, Radical Orthodoxy is less adaptable to the autonomous realities of secular discourse, yet at the same time more mediating, participating, and intensifying, while refusing to Christianize nihilism as does contemporary negative theology. This is what its proposed theological framework looks like:

> The central theological framework for Radical Orthodoxy is "participation" as developed by Plato and reworked by Christianity, because any alternative configuration perforce reserves a territory independent of God. The latter can lead only to nihilism (though in different guises). Participation, however, refuses any reserve of created territory, while allowing infinite things their own integrity . . . the idea [is] that every discipline must be framed by a theological perspective; otherwise these disciplines will define a zone apart from God, grounded literally in nothing.[81]

Radical Orthodoxy does not limit theology to a purely exegetic

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80   John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 3.

81   Ibid., 3.

interpretation of the Bible according to its own founded logic, nor does it see theology as a useful crutch in the service of church teachings. Its intention is a radicalization of these juxtaposed positions so that by way of mediation it reaches a third option which would not be apologetic but rather radically transformative and intensely imaginative. From this statement may be extrapolated an important fact. For Radical Orthodoxy, theology is the only metadiscourse that can position all other discourses in such a way that they do not culminate in nihilism. Despite the secular announcement of the death of God and the lack of a call for theology in public space, Radical Orthodoxy "seeks to reconfigure theological truth."[82] Graham Ward sums this up as follows:

> Radical Orthodoxy is involved in reading the signs of the times in such a way. It looks at "sites" that we have invested much cultural capital in—the body, sexuality, relationships, desire, painting, music, the city, the natural, the political—and it reads them in terms of the grammar of the Christian faith; a grammar that might be summed up in the various creeds. In this way Radical Orthodoxy must view its own task as not only doing theology but being itself theological—participating in the redemption of Creation, by being engaged in the gathering of different *logoi* into the *Logos*.[83]

Orthodox means commitment to confessional formulae that are defined at ecumenical councils and situated in a universal patristic matrix of theology and practice which endured a complex sys-

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82   Ibid., 1.
83   Graham Ward, "Radical Orthodoxy and/as Cultural Politics," in Laurence Paul Hemming, ed., *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Enquiry* (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2000), 103.

tematization in the early Middle Ages prior to 1100. Orthodoxy is also understood as a practical theological model, breaking out of and transcending the narrow confessional boundaries established during the post-Reformation and Baroque eras. Milbank, in the context of a critique of post-Reformation theology, would speak of Radical Orthodoxy as an attempt at constructing an "alternative Protestantism."

Radical means a return to roots. This means, first of all, a return to the vision of Augustine, Maximus, and, somewhat, Aquinas, of knowledge as divine illumination and participation in the divine *logos*. For Milbank, this understanding of theological epistemology is one of the essential tools for a critique of the contemporary modernist understanding of culture, politics, art, science, and philosophy. Radical means embracing the *catholic* Christian tradition, especially the forgotten part of that tradition within which we might set apart authors such as Johannes Scotus Eriugena and Nicolas of Cusa on the one hand, and, on the other, Giambatista Vico, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Ruskin, or Charles Péguy, who with their specific view of Christianity questioned Enlightenment decadence and secular Gnosticism.

John Milbank is of the opinion that orthodoxy makes no sense without a radicality which only Christianity can bring to it. Christianity and its practice cannot be compared to all other historically tragic forms of radicalism, because the Christian *agape* sets itself above any law. This means that Christianity establishes a person-in-process before it understands the person as an isolated or collective individual instrumentalized or subordinated to collective and technocratic interests. Orthodoxy enables and creates an *interpersonal* community placing the person in the *mystical and metaphysical body* of the community, which is, at the same time, the *locus of truth* that connects the pastoral, economic, and political. Otherwise, without the help of a Christian meta-

physical participation everything would drown in neo-pagan individualism which, through a false concern for the corporeal, enslaves with utilitarian forms of technocratic control, creating an illusion of freedom and safety. Milbank asserts that the radical in orthodoxy means a serious receptivity to the meaning of a proper understanding of its integrity. This seriousness implies a radicalization of orthodoxy itself in two almost contradictory, yet interrelated, ways.

The first consists of reflecting on the *unfinishedness of theological discourse*. The English theologian argues that Christian doctrine is not *finished*, demonstrating this with the examples of Christ's incarnation and an ecclesial reading of the Scriptures. Milbank maintains that after his incarnation and *kenosis*, Christ is entirely "constituted by substantive relations"[84] to the Father and the Holy Spirit. These relations, he says, are still underexplored and that is why it is exceptionally important to reflect on an ontology of these relations which should not be interpreted in psychological categories. Furthermore, according to Milbank's thinking, we will never be able to read completely the infinite plenitude of meaning contained in the Scriptures that we read in a liturgical and contemplative way, as Henri de Lubac has said. This is a traditional reading of the Scriptures originating with Origen—a literary, historical, allegorical, and analogic reading in a medieval matrix. It is distinct from the abstract, ultra-modern, and *Sola Scriptura* Protestant reading that strives to preserve the boundaries of acceptable faith, conceptualizing the most plausible model for church practice. Milbank says that this ultra-Protestant reading of the Bible is every bit as perilous as the reading of the Qur'an.

The second way orthodoxy is radicalized is by calls for a redis-

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84   John Milbank and Simon Oliver, eds., *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader* (London: Routledge, 2009), 394.

covery and re-reading of authors whom Milbank describes as the *hyperbolically orthodox*, particularly Johannes Scotus Eriugena, Johannes Eckhart,[85] Nikolas of Cusa, Bede, in part, as well as Robert Grosseteste, Anselm, Ralph Cudworth, Søren Kierkegaard, and G.K. Chesterton. What these authors have in common, Milbank argues, is that in a specifically *concentrated* logic they think through the entire Christian doctrine, seeking and deeply probing the paradoxes of orthodoxy, and in doing so seem to be deviating from what they intend to study. This is the strategy pursued by Radical Orthodoxy. The hyperbolically orthodox consistently "push things further" and that is why we cannot now ignore them. In a very specific way they espouse a vision of universal cosmic salvation. This vision is compatible with the glory of God, or so Milbank argues, which is why it can deliver us from perverse regimes of truth and disciplining practices straying into deviant forms of control. The Englishman is aware that there are groups of people who will approve of and support the first way in which orthodoxy is radicalized. He is also aware that there will be those who will protest against the first way yet embrace the second. However, according to him, this is the very reason why Radical Orthodoxy exists, and it will attract those rare and romantic souls who are convinced that such a double radicalism is both "authentic and crucial" not only for the future of theology but for the future of Christianity. "For a Christian radicalism not promoting orthodoxy cannot be radical, but equally an orthodoxy that does not seek to radicalize itself continuously cannot be orthodox."[86] The following conclusions arise from these statements:

Radical Orthodoxy is primordially an ecumenical discourse which means to transcend an ecclesially crumbling Protestant

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85   Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2009), 189.

86   Milbank and Oliver, eds., *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, 395.

biblical fundamentalism and post-tridentine positivist author-
itarianism which are, according to Milbank, two unfinished
forms of authority in the church. Milbank says that Radical
Orthodoxy is not some rootless theology of ecumenism, nor
is it a dialogue between churches. We can understand Radical
Orthodoxy as an ecumenical theology "with a particular ecu-
menical diagnosis" which sets forth a set of concrete, theopo-
litical proposals. Understood in this way Radical Orthodoxy
is "the first ecumenical theology of modern times" which is
neither narrowly Protestant like neo-orthodoxy, nor narrowly
Catholic like new French theology. Although since its incep-
tion Radical Orthodoxy has been perceived to be an academic
movement, it is founded in Anglo-Catholic ecclesial practice
that remains open to a literal "catholic" orientation as defined
at the seven councils. This natural openness of the movement
consists primarily of its intention to include in its own dis-
course parts of the Orthodox theology and tradition that relate
to modern Russian religious philosophy. An important fact
emphasized by Radical Orthodoxy authors, especially Milbank,
is that they do not see themselves as anti-modernist conserva-
tives, but as those who are carrying on in deepening and broad-
ening the integral vision of reality espoused by the new French
theology led by Henri de Lubac.[87] New French theology is the
most important theology of the twentieth century, according
to Milbank, and de Lubac is its most authentic representative;
his conclusions, works, and insights should be broadened and
furthered. Radical Orthodoxy sees such furthering primarily
in terms of reviving the doctrines on the supernatural, the
allegorical reading of the Scriptures, and the ternary body of
Christ. Milbank has described this as follows:

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87   John Milbank, "The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy," in Hemming, ed.,
      Radical Orthodoxy?, 36.

> The transformation of theology in the pre-1300 situa-
> tion to the modern one will now be considered under
> three headings: the supernatural, the *corpus mys-*
> *ticum* and allegory. Through all these three headings
> runs a fourth, which will not be explicitly considered
> on its own, and this is participation. The first three
> categories derive mostly from the work of de Lubac,
> especially as re-interpreted by Michel de Certeau,
> Jean-Yves Lacoste and Olivier Boulnois. The fourth
> category derives in part from Erich Przywara, Sergej
> Bulgakov, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Rowan Williams
> and, again, Olivier Boulnois.
>
>   What is at issue under the first heading is the-
> ology between faith and reason; under the second,
> theology under ecclesial authority; under the third,
> theology between scripture and tradition.[88]

This clearly sets out the theological disposition of Radical
Orthodoxy which is broadened and deepened upon critical
examination: "This new approach was marked by serious consid-
eration of contemporary postmodern thought especially in its
French variants, but at the same time a preparedness to criti-
cize this thought from a theological vantage point."[89] It must be
mentioned that a theological critique of French postmodernism
began in the UK long before the appearance of Radical Ortho-
doxy. Graham Ward pursued this criticism largely in the early
nineties, and he went the furthest in his research. The texts pub-
lished by Milbank, Ward, and Pickstock were key for the publica-

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88   John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge,
     2003), 113.
89   Catherine Pickstock, "Reply to David Ford and Guy Collins," *Scottish Journal of*
     Theology 54: 3 (2009): 406.

tion of the collection *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* which in a specific way inaugurated the entire project.[90] *RONT*, as it is often called, was the third volume to come out, which brought nine more authors together within the Routledge publishing house. Routledge has played a pivotal role in the public presentation of *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, while the *Chronicle of Higher Education* has said that Radical Orthodoxy may well become the biggest development in theology since Luther's ninety-five theses.[91] Immediately after publishing this volume, Routledge inaugurated the "Radical Orthodoxy" series, with Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward as its editors. One of the series' authors later quipped that Radical Orthodoxy is a book series published by the Routledge publishing company, not a theological movement.

RONT was initially supposed to be called *Suspending the Material*. The editors wanted to avoid the pretentious wording of *A New Theology*, and in agreement with the publishers, for whom the title *Radical Orthodoxy* was very interesting, the volume was given the name it has today. This name was later given to the movement which for a time was known as the *Cambridge Movement*, a more than obvious nod to the Oxford movement of Cardinal Newman. The essays published in *RONT* are reminiscent of works by Anglican authors from Oxford in the century before last, gathered in *Lux Mundi*, a volume of essays edited by Charles Gore. One can rightfully state that Radical Orthodoxy is a "post-

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90   Graham Ward edited *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997). The editors of *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* met while working on this volume. Programmatic texts which would not only shape the *Radical Orthodoxy* collection but their entire careers as scholars were published here. Philip Blond put together *Post-secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1998) the very next year, a collection which, with an additional review of continental philosophy, built on the Ward volume.

91   Jeff Sharlet, "Theologians Seek to Reclaim the World with God and Postmodernism," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 23, 2000.

modern" continuation of the Oxford movement. This is evident from Milbank's recent statements which confirm their Oxford legacy. Milbank goes so far as to claim, "I'm quite clear that church unity has to happen around the pope,"[92] which is known to have been the program of the Oxford movement. Apparently Pickstock was the first to come up with the name Radical Orthodoxy, used at first with a dose of self-irony on the part of the editors. The essays published in *RONT* may vary in quality but they do manifest a systematic, interconnected approach. The editors spontaneously fused the twelve essays into an unfinished whole. The intention of *RONT*, as the editors suggest in the introduction, was a sort of serious theological experiment to provoke, examine, and make stabs at possible suggestions. The volume is characterized by profound insights, powerful intuition, excess, hyperbolic language, risky generalizations which despite the inventive syntheses remain inadequately argued, as well as eccentricity in articulating the almost scandalous theses which as raw material appear to be provocative, but only now await their subsequent argumentation, interpretation, and additional systematization. From the very first pages, in the Acknowledgments, there is ample evidence of the many thinkers who have influenced the contributors to *RONT* in significant ways. They are a presence throughout the book. The mention of classical authors clarifies the central strategy of the nascent project. Drawing on classical authors such as Plato, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas, Radical Orthodoxy would suggest a different approach to theological and philosophical authors within the larger Anglo-Catholic confessional strategy. Whether talking about Duns Scotus, Johann Georg Hamann, Søren Kierkegaard, or Henri de Lubac, Radical

92 Graham Ward and John Milbank, "Return of Metaphysics," in Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward, eds., *The New Visibility of Religion: Studies in Religion and Political Culture* (London: Continuum, 2008), 160.

Orthodoxy offers a new reading of "marginalized" authors in an entirely new cultural matrix. Radical Orthodoxy as it is presented in *RONT* could be understood as a re-defined, early-twenty-first century Oxford movement, although it is largely a collection of Cambridge authors. This much is evident from the fact that the editors thank and cite Ralph Cudworth and Christopher Smart. Cudworth is the most well known of the Cambridge Platonists, with whom Radical Orthodoxy insists on the significance of Plato's ontology of participation. Christopher Smart was a tragic and eccentric figure within Anglicanism, considered by Radical Orthodoxy to be an exceptionally important metaphysical poet whose most famous poem is dedicated to his cat Jeoffry and fellow inmates from the insane asylum. A verse from his most quoted poem *Jubilate Agno* opens the volume with the words: "For X has the pow'r of three and therefore he is God."[93]

Contemporary authors from Cambridge who had an indirect influence on *RONT* are just as important to the volume's editors. These are Cambridge writers, professors, or personal friends of John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock. First among them are Rowan Williams, Nicholas Lash, David Ford, Janet Soskic, Tim Jenkins, Donald MacKinnon, and Lewis Ayers. The final group who contributed to the shaping of *RONT* consists of those outside Cambridge, the best known among them being Stanley Hauerwas, David Burrell, Michael Buckley, Walter Ong, and Gillian Rose. Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward open the book with an introduction which is also the most often quoted text, often recommended to beginners in theology. Themes such as knowledge, revelation, language, nihilism, desire, friendship, sexuality, politics, aesthetics, perception, and music, which the book posits as issues, flesh

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93   Christopher Smart, *The Religious Poetry* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1980), 48.

out the referential range of the project itself. Shortly after it was published, *RONT* became the object of fierce debate and criticism that has not subsided for a full ten years. Pickstock acknowledges that the future of Radical Orthodoxy is far less important than the future of theology; judging by how Radical Orthodoxy is doing today we have no cause for concern on that score. It is important to add that *RONT* enjoys no canonical status in the movement, hence it must be built upon and critiqued. Radical Orthodoxy holds that a portion of the criticism of the essays published in *RONT* is plausible and justified. The essays in which the authors subsequently revised, supplemented, and sharpened their arguments further confirm this.

As I write these lines, slightly more than ten years have passed since *RONT* first appeared and, as I have said, set the "movement" in motion. This is distance enough to contemplate the path Radical Orthodoxy has covered. Today they describe themselves as a porous group of fellow travelers, a network of friends and sympathizers.[94] Several essay collections have appeared on the relation between theology and politics. These were edited by Radical Orthodoxy adherents or their sympathizers.[95] Six thematic issues were published in the leading theological journals dedicated in their entirety either to Radical Orthodoxy or

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94 See Hemming, ed., *Radical Orthodoxy?* (2000); Adrian Pabs and Christof Schnider, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy and Eastern Orthodoxy* (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2009); James K. A. Smith and James H. Olthuis, eds., *Creation, Covenant, and Participation: Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

95 John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Edith Wyschogrod, *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty* (London: Continuum, 2003); Graham Ward, *Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); John Milbank, Creston Davis, Slavoj Žižek, eds., *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Graham Ward and Michael Hoelzl, eds., *Religion and Political Thought* (London: Continuum, 2006); Hoelzl and Ward, eds., *The New Visibility of Religion* (2009).

one of its authors, such as Milbank or Pickstock.[96] It was reasonable to expect that Radical Orthodoxy would publish several significant books and articles over the next ten years to which there would be a polemical response from a number of authors in the Anglo-Saxon world.[97] Texts by Milbank, Ward, and Pickstock attract attention as they have been publishing the writing of the greatest quality. *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, published in the spring of 2009, was certainly a touchstone, reprinting the most important and oft-quoted texts by Milbank, Ward, and Pickstock, plus a text by Cavanaugh. The *Reader* ends with a long piece by Milbank which reviews the first ten years of the movement. In his analysis, Milbank establishes how an initially a spontaneous academic initiative grew into the embryo of a cultural and political movement espousing a global Christian order in the face of the scandal of divided Christianity. The division of Christianity for the Radical Orthodox thinkers has had a profound ideological and cultural consequences rooted in a modern understanding of theology and politics. Today this politics lies in the triangle formed by the Anglo-Saxon world, continental Europe, and Russia. Although there is a desire to encourage ecumenical practice at every level, Radical Orthodoxy is extremely skeptical of the official ecumenical dialogue and interconfessional documents, rife with compromises and insincerity, that

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96 See *New Blackfriars* 73:861 (1992); *Arachne* 2:1 (1995); *Modern Theology* 15:4 (1999); *Antonianum* 78:1 (2003); *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 33:1 (2005); Conrad Grebel *Review* 23:2 (2005).

97 Clayton Crockett, *A Theology of the Sublime* (London: Routledge, 2001); Gavin Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2001); David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Christopher J. Insole, *The Politics of Human Frailty: A Theological Defense of Political Liberalism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

hold no broader significance. What we need to do in the future, Milbank contends, is extend the activities of "interconfessional cultural bodies such as, among others, Radical Orthodoxy" which tend to encourage and support ad hoc initiatives in intercommunion and an increasingly shared theology. Such shared initiatives can spur cooperation in simple things, such as different denominations sharing the same sacred places, as has already been the case in Great Britain. If reunion with Rome can finally be achieved, as Milbank hopes it will, then this will be because it has already become a de facto reality.

The future of Radical Orthodoxy will be decisive, Milbank asserts, in the context of mediating within the Anglican corpus, because the Anglican Church today is going through profound crisis and division. This is known as the "homosexual crisis," and is one of the most serious in the history of the Anglicans. Among other things, the mediating strategy of Anglican centrism, as endorsed by Radical Orthodoxy, should be embraced. It questions evangelically conservative extremists within the Anglican church (who care nothing for any sort of church order beyond their campaign against gay marriage and gay priesthood) as well as the arguments of the Anglican liberals (who are indifferent to all but their differentness, which they consider the ultimate theological virtue). It is therefore hardly surprising that Radically Orthodox centrism is criticized on both sides as simultaneously elitist and sexist, as anti-modern conservatism and Europocentric exclusivism. This is the price to be paid if these two extreme positions are to be mediated. Equally, Milbank says that Radical Orthodoxy could exert a serious influence on British politics because it is no longer enough to be theologically conservative and politically radical. This is entirely clear from his debate with Slavoj Žižek. At a time dominated by three equally influential discourses such as capitalist rationality, Christianity, and Islam,

the customary divisions of Left and Right must be overcome. Following André de Muralt, Milbank is convinced that contemporary Anglo-Saxon politics is still, ontologically and genealogically, grounded entirely in a "political" nominalism. Within this sort of nominalist social ontology there is still what is thought of as a "natural" division into Left and Right that Milbank feels to be archaic and entirely inadequate, primarily because it is not natural—the division itself only postdates the French Revolution. Such an (ultra)modern invention, as Milbank says, returns us to a certain form of paganism which cannot offer a coherent policy, and he therefore asserts that it is important to offer a radically new form of *ethos*. Only the "Catholic center" will, for him, be adequately extreme to constitute such an *ethos*. In a typical paradoxical assertion, Milbank says that only a Catholic center, more extreme than either of the extremes, can lead the way out of today's immoral, neo-pagan, heretical, and destructive capitalist rationality. Milbank sees the future of Radical Orthodoxy as follows:

> Politically, culturally, ecclesially, theologically, Radical Orthodoxy is just one of the new "creative minorities" spoken of by Pope Benedict, whose youthful and spontaneous spirit is renewing Christendom throughout the world. But it is already playing its part and I trust will continue to do so.[98]

If we want to see Radical Orthodoxy as a creative attempt at renewing Christianity, as Milbank says, then it should be interpreted in a more youthful and spontaneous way. We can interpret and represent it as a certain "technology of the self," or what

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98   Milbank and Oliver, eds., *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, 402.

Pierre Hadot calls spiritual exercise. In other words, Radical Orthodoxy cannot be seen merely as an academic initiative, a sensibility, or even a metaphysical disposition, but as something which largely pertains to everyday experience and practice. The renewal of Christendom we are talking about here is possible to see through the supporting categories of Radical Orthodoxy which, at the same time, uphold an interpretative framework for spiritual exercise. I reduce Radical Orthodoxy at this point to three categories for the sake of clarity: It would seem that by problematizing language, desire, and community in a specific way the entire vision of Radical Orthodoxy can be encompassed.

Since it is my intention to interpret Radical Orthodoxy as a spiritual exercise, I will use Hadot's[99] conclusions from which is visible the degree to which the philosophical discourse of Antiquity has always corresponded to a voluntarily elected and embraced way of life which contained, in an inherent way, certain therapeutic and pedagogical models. This way of life, inseparable from the philosophical discourse in the various philosophical schools, was examined through privileged places and specific *topoi*, whether these be Platonists, Aristotelians, Cynics, Stoics, Epicureans, or Neoplatonists. Hadot's major contribution lies in showing that Christianity itself was presented as a philosophy, meaning a specific model of spiritual exercising. Hadot reminds us of Origen's example of interpreting the wisdom literature in the Bible (according to Origen the goal is to live in harmony with divine *logos*) reducing it to three *topoi*: ethics, physics, and metaphysics. Origen considered Christianity to be the most complete expression of all philosophy, interpreting ethics through the Book of Proverbs, physics through Ecclesiastes, and metaphysics, or, as he called it, *epopteia* (what today we think of as "theology"),

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99   Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1993.

through the Songs of Songs. Here one could speak of the many Church Fathers who offered similar models, such as, for instance, Evagrius Ponticus and even Dorotheus of Gaza. What matters is that these three *topoi* in various philosophical schools have been interpreted in different ways, and I have settled on one of the possible interpretations that Hadot suggests. The Frenchman asserts that in the later period of Hellenic Roman philosophy, at the very end of Antiquity, philosophy began again to be interpreted as a way of life (and not merely as a theoretical exegesis of earlier philosophical texts). Philosophy as a discourse is interpreted in a framework for which logic, physics, and ethics were decisive, especially pertaining to the late Stoics and Epicureans. This is precisely what I mean to do with Radical Orthodoxy, interpreting it as spiritual exercises linking logic and language, desire and physics, and ethics and community.

THE LOGIC OF LANGUAGE

For Radical Orthodoxy, language is both a privileged place of theology and a medium for true doxologicial order. Ward has stated that "language is always and ineradicably theological."[100] Milbank argues that only Christianity in its entirety anticipates the idea that reality is shaped by language and that language has the power to reshape reality. In parallel, he sees language as an interactively dynamic reality grounded in relations, meaning that relations and communication come first and only later are fixed identities constructed. This is why Milbank argues that our articulation through language reflects the divine act of creation, while Long says that language itself became participation in God's infinite abundance. Ward supplements this with his terse

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100 Graham Ward, *Barth*, *Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 9.

poetic statement, "Communication confers communion and cre-
ates community."[101] This understanding of language comes from
the specifically Christian conviction that Jesus Christ is simul-
taneously God's Word, God's language, sign, image, and meta-
phor, which all adherents of Radical Orthodoxy espouse.[102] The
primary role of language is to enable us to participate in rela-
tionships. This means that Pickstock, for example, wishes to
renew a specific notion of language as liturgy which enables and
guides us to our role in divine life. The truth would therefore be
an event, a manifold participative relationship in time, continu-
ally reflected in the liturgical community. Milbank holds that all
of human creativity participates in God, while God himself is an
infinitely poetic articulation.

THE PHYSICS OF DESIRE

In this instance Radical Orthodoxy turns to Augustine and his
interpretation of desire. Its adherents argue that desire is the
constitutive element which makes us human and that it is excep-
tionally important to direct desire in a teleologically orderly
manner. For Pickstock desire is "divine mercy within us." Ward
asserts that desire is "complex, multi-focused and held to be
maintained by a power that is greater than that of any individual
or even collective."[103] Following Augustine, Radical Orthodoxy in
its texts wants to show that desire itself is enslaved and tainted
by sin because it is not directed to God but to ourselves, and

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101 Ward, "Radical Orthodoxy and/as Cultural Politics," 111.

102 Graham Ward wrote a book about the importance of Jacques Derrida's phi-
losophy in terms of Karl Barth's theology. Ward certainly has a more concilia-
tory relationship to Derrida than do Pickstock or Milbank (see Ward, *Barth,
Derrida and the Language of Theology*, xvii).

103 Graham Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice* (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 2005), 153.

therefore our "hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee." This restlessness of the soul, argues Radical Orthodoxy, is evident in the postmodern obsession with various perverse forms of sexuality which destroy eros, love, and the body, shaping them in terms of the laws of the market where everything becomes merchandise. Desire in this case gets defined as a lack and paucity which are perpetually directed at ourselves. We can never fully satisfy this desire. Hence in a mimetic way we desire what others desire. This is the fundamental assumption of a capitalist rationality according to which function the laws of the marketplace, "ontologically" enslaving desire.

Interpreting Gilles Deleuze, Daniel M. Bell Jr. argues that capitalism is a sinful discipline of desire. Capitalism is "a form of sin, a way of life that captures and distorts human desire in accord with the golden rule of production for the market."[104] It seems that capitalist production prevails because its victory is "ontological" as it is founded on an effective disciplining of desire as constitutive human power. In order to free ourselves from such a "technology of desire" we need a very specific "therapy" of desire. We need a theological anti-practice that will heal our desire, as Pickstock has aptly noted. Radical Orthodoxy is convinced that only Christianity can reshape and re-direct desire. Experienced through the physics of the liturgy, the beauty of the Christian story can heal the wounded eros by re-channeling desire towards the infinite plenitude of God's beauty. The course of desire and the openness of the wounded eros can be wrested from the capitalist rationality of the market in a romantic way through a liturgical therapy which will not interpret nature as a given, but as a gift. Pickstock remarks that Aquinas already spoke about modulating desire through liturgy, and that the very act of preparation

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104   Daniel M. Bell Jr., *Liberation Theology After the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (London; Routledge, 2001), 2.

for liturgy is closely tied to human desire. Pickstock summed this
up succinctly:

> Thus we can see that what the Eucharist is is desire.
> Although we know via desire, or wanting to know, and
> this circumstance alone resolves the aporia of learning,
> beyond this we discover that what there is to know is
> desire. But not desire as absence, lack, and perpetual
> postponement; rather, desire as the free flow of actu-
> alization, perpetually renewed and never foreclosed.[105]

THE ETHICS OF THE COMMUNITY

Radical Orthodoxy considers that first we are offered the eccle-
sial practice of the Church—such as the liturgy and the sacra-
ments—and only then are we called to deliberate upon complex
doctrines such as Jesus' incarnation and the Trinity. The Church
is the way in which Christians live and are shaped as Christians.
The Church is the efficacious continuation of the incarnation
through history, as Christ is present through the text of the
Word, the sacrament, and in the way that people live his journey.
What started with the incarnation continues in the Eucharist,
staged in the liturgical practice of the Church. In this way the
circle of doxology never ends, but instead begins anew. The
Church stretches through time, meaning the Church is a commu-
nity of ecclesial nomads traveling to the City of God. The Church
cannot have a particular ethic because the Church is itself ethic.

   The Church is a complex space much like a Gothic cathedral to
which additional chambers are always being annexed. Complex
space understood this way consists of multiple social relation-

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105 Catherine Pickstock, "Thomas Aquinas and the Quest for the Eucharist,"
     Modern Theology 15 (April 1999): 178–9.

ships which have various centers and graduating levels of power because it includes numerous associations, guilds, universities, households, movements, fraternities, and monastic orders each having its own specific merit, influence, and rules. Authority, power, and spheres of influence must be kept separate within this complex space—not hierarchically dispersed—because if that does not happen the Church remains an ideological lever in the service of the state, a semi-feudal association resembling a totalitarian parody of the modern state and its bureaucracy. The Church incarnates at the same time a truth community and, thereafter, its politics, as Milbank often argues. The Church in that case does not call for any specific political option, nor does it have a specific politics, but the Church is a polity. The Church, at the center of which is the Eucharist, remains open and inclusive since the Eucharist itself is a certain form of politics, as Cavanaugh has demonstrated.[106] As Ward suggests, the exclusivity and truthfulness of the Christian story do not mean being closed to communication with others. Calling on Augustine, Ward invites his readers to suspend their condemnation of other religions and construct a strategy of prayer and watching. This sort of strategy of "waiting" would open space for important questions about the interrelation with other religions, because other religions have the potential and the resources to raise questions about the capitalist enslavement of desire and nihilism as the ultimate goal of capitalism.

This understanding of language, desire, and community is precisely what I find thrilling and romantic in the discourse espoused by Radical Orthodoxy. It can therefore be understood as spiritual

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106 William T. Cavanaugh, *The City: Beyond secular parodies* in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 182-200.

exercise. As we said earlier, what was called philosophy in Antiquity was inseparable from the way of life that incarnated the selected discourse. This bond between life and discourse is reminiscent of what Michel Foucault offered as the model for "technologies of the self." The bond between life and discourse can be found equally in the project and vision as espoused by Radical Orthodoxy. A return to Augustinian patrological synthesis as a methodological model can be found in texts published by Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward. This step back is meaningful only if they then take two steps forward, as they are now doing, each in their own way. What links the three authors is the fact that they see the Augustinian synthesis as one of the determinants of a common discourse, although each of them reads it in a distinct way. In their reading of Augustine there are common constitutive elements which can be understood simply as spiritual exercises in the Hadot sense.

Here we do not have what would amount to a pre-modern insistence on a theological interpretation of historical-philosophical categories and *topoi*, since Augustine writes a theological history of the soul (*Confessions*), a theological history of the community (*City of God*), and a theological history of God (*On the Trinity*). Instead what we have is a new interpretation of Augustine's non-substantial relational Trinitarian ontology leading to a new understanding of the soul and its relation to (household and) community within a theological-cosmological context. The intention is to show how Augustine offered a solution of Classical political antinomies which Plato had not succeeded in doing, having been trapped in the Greek *mythos*. In other words, Radical Orthodoxy intends to offer a new reading of *City of God* with the help of *De Musica*, a lesser known text of Augustine's. It is precisely in its synthesis of these two texts that I understand Radical Orthodoxy as spiritual exercise.

De Musica is one of Augustine's early Neoplatonic works.[107]
The first five books of *De Musica* are on rhythm and meter
while the sixth is on harmony. Augustine himself felt that the
first five books were insignificant. The sixth book is, without
doubt, the most important because it focuses on the question
of music within the cosmological and philosophical theological
context as well as on a hierarchy of numbers, since numbers
are constitutive ontological categories in understanding the
soul, the being, the universe, and angels. It is not possible to
distil ontology from *De Musica* if we don't read this hermetic
and impassible text as a spiritual exercise, which is visible in
the text itself. Augustine's text is written in the form of Clas-
sical therapeutic dialogues between teacher and disciple. These
are spiritual exercises which point to a "musical ontology."
Milbank and Pickstock interpret Augustine's musical ontology
using Plato's political epistemology, which, as we know, cannot
be separated from ontology. Here we need no great wisdom to
hear an echo, in the background of Augustine's research into
the theory of music, of Plato's statement: "for any musical
innovation is full of danger to the whole State, and ought to be
prohibited. So Damon tells me, and I can quite believe him."[108]
In other words, Augustine's text on music is important for
them because it points to a certain "musical" ontology which
connects to the "political theology" of *City of God*, also referred

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107 Augustine spent four years, from 387 to 391, writing *De Musica*. All things
considered this is his most enigmatic text. Esoteric and opaque, for centuries
it was neglected in favor of other better-known writings. *De Musica* was to be
part of a large project in which Augustine wished to contextualize the clas-
sical arts of Antiquity in the Christian discourse. The only parts he finished
were the texts *On Grammar* and *On Music*, while he left unfinished texts on
dialectics, rhetorics, geometry, arithmetic, and philosophy.

108 Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Digireads.com Publishing, 2008),
75.

to in some places as a social ontology.[109] At the very beginning of *City of God*, Augustine speaks of political theory in terms of the justice of the Heavenly City and the Earthly City, using the metaphor of music in a very specific way which fully enhances his conclusions in *De Musica*:

> Now Scipio, at the end of the second book, says: As among the different sounds which proceed from lyres, flutes, and the human voice, there must be maintained a certain harmony which a cultivated ear cannot endure to hear disturbed or jarring, but which may be elicited in full and absolute concord by the modulation even of voices very unlike one another; so, where reason is allowed to modulate the diverse elements of the state, there is obtained a perfect concord from the upper, lower, and middle classes as from various sounds; and what musicians call harmony in singing, is concord in matters of state, which is the strictest bond and best security of any republic, and which by no ingenuity can be retained where justice has become extinct.[110]

It is worth keeping in mind that music, for Augustine, is a science of proper modulations and structured flow that denies the

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109 "Perhaps this is partly why Augustine, in *De Musica*, understood that creating *ex nihilo* implies . . . a 'musical' ontology." John Milbank, "'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism': A Short Summa in Forty-two Responses to Unasked Questions," in Ward, ed., *The Postmodern God*, 268. Here we certainly must mention the two most important ontological texts: "Epistle 18" and the essay "On Ideas" from Augustine's *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, section 46 (see Phillip Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 149–50).

110 Augustine, *City of God*, 2:21:1, trans. Marcus Dods, in Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 2 (Buffalo NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887). Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, available at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120102.htm

priority of spatial harmony and, as such, through polyphony, balances spatial harmony into temporal melody. For Augustine and the whole Hellenistic and Christian tradition up to Descartes, music is the measure of the soul's relation to the body through which we are able to participate in eternal harmony. Just as the soul can recognize in disharmonious music its own distortions and mistakenness, in the same way music can articulate imbalances in the psychological, political, and even cosmic orders. Augustine's teaching on music has serious ethical implications since he understands the body in a specific way as a musical instrument of the soul necessary for the soul to communicate with the *polis* and the *cosmos* within an ethical framework. According to Augustine's reading of Plato, using music to dominate people is possible only by distorting musical harmony, so no wonder Augustine was the first to point to the meaning of a musical *ethos*, arguing that there is no possibility of using good music to a bad end. Music for Augustine is metonymic for the physical that "steals" the attention of the soul; that is, music is Augustine's way of describing what it means to be physically in the world. Hence *De Musica* should be read as spiritual exercises corresponding to the classical Hellenic and Roman therapeutic discourses. We must distance ourselves from rhythm which brings with it pleasure and instead embrace the unchanging truth of *logos*, which brings healing in the form of a vision of creation and resurrection through Christ's example and which thereby introduces us to the whole contemplation of God. Augustine demonstrates this with two examples. The first is Ambrose's beautiful hymn *Deus creator omnium*, which the man from Milan reads from the perspective of the scriptural texts about creation and resurrection. The other is a text from the Gospel of Matthew about how one needn't worry anxiously about tomorrow (Matthew 6:26–30). But the therapeutic discourses of Antiquity func-

tion within a map of certain *topoi* and a particular ontological concept which therapeutic exercise makes possible. It is Radical Orthodoxy which has offered a description of these *topoi* of language, desire, and community.

Interpreting Augustine, Milbank understands the soul in a specific way as a number that must be placed correctly in a series. Every number has an infinite capacity for self-expansion through division and multiplication, just as every musical note or poetic syllable can be infinitely divided. The inherent power of freedom is proportional to any series that can be repeated and revised as a series. This is important to note because Augustine's *De Musica* offers a completely new formula in which spatiality is subordinated to intervals of time. This means that every part belongs to the whole while at the same time every part transcends the possible imagined whole. For the whole is a final series of unclear continuation towards an inscrutable and infinite God. Equally the series is sequences of mediation between the individual, the household, the city, and the cosmos. An internal correspondence bonding the soul, the household, and the city is possible because all three, from the start of their own internal organization, are placed in a correspondence with what is external, public, and visible and that is other souls, other households, and other cities connected by the laws of the cosmos, the metaphor for which is music. Souls, households, and cities may be placed regularly insofar as their internal order is entirely connected to an external sequence by the aid of which they are properly situated.

> The idea that this practice is essentially "music" . . . implies "community" in a very particular sense. For Christianity, true community means the freedom of people and groups to be different, not just to be functions of a fixed consensus, yet at the same time it

totally refuses *indifference*; a peaceful, united secure community implies *absolute* consensus, and yet, where difference is acknowledged, this is no agreement in an idea, or something once and for all achieved, but a consensus that is only in and through the inter-relations of the community itself, and a consensus that moves and "changes": a *concentus musicus*. Christianity (and not even Judaism, which postpones universality to the *eschaton*, a final chord) uniquely has this idea of community: this is what "Church" should be all about.[111]

These statements should not be seen only as allegories intended to legitimize the discourse put forward by Radical Orthodoxy. To them we can add serious insights into the music of Olivier Messiaen and its influence on modern philosophy introduced by Catherine Pickstock by way of Deleuze. Equally, John Milbank's argument can be fully broadened by Graham Ward's marvelous study on angels and the church as an erotic community, which can be read as the finest postmodern commentary on Augustine's *City of God*. This is why Milbank's assertion that Christianity discovered true music and the way its harmony functions is not surprising. Christianity differentiates itself without dissonances, and only music which is listened to in this way supports and legitimizes ontological reflection on differentiation. Is not this understanding of Christianity as music enough to legitimize Radical Orthodoxy as a thrilling, romantic, creative endeavor which I have described as a call to spiritual exercise? This is a romantic technology of the self and an initiation into cooperation with God understood in symbolic liturgical terms. The tech-

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111 Milbank, "'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism'," in Milbank and Oliver, eds., *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, 52.

nology of the self understood in this way makes possible an inner self-transcendence and a transmitting of the strength of charity in the light of divine knowledge to those who have been initiated into ecclesial practices which are not just thrilling and romantic but also, as Chesterton says, perilous. This is the way in which I understand Radical Orthodoxy and what it does. God has not blessed me with the gift of prophecy so I cannot read the future of Radical Orthodoxy, but what I can say with certainty is that the unsystematic trilogy "compiled" by Milbank (*Theology and Social Theory*), Pickstock (*After Writing*), and Ward (*Cities of God*) presents Radical Orthodoxy in a very inspiring way as spiritual exercise.

7

The Animal Gaze
of the Other
Žižek

Levinas located the gap that separates Judaism from Christianity in the way spiritual salvation and worldly justice are linked: in contrast to the Jewish admission of terrestrial life as the very terrain of our ethical activity, Christianity simultaneously goes too far and not far enough—it believes that it is possible to overcome this horizon of finitude, to enter collectively a blessed state, to "move mountains by faith" and realize a utopia, *and* it immediately transposes the place of this blessed state to an Elsewhere, which then compels it to declare our terrestrial life of ultimately secondary importance and to reach a compromise with the masters of this world, giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. The link between spiritual salvation and worldly justice is cut short.

Along these Levinasian lines, Jean-Claude Milner[112] recently elaborated the notion of the "Jews" in the European ideological imaginary as an obstacle that prevents unification-peace and which therefore has to be annihilated in order for Europe to unite. This why the Jews are always a "problem/question" demanding a "solution"—Hitler being merely the most radical point of this tradition. For Milner, the European dream is that

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112 See Jean-Claude Milner, *Les penchants criminels de l'Europe démocratique* (Paris: Editions Verdier, 2003).

of *parousia* (Greek and Christian), of a full *jouissance* beyond Law, unencumbered by any obstacles or prohibitions. Modernity itself is propelled by a desire to move beyond Laws, to a transparent self-regulated social body; the last installment in this saga, today's postmodern neo-pagan Gnosticism, perceives reality as fully malleable, enabling us humans to transform ourselves into a migrating entity floating between a multitude of realities, sustained only by infinite Love. Against this tradition, the Jews, in a radically anti-millenarian way, persist in their fidelity to the Law, insisting on the insurmountable finitude of humans, and, consequently, on the need for a minimum of "alienation," which is why they are perceived as an obstacle by everyone bent on a "final solution."

This approach is based on a precise line of distinction between Jewish Messianism and Christian teleology: for Christians, history is a process directed towards its goal, the redemption of humanity, while for the Jews, history is an open-ended, undecided process in which we wander without any guarantee of the final result. However, what if such an approach nonetheless balks (as Christians themselves often do) at drawing out the full consequences of the basic shift from Judaism to Christianity with regard to the Event, best encapsulated with regard to the status of the Messiah? In contrast to the Jewish Messianic expectation (where the arrival of the Messiah is forever postponed, forever to-come, like Justice or democracy for Derrida), the basic Christian stance is that *the expected Messiah has already arrived*, i.e., that we are already redeemed: the time of nervous expectation, of precipitously rushing towards the expected Arrival, is over; *we live in the aftermath of the Event; everything—the Big Thing—has already happened*. Paradoxically, of course, the result of this Event is not atavism ("It has already happened, we are redeemed, so let us just rest and wait"), but, on the contrary,

an extreme urgency to act: it happened, *so now we have to bear the almost unbearable burden of living up to it, of drawing out the consequences of the Act. . . .* "Man proposes, God disposes"—man is incessantly active, intervening, but it is the divine act which decides the outcome. With Christianity, it is the obverse—not "God proposes, man disposes," but rather, "God (first) disposes, (and then) man proposes." What this means is that, although the Event has already happened, its meaning is not decided in advance but is radically open. Karl Barth drew the consequences of this fact when he emphasized how the final revelation of God will be totally incommensurable with our expectations:

> God is not hidden to us; He is revealed. But what and how we shall be in Christ, and what and how the World will be in Christ at the end of God's road, at the breaking in of redemption and completion, that is not revealed to us; that is hidden. Let us be honest: we do not know what we are saying when we speak of Jesus Christ's coming again in judgment, and of the resurrection of the dead, of eternal life and eternal death. That with all these there will be bound up a piercing revelation—a seeing, compared to which all our present vision will have been blindness—is too often testified in Scripture for us to feel we ought to prepare ourselves for it. For we do not know what will be revealed when the last covering is removed from our eyes, from all eyes: how we shall behold one another and what we shall be to one another—men of today and men of past centuries and millennia, ancestors and descendants, husbands and wives, wise and foolish, oppressors and oppressed, traitors and betrayed, murderers and murdered, West and East,

Germans and others, Christians, Jews, and heathen, orthodox and heretics, Catholics and Protestants, Lutherans and Reformed; upon what divisions and unions, what confrontations and cross-connections the seals of all books will be opened; how much will seem small and unimportant to us then, how much will only then appear great and important; for what surprises of all kinds we must prepare ourselves. We also do not know what Nature, as the cosmos in which we have lived and still live here and now, will be for us then; what the constellations, the sea, the broad valleys and heights, which we see and know now, will say and mean then.[113]

From this insight, it becomes clear how false, how "all too human," the fear is that the guilty will not be properly punished—here, especially, we must abandon our expectations: "Strange Christianity, whose most pressing anxiety seems to be that God's grace might prove to be all too free on this side, that hell, instead of being populated with so many people, might some day prove to be empty!"[114] And the same uncertainty holds for the Church itself—it possesses no superior knowledge, it is like a postman who delivers mail with no idea what it says: "The Church can only deliver it the way a postman delivers his mail; the Church is not asked what it thinks it is thereby starting, or what it makes of the message. The less it makes of it and the less it leaves on it its own fingerprints, the more it simply hands it on as it has received it—and so much the better."[115] There is only one unconditional certainty in all this—the certainty of Jesus

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113 Karl Barth, *God Here and Now* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 45–6.
114 Ibid., 42.
115 Ibid., 49.

Christ as our savior, which is a "rigid designator" remaining the same in all possible worlds:

> We know just one thing: that Jesus Christ is the same also in eternity, and that His grace is whole and complete, enduring through time into eternity, into the new World of God which will exist and be recognized in a totally different way, that it is unconditional and hence is certainly tied to no purgatories, tutoring sessions, or reformatories of hereafter.[116]

The further crucial consequence of this radical openness is that we must move beyond Levinas at the very foundation of ethics: the basic ethical step is the one *beyond* the face of the other, the one of *suspending* the hold of the face, i.e., the choice *against* the face in front of me, for the absent *third*. This coldness *is* justice at its most elementary. Every preempting of the Other in the guise of his face relegates the Third to the faceless background. And the elementary gesture of justice is not to show respect for the face in front of me, to be open to its depth, but to abstract from it and refocus onto the faceless Thirds in the background. It is only such a shift of focus that effectively *uproots* justice, liberating it from the contingent umbilical link that renders it "embedded" in a particular situation. In other words, it is only this shift onto the Third that will ground justice in the dimension of *universality* proper. When Levinas endeavors to ground ethics in the Other's face, is he not still clinging to the ultimate root of the ethical commitment, afraid to accept the abyss of the rootless Law as the only foundation of ethics? Justice being blind thus means precisely that it cannot be grounded in the relationship to the

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116 Ibid., 46.

Other's face. In other words, does Levinas, in his accent on the Other's face, not (dis)miss precisely the most precious part of the Jewish legacy, the endeavor to assert a new form of *collectivity* grounded in the "dead letter" of an uprooted Law, the legacy which found its last great expression in the kibbutz movement (and institution) in the early years of the State of Israel?

There is thus a crucial consequence of this primacy of the Third: if we accept that the Third is—not only empirically but at the conceptual level of transcendental constitution—*always already here*, that it does not arrive secondarily, as a complication of the primordial relation to the Other's Face, then what is for Levinas the most elementary ethical experience, that of getting fixated on an Other's Face, is effectively (the appearance of) its very opposite: a primordial, zero-level Evil that disturbs the balance of the collective by way of an egotistical preference for one face at the expense of all others. Does this mean that we should support a communal ethics, an ethics which gives primacy to the values of the community and sees individuals as embedded in it?

Levinas's critical rejection of Hegel is best rendered by the very title of his first big work: *Totality and Infinity*. For Levinas, Hegelian "totality" stands for the harmonious organically hierarchical Order of Things, with each thing in its proper place, while the encounter with the Other's Face stands for the intrusion of a totally heterogeneous infinite Otherness which de-rails this balanced immanent order. Is the Hegelian totality, however, really such an all-encompassing Whole that "mediates" and thereby incorporates all alterity, all transcendence? Is there not something missing in the alternative of totality *qua* organic Whole and infinity *qua* the singular intrusion of radical Otherness—namely, the space of egalitarian collectivity which is even more destructive of the organic-hierarchic Whole than any singular Otherness? In other words, what the Levinasian opposition of

totality and infinity, of Sameness and Otherness, leaves out is *singular universality*, the access of a singular to universality which by-passes the hierarchic order of particularity. And, contrary to many interpretations, the whole point of the Hegelian totality is that it is not an organic Whole but an inconsistent/fractured, self-referential non-All consisting of the incessant interplay between the organic Whole and the singular universality undermining it.

This singular universality has nothing whatsoever to do with the universality of the high-ground position of neutrality, elevated above the combatants' partisan passions (recall the role of international observers in the Bosnian conflict in the early 1990s, fanatically clinging to "neutrality" in the face of a clear conflict between an aggressor and its victim): such a position is one of the exemplary forms of ethical betrayal in which universality appears in the guise of its opposite, as a high moral stance. The difference here is that between "abstract" and "concrete" universality: neutrality assumes the "abstract-universal" position elevated above the conflict, while "singular universality" achieves universality by way of taking sides and fully identifying with a singular partisan position—the one which, within the space of the conflict, stands for the universal dimension. This brings us back to Levinas: taking the Third into account does not (as Levinas thinks) bring us into the position of pragmatic consideration, of comparing different Others; the task is rather to learn to distinguish between "false" conflicts and the "true" conflict. For example, today's conflict between Western liberalism and religious fundamentalism is a "false" one, since it is based on the exclusion of the third term which is its "truth": the Leftist emancipatory position.

At the most radical level, this Third is not only a third human being outside the duality of me and the face confronting me, but

the third face, the inhuman animal face excluded by Levinas as an ethical fact (and one can add, not without irony, that the true argument against the Levinasian face is the face itself, the face neglected, excluded, by him). Derrida elaborated this point in his *The Animal That Therefore I Am*.[117] Although the title is intended as an ironic stab at Descartes, one should perhaps take it with a more literal naivety: the Cartesian *cogito* is not a substance different and separable from the body (as Descartes himself misunderstood it in his illegitimate passage from *cogito* to *res cogitans*)—at the level of substantial content, I am nothing but the animal that I am. What makes me human is the very form, or formal declaration, of me *as* an animal.

Derrida's starting point is that every clear and general differentiation between humans and "the animal" that we know from the history of philosophy (from Aristotle to Heidegger, Lacan, and Levinas) should be deconstructed: what really legitimizes us to say that only humans speak, while animals merely emit signs; that only humans respond, while animals merely react; that only humans experience things "as such," while animals are just captivated by their life world; that only humans can feign to feign, while animals just directly feign; that only humans are mortal, experience death, while animals just die; or that animals enjoy a harmonious sexual relationship of instinctual mating, while for humans *il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*; etc. Derrida displays here the best of what we cannot but call the "common-sense of deconstruction," asking naïve questions which undermine philosophical propositions taken for granted for centuries. What, for example, allows Lacan to claim with such self-confidence, without providing any data or arguments, that animals cannot feign to feign? What allows Heidegger to claim as a self-evident fact that

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117 Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

animals don't relate to their death? As Derrida emphasizes again and again, the point of this questioning is not to cancel the gap that separates man from (other) animals and attribute also to (other) animals properly "spiritual" properties—the path taken by some eco-mystics who claim that not only animals, but even trees and other plants communicate in a language of their own to which we humans are deaf. The point is rather that all these differences should be re-thought and conceived in a different way, multiplied, "thickened," and the first step on this path is to denounce the all-encompassing category of "the animal."

Such negative characterizations of animals (speechless, world-less, etc.) engender the appearance of positive determinations which are false: animals as captured by their environs, etc. Do we not encounter the same phenomenon in traditional Eurocentric anthropology? Viewed through the lenses of modern Western "rational" thought taken as the standard of maturity, its Others cannot but appear as "primitives" trapped in magic thinking, "really believing" that their tribe originates from their totemic animal, that a pregnant woman has been inseminated by a spirit and not by a man, etc. Rational thought thus engenders the figure of "irrational" mythic thought—what we get here is (again) a process of violent simplification (reduction, obliteration) which occurs with the rise of the New: in order to assert something radically New, the entire past, with all its inconsistencies, has to be reduced to some basic defining feature ("metaphysics," "mythic thought," "ideology" . . .). Derrida himself enacts the same simplification in his deconstructive mode: all the past is totalized as "phallogocentrism" or "metaphysics of presence," which—it can be argued—is secretly modeled upon Husserl. (Derrida here differs from Deleuze and Lacan, who treat philosophers one by one, without totalizing them.) Is it not the same to oppose the Western Judeo-Greek legacy to the "Oriental" stance, thereby

obliterating the incredible wealth of positions covered by the term "Oriental thought"? Can we really put into the same category, say, the Upanishads, with their "corporate" metaphysics of castes, and Confucianism, with its agnostic-pragmatic stance?

But is such a violent leveling not necessary in every critical move, in every rise of the New? So, instead of dismissing *en bloc* such "binary logic," one should perhaps assert it, not only as a necessary step of simplification, but as inherently true in that very violent simplification? To put it in Hegelese, it is not only that the totalization effected under the heading "the animal," say, violently obliterates a complex multiplicity; it is also that the violent reduction of such a multiplicity to a minimal difference is the moment of truth. That is to say, what if the multiplicity of animal forms is to be conceived as a series of attempts to resolve some basic antagonism or tension which defines animality as such, a tension which can only be formulated from a minimal distance, once humans are involved? Recall the well-known elaboration of the general equivalent from the first edition of *Capital*, volume 1, where Marx writes:

> It is as if, alongside and external to lions, tigers, rabbits, and all other actual animals, which form when grouped together the various kinds, species, subspecies, families, etc. of the animal kingdom, there existed in addition *the animal*, the individual incarnation of the entire animal kingdom.[118]

(Marx dropped this sentence from the second edition, where he rearranged the first chapter.) This image of money, as "the animal" romping alongside all the heterogeneous instances of particular

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118 Karl Marx, *Capital*, available at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/commodity.htm

sorts of animality that exist around it, does it not lend itself to capturing what Derrida describes as the gap that separates the Animal from the multiplicity of actual animal life? In Hegelese again, what man encounters in *the* Animal is itself in the oppositional determination: viewed as an animal, man is *the* spectral animal existing alongside really existing animal kinds. Is this not also how we could give a perverse twist to the early Marx's determination of man as *Gattungswesen*, a being-of-species: it is as if, alongside particular subspecies, the species as such comes to exist. Perhaps this is how animals view humans, and is the reason for their perplexity.

The key point here is that it is not enough to say that, while such a determination of animals as speechless, etc., is wrong, the determination of humans as rational, speaking, etc., is right, so that we just have to provide a more adequate definition of animality—the entire field is false. This falsity can be thought in the terms of the Kierkegaardian couple of becoming and being: the standard opposition animal/human is formulated from the perspective of the human as being, as already constituted; it cannot think the human in its becoming. It thinks animals from within the given human standpoint, it cannot think the human from the animal standpoint. In other words, what this human/animal difference obfuscates is not only the way animals really are independently of humans, but the very difference which effectively marks the rupture of the human within the animal universe. Here psychoanalysis enters: what Freud calls the "death drive" is his name for the uncanny dimension of the human-in-becoming. We find a first indication of this dimension—neither nature nor culture—already in Kant, for whom discipline and education do not directly work on our animal nature, forging it into human individuality: as Kant points out, animals cannot be properly educated since

their behavior is already predestined by their instincts. What this means is that, paradoxically, in order to be educated into freedom (*qua* moral autonomy and self-responsibility), *I already have to be free* in a much more radical—"noumenal," monstrous even—sense. The Freudian name for this monstrous freedom, of course, is the death drive. It is interesting to note how philosophical narratives of the "birth of man" are always compelled to presuppose a moment in human (pre)history when (what will become) man is no longer a mere animal and simultaneously not yet a "being of language," bound by symbolic Law; a moment of thoroughly "perverted," "denaturalized," "derailed" nature which is not yet culture. In his anthropological writings, Kant emphasized that the human animal needs disciplinary pressure in order to tame an uncanny "unruliness" which seems to be inherent to human nature—a wild, unconstrained propensity to insist stubbornly on one's own will, cost what it may. It is on account of this "unruliness" that the human animal needs a Master to discipline him: discipline targets this "unruliness," not the animal nature in man. In Hegel's *Lectures on Philosophy of History*, a similar role is played by the reference to "negroes": significantly, Hegel deals with "negroes" before history proper (which starts with ancient China), in the section entitled "The Natural Context or the Geographical Basis of World History." While being fully aware of the deeply racist implications of these lines, one should nonetheless notice that "negroes" stand here for the human spirit in its "state of nature," they are described as a kind of perverted, monstrous child, simultaneously naïve and extremely corrupted, i.e., living in a pre-lapsarian state of innocence, and, precisely as such, the most cruel barbarians; part of nature and yet thoroughly denaturalized; ruthlessly manipulating nature through primitive sorcery, yet simultaneously terrified by raging natural forces; mindlessly brave cow-

ards . . . This in-between is the "repressed" of the narrative form (in this case, of Hegel's "grand narrative" of the world-historical succession of spiritual forms): not nature as such, but the very break with nature which is (later) supplemented by the virtual universe of narratives. The answer to Derrida's claim that every feature attributed exclusively to "man" is a fiction could thus be that this fiction nonetheless has a reality of its own, effectively organizing human practices—so what if humans are precisely animals who become committed to their fictions, sticking fully to them (a version of Nietzsche's claim that man is the animal that can make promises)?

Derrida begins his exploration of this obscure "twilight zone" with a report on a kind of primordial scene: after waking, he goes naked to the bathroom where his cat follows him; then the awkward moment occurs—he is standing in front of the cat which looks at his naked body. Unable to endure this situation, he does something: he puts a towel around his waist, chases the cat outside, and enters the shower . . . The cat's gaze stands for the gaze of the Other—an inhuman gaze, but for this reason all the more the Other's gaze in all its abyssal impenetrability. Seeing oneself being seen by an animal is an abyssal encounter of the Other's gaze, since—precisely because we should not simply project onto the animal our inner experience—something is returning the gaze which is radically Other. The entire history of philosophy is based upon a disavowal of such an encounter, right up to Badiou, who characterizes all too easily a human being not yet converted into a subject (to the Event) as a "human animal." Sometimes, at least, the enigma is admitted—by, among others, Heidegger, who insists that we are not yet able to determine the essence of a being which is "living." And, sporadically, we can even find direct reversals of this disavowal: not only is the gaze of the animal recognized, it is also directly elevated into the key preoccupation

of philosophy, as in Adorno's surprising proclamation: "Philosophy exists in order to redeem what you see in the gaze of an animal."[119]

I remember seeing a photo of a cat after it had been subjected to some lab experiment in a centrifuge, its bones half-broken, its skin half-hairless, its eyes looking helplessly into the camera . . . this is the gaze of the Other disavowed not only by philosophers, but by humans "as such." Even Levinas, who wrote so much about the face of the helpless other as the original site of ethical responsibility, explicitly denied that an animal's face can function like this. One of the few exceptions is here Bentham, who made a simple proposal: instead of asking, "Can animals reason and think? Can they talk?," etc., we should rather ask: "Can they suffer?" Human industry alone is continuously causing immense suffering to animals, which is systematically disavowed—not only laboratory experiments, but special regimes to produce eggs and milk (turning artificial lights on and off to shorten the day, the use of hormones, etc.), pigs which are half blind and barely able to walk, fattened up fast to be slaughtered, etc. The majority of those who visit a chicken factory are no longer able to eat chicken meat, and although all of us know what goes on in such places, this knowledge has to be neutralized so that we can act as if we don't know. One of the ways to facilitate this ignorance is with the Cartesian notion of the *animal-machine*: the Cartesians were warning people against having compassion for animals. When we hear an animal emitting sounds of pain, we should always bear in mind that these sounds do not express any real inner feeling—since animals do not have souls, they are just sounds generated by a complex mechanism of muscles, bones, fluids, etc., that one can clearly see through dissection.

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119 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "Towards a New Manifesto?," *New Left Review* 65 (Sept/Oct 2010): 51.

The problem is that the notion of the *animal-machine* has to end up in La Mettrie's *L'Homme-Machine*: if one is a fully committed neuro-biologist, then exactly the same claim can be made about the sounds and gestures emitted by humans when they are in pain; there is no separate interior domain of the soul where pain is "really felt," the sounds and gestures of pain are simply produced by the complex neuro-biological mechanisms of the human organism.

In order to provide the larger ontological context for this animal suffering, Derrida resuscitates the old motif of German Romanticism and Schelling, taken over by Heidegger and Benjamin, of the "great sorrow of nature": "It is in the hope of requiting that [sorrow], of redemption from that suffering, that humans live and speak in nature."[120] Derrida rejects this Schellingian-Benjaminian-Heideggerian motif of the sadness of nature, the idea that nature's numbness and muteness signals an infinite pain, as teleologically logo-centric: language becomes a *telos* of nature, nature strives towards the Word to be relieved of its sadness, to reach its redemption. But this mystical *topos* nonetheless raises the right question by, again, turning around the standard perspective: not "What is nature for language? Can we grasp nature adequately in/through language?" but "What is language for nature? How does its emergence affect nature?" Far from belonging to logo-centrism, such a reversal is the strongest suspension of logo-centrism and teleology, in the same way that Marx's thesis on the anatomy of man as providing the key to the anatomy of ape subverts any teleological evolutionism. Derrida is aware of this complexity: he describes how the animal sadness

doesn't just derive from the inability to speak and

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120 Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 19.

> from muteness, from a stupefied or aphasic priva-
> tion of words. If this putative sadness also gives rise
> to a lament, if nature laments, expressing a mute but
> audible lament through sensuous sighing and even
> the rustling of plants, it is perhaps because the terms
> have to be inverted. Benjamin suggests as much.
> There must be a reversal, an *Umkehrung* in the essence
> of nature . . . nature (and animality within it) isn't sad
> because it is mute. On the contrary, it is nature's sad-
> ness or mourning that renders it mute and aphasic,
> that leaves it without words.[121]

Following Benjamin, Derrida thus interprets this reversal in the
sense that what makes nature sad is not "a muteness and the
experience of powerlessness, an inability ever to name; it is, in
the first place, the fact of *receiving one's name*."[122] Our insertion
into language, our being given a name, functions as a *memento
mori*—in language, we die in advance, we relate to ourselves as
already dead. Language is in this sense a form of melancholy, not
of mourning: in it, we treat an object which is still alive as already
dead/lost, so that when Benjamin speaks about "*a foreshadowing
of mourning*," we should take this as the very formula of melan-
choly.

  There is, however, a barely concealed ambiguity in Derrida's
claims: If sadness is prior to muteness (lack of language), if it
causes muteness, is the primordial function of language then to
release/abolish this sadness? But if this is the case, how can then
this sadness originally be the sadness of receiving one's name?
Am I left without words at the unheard-of violence of someone
naming me, sticking a symbolic identity onto me without asking

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121 Ibid.
122 Ibid., 19–20.

my consent? And how can the sadness caused by this reduction to the passivity of being named be experienced by nature itself? Does such an experience not presuppose that one already dwells in the dimension of naming, of language? Should one not limit such a claim to so-called domestic animals? Lacan noted somewhere that, while animals do not speak, domestic animals nonetheless already dwell in the dimension of language (they react to their names, run to their master when they hear it called, obey orders, etc.), which is why, although they do not have access to "normal" subjectivity, they can nonetheless be affected by (human) pathology: a dog can be hystericized, etc. So, to return to the sad perplexed gaze of the laboratory cat, what it expresses is perhaps the cat's horror at having encountered The Animal, namely ourselves, humans: what the cat sees is us in all our monstrosity, and what we see in its tortured gaze is our own monstrosity. In this sense, the big Other (the symbolic order) is already here for the poor cat: like the prisoner in Kafka's penal colony, the cat suffered the material consequences of being caught in the symbolic gridlock. The cat effectively suffered the consequences of being named, included into the symbolic network.

To resolve this problem, should we distinguish between *two* sadnesses: the sadness of natural life prior to and independent of language, and the sadness of being named, submitted to language? There is, first, the "infinite melancholy of all living things," a tension or pain which is resolved when a Word is spoken; then, however, the pronunciation of a Word itself generates a sadness of its own (referred to by Derrida). Does this insight into the intimate link between language and pain not bring us close to Richard Rorty's definition of humans as beings who suffer and are able to narrate their suffering—or, as Derrida put it, to man as the autobiographical animal? What Rorty doesn't take into account is the additional pain (surplus-pain) generated by language itself.

Maybe Hegel can show us a way here, when he interprets gravity as an indication that matter (nature) has its center outside itself and is condemned to endlessly strive towards it; spirit, on the contrary, has its center in itself, i.e., with the rise of spirit, reality returns back to itself from its self-externalization. Spirit, however, is only actual in human thought whose medium is language, and language involves an even more radical externalization—nature thus returns to itself through a repeated externalization (or, as Schelling would have put it, in language, a subject contracts itself outside itself).

There is an underlying necessity at work here: every speaker—every name-giver—*has* to be named, has to be included in its own chain of nominations, or, to refer to the joke often quoted by Lacan: "I have three brothers, Paul, Ernest, and myself." No wonder that, in many religions, God's name is secret, one is prohibited from pronouncing it. The speaking subject persists in this in-between: prior to nomination, there is no subject, but once it is named, it already disappears in its signifier—the subject never is, it always *will have been*.

But what if that which characterizes humans is this very openness to the abyss of the radical Other, this perplexity of "What does the Other really want from me?"? In other words, what if we turn the perspective around here? What if the perplexity a human looking at a cat sees in the animal's gaze is the perplexity aroused by the monstrosity of the human being itself? What if it is my own abyss I see reflected in the abyss of the Other's gaze—"*dans ses yeux, je vois ma perte ecrite*," as Racine put it in *Phedre*? Or, in Hegelese, instead of asking, "What is Substance for Subject?," "How can Subject grasp the Substance?," one should ask the obverse question: "What is (the rise of the) Subject for (pre-subjective) Substance?" G. K. Chesterton proposed such a Hegelian reversal precisely apropos man and animals: instead

of asking what animals are for humans, for our experience, we should ask what man is for animals—in his less known *Everlasting Man*, Chesterton conducts a wonderful mental experiment along these lines, imagining the monster that man might have seemed at first to the merely natural animals around him:

> The simplest truth about man is that he is a very strange being; almost in the sense of being a stranger on the earth. In all sobriety, he has much more of the external appearance of one bringing alien habits from another land than of a mere growth of this one. He has an unfair advantage and an unfair disadvantage. He cannot sleep in his own skin; he cannot trust his own instincts. He is at once a creator moving miraculous hands and fingers and a kind of cripple. He is wrapped in artificial bandages called clothes; he is propped on artificial crutches called furniture. His mind has the same doubtful liberties and the same wild limitations. Alone among the animals, he is shaken with the beautiful madness called laughter; as if he had caught sight of some secret in the very shape of the universe hidden from the universe itself. Alone among the animals he feels the need of averting his thought from the root realities of his own bodily being; of hiding them as in the presence of some higher possibility which creates the mystery of shame. Whether we praise these things as natural to man or abuse them as artificial in nature, they remain in the same sense unique.[123]

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123 G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, available at http://www.worldinvisible.com/library/chesterton/everlasting/content.htm

This is what Chesterton called "thinking backwards": we have to place ourselves back in time, before the fateful decisions were made or before the accidents occurred that generated the state which now seems normal to us, and the royal way to do it, to render palpable this open moment of decision, is to imagine how, at that point, history may have taken a different turn. With regard to Christianity, instead of losing time probing into how it relates to Judaism, how it misunderstands the Old Testament by reading it as announcing the arrival of Christ—and trying to reconstruct how it was with the Jews prior to Christianity, unaffected by the retroactive Christian perspective—one should rather turn the perspective around and "extraneate" Christianity itself, treat it as Christianity-in-becoming and focus on what a strange beast, what a scandalous monstrosity, Christ must have appeared to be in the eyes of the Jewish ideological establishment.

8

Pray and Watch—The Messianic Subversion
Gunjević

The only philosophy which would still be accountable in the face of despair, would be the attempt to consider all things, as they would be portrayed from the standpoint of redemption. Cognition has no other light than that which shines from redemption out upon the world; all else exhausts itself in post-construction and remains a piece of technics. Perspectives must be produced which set the world beside itself, alienated from itself, revealing its cracks and fissures, as needy and distorted as it will one day lay there in the messianic light.[124]

The text of the Gospel According to Mark is an example of the socio-literary genre of the first Church. The author of this subversive text, hidden behind his Hellenized name, is a member of the marginalized multitude. Mark's protagonist, Jesus of Nazareth, also on the margins in Galilee and apparently a tragic figure, is someone of whom readers at first knew very little. The text was written for a politically marginal community lurking on the borders of the Roman Empire. In terms of the narrative, Mark's text describes three worlds, Jesus', Mark's, and the third world of the reader whom Mark addresses. In the societies of

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[124] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, aphorism 153; trans. Dennis Redmond; available at http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1951/mm/index.htm

Antiquity almost 80 percent of the inhabitants lived in villages
and few could read. Literacy was a privilege of the urban elite
who lived sheltered, comfortable lives in well-organized cities. In
such a context, the oral tradition is considered the relevant mode
for passing on social knowledge. Mark's story of Jesus—which
was, at first, only memorized—was the first text in Antiquity
written by someone from the margins about someone on the
margins and for a marginalized readership. The manner in which
the text is written and the period in which it originates point to
the theopolitical, subversive nature of the story, and the ques-
tion of the "Messianic secret" runs through the sub-text. "Let
him that readeth understand," Mark says cryptically in Chapter
13. Mark's text is not a Greek tragedy, a biography of Jesus, a
historiography of miracle-working, or an Antique hagiography;
nor is it an apologia for the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.
Mark's story is a text that defies interpretation using an objective
and sterile academic Biblical theology of the bourgeois variety.
Mark's Gospel mocks contemporary exegesis and resembles
more a manifesto or guerilla manual for militants than it does a
paradigm for a historical critique listing the number of irregular
verbs in the text.

The first question is how the Jesus whom Mark presents
resists any political identification, distancing himself from all
political and theological Jewish movements, parties, or follow-
ings, while at the same time embracing disempowerment in the
name of the marginalized multitude. An emptied "theopolitical"
space is created through this public distancing and voluntary dis-
empowerment, a space which Mark fills with a new meaning and
interpretation of the notion of "Messiah" when Jesus, as Mes-
siah, forbids anyone to speak of this or to testify. In other words,
Mark totally "deconstructs" the Messianic scenario. Mark's
writing is characterized by irony, repetition, and understate-

ment. Mark leaves a great deal to the reader's judgment because he does not treat his readers as fools, as Michel De Certeau has said in a different context. Equally, Mark's words to the community of readers and followers of the Messiah are an invitation to an unexpected practice that requires a profound deliberation, such as for example, when Jesus was walking at the sea. He came to a frightened community of people out fishing in the night. In writing of this, in one place Mark says, "He would have passed by them." Why would he have come *to* them, yet intending to pass by them? Clearly Mark had something else in mind. Mark's text is full of such notes of ironic dissonance:

> ❯ The reader from the start knows that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, while this awareness is withheld from everyone else (except the demons who are forbidden from speaking and disclosing Jesus' identity). It is worth remarking that in Mark's text the demons obey Jesus' will, while people are given a choice. The only character who recognizes, testifies to, and confesses to Jesus' identity is none other than his "ideological enemy," the Roman centurion under the cross who symbolizes Roman imperial power. These paradoxes run through all the Gospels. The "paradoxes of the disciples" are the only clear signs that indicate Messianic practice thanks to which one reaches the Kingdom of God (Mark 4:25, 8:35, 9:35, 9:42, 9:43, 9:47, 10:15, 10:43–5). Messianic practices are realized through the tension of paradox.

> ❯ Mark's text brings "good news," yet only by announcing that an innocent man was crucified (Mark's tragic protagonist); and the story's ending is not clear: we can barely make out the event of the resurrection.

This ending indicates the cyclical nature of the text in which the disciples, in order to meet with their resurrected teacher, must go to back to where the story of the disciples began, in Galilee (Mark 16:7).

› Jesus' friends and family think he is beside himself (Mark 3:21). They want to soothe him and lead him away to safety. They send others to fetch him. Jesus declares he has no family and that his family are those sitting in the circle around him and doing God's will. He calls these people his brethren and sisters because they are the ones who belong to the community of the radically equal, the Messianic emancipatory collective. Moreover, some of those immediately around him insult him indirectly in the worst possible way, given that theirs was a patriarchal society: "Behold, thy mother and thy brethren without seek for thee"—implying that his father is not looking for him (Mark 3:32). His opponents, in other words, wish to discredit him (Mark 6:3) by suggesting that he is a bastard. How could such a person be a Messiah?

› From the very beginning of his story Mark packs many events into a brief interval of time, as time has been "fulfilled and the apocalyptic campaign of the Kingdom of God is beginning." The urgency and haste in the very first chapter are described by the Greek word *euthys*, most accurately translated as "immediately thereafter, quickly, that same moment." The word *euthys* appears eleven times in Chapter 1. Mark seems to be in a hurry to present his protagonist and the story about him, so much so that he skips the parts about his birth. This is no place for Christmassy sentimentality. Equally Mark does not tell of Jesus'

Sermon on the Mount, as if suggesting indirectly that the readers themselves must write their own sermon on the mount with their lives, as becomes clear from Jesus' apocalyptic discourse in Chapter 13.

❯ The key moments for understanding Mark's text are not the questions asked of Jesus, nor are they Jesus' answers or his symbolic actions (healing, exorcisms, the miracles of him feeding the hungry), nor even his parables, but rather the questions he asks his disciples, his opponents, and, in fact, his readers, such as: "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath days, or to do evil? Who is my mother, or my brethren? Why are ye so fearful? How is that ye have no faith? Are ye so without understanding also? Whom do men say that I am? But whom say ye that I am? What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way? Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? And be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? Whose is this image and superscription? My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" These questions are directed firstly to us, the readers, today, not only to the characters in the story. Jesus does not answer a single question explicitly but instead uses parables and stories.

❯ With an abundant use of irony (blind Bartimaeus is the only one who sees who Jesus is, and by healing him Jesus shows that everyone around Bartimaeus is blind), Mark does not portray Jesus as a wandering charismatic and miracle-worker, but chiefly as non-violent Messiah and apocalyptic Son of Man who radically redefines and subverts the social and cultural hierarchical structure of power which is invariably, as is well known, symbolically codified. This symbolic

taxonomy is founded in the religious discourse of the Jewish elite and legitimized through the political and economic practice of violence perpetrated by the Roman Empire.

› From the start of the story Mark's Jesus questions the "social orthodoxy" that legitimates the patriarchal reality construct. Jesus in Galilee heals the mother of Peter's wife "and she ministered unto them" (Mark 1:31). This does not mean that she made them a tasty dinner but that she served them (*diakonia*) in a way characteristic of those who respond to the Messianic call and who see their actualization in Jesus. The term *diakonia* is mentioned only twice in the entire text. The second mention of this same verb is in the most important sentence: "For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister . . ." (Mark 10:45). Women in Mark's text are shown as para-digmatic models of Messianic practice. To the inner circle of privileged disciples, Peter, James, and John, the writer juxtaposes three women: Mary Magdalene, Mary, mother of James, and Salome (Mark 15:40–1). An unknown woman anoints him and recognizes him as the Messiah while his disciple betrays him. Women testify to his agony on the cross. They follow him and minister to him from the beginning of the mission in Galilee. Many other women from Jerusalem join them. They are the first to come to the sepulcher, asking the question: Who shall roll us away the stone? (Mark 16:3), as Christ's sepulcher was sealed by a boulder. The women wish to corroborate the truth of Jesus' words. In his speeches he had promised he would be resurrected. The women, incarnating the

model of the disciples, come to the Messiah's sepul-
cher and demonstrate the need for a two-fold vision
of reality. "And when they looked, they saw that the
stone was rolled away" (Mark 16:4).

›   The only relevant modus for participating in the
Kingdom of God is the paradox of the cross to which
all are summoned, and the only fitting theology of
that Kingdom, if one can even speak of a theology,
is the Messianic practices which are represented by
the metaphor of "way." Paradoxically, the disciples are
not only those who "literally" follow Jesus, yet do not
understand him, but also those who do not follow him
(or are sitting "by the way"), yet do understand him,
as does one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus,
or blind Bartimaeus, or the Syrophenician woman
whose daughter was possessed (i.e., mentally ill).

Almost half of Mark's story speaks of Jesus' suffering and death,
so it is no wonder that Mark arrives at the story of Jesus' suf-
fering after a lengthy introduction. Mark's readers need to be
convinced that Jesus is the apocalyptic Son of God, and not
an apolitical charismatic, merciful healer. With their miracle-
working, the healers of Antiquity legitimized the political and
social *status quo*, and in doing so secured for themselves eco-
nomic and political privileges. This is altogether the opposite of
the Messianic practice on which the carpenter from Nazareth
insists. If Jesus had been an apolitical charismatic, a wandering
healer, of whom in Antiquity in the Middle East there were far
too many, there would have been no reason whatsoever for the
unprincipled coalition of Herodians and Pharisees to conspire
against him, as related in the first fifth of the Gospel (Mark 3:6).
In that first fifth, Jesus exorcises an unclean spirit from a man

in Capernaum, heals several people from disease, and summons a few disciples, openly violating certain taboos and bringing into question the social stratification in ritual cleansing. Immediately after the conspiracy Jesus consolidates his community of radical equals by declaring ideological warfare on the political and religious elite who oppose his mission (Mark 3:20–35). Surrounded by a multitude of followers, Mark's Jesus is aware of the impact of his own mission which must move from the margins of society (the desert and the villages of Galilee) to the center (Jerusalem), in which the final confrontation will happen with the corrupt representatives of the Temple and the urban elite who will, with the Roman occupying forces, be responsible for his being put to death. Ideological warfare is declared through a simple parable and examples from the life of those who till the soil (Mark 4:1–34), which Jesus' audience could readily understand. Mark's commentaries on Jesus' parables are inspirational because they address the community of readers, meaning us, today.

The multitude follows Jesus, and Mark's use of the word *ochlos* (multitude) twice in a single sentence is intended to bring this to our attention. The word "multitude," in contrast to the word for "people" (*laos*), comes up in Mark's text an incredible thirty-eight times. The teaching of the multitude is one of the practices for which the disciples have been summoned. The methodology of collective emancipatory teaching is founded on simple parables drawn from raw experience and analysis of the everyday life of the farm laborer. The complexity of the Kingdom of God about which Jesus speaks lies in the fact that the manifold relationships within it contradict every concept of ruling and power to which the multitude was accustomed. This is, of course, the Roman Empire, but it is also the Jewish theocratic state, which lives on in the stories and writings of the Jewish people who celebrate an ideally mythologized past. Being subjected to the horrific repressive practices of

Empire, it is difficult for the multitude to imagine the practice of the Kingdom of God because the impact of such repression upon psychological life is so great that, as the anti-psychiatrist R.D. Laing once said, it destroys experience, hence their behavior is destructive.[125] Mark describes this "destroyed experience" and "destructive behavior" vividly in the terrible case of the possessed man of Gadarenes, mentioned by Hardt and Negri as representing the "dark side" of the multitude.[126]

The multitude as the subject of repressive practices of Empire in Mark's text is chiefly those who are socially excluded and dependent, those marginalized by faith, the physically handicapped, the mentally ill, and the spiritually meek. It is precisely among these, Mark is arguing, that the new social order is being sown. This includes lepers, those with special needs, prostitutes, widows, orphans, customs officials, in other words those on the margins. Jesus relies on the tactic of specific speech in the parables. By so doing he describes and summons into being the reality of the Kingdom of God and renews the power of imagination and the destroyed perception of the downtrodden multitude so that it can participate in the Messianic practices Jesus is inaugurating. Jesus' parables are not only *earthly stories with divine meaning*, they are also concrete descriptions of a practice that was accessible to the disenfranchised multitude. Such parables often contain unpredictable and surprising twists which question the multitude's already entrenched assumptions. The parable about the subversive sower describes with crystal clarity the reality of agricultural labor and poverty, furnished with difficulties with which every resident of Judea was familiar. This is the reality determined by the arid, unirrigated soil of occupied Judea.

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125 R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 12.

126 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 138.

The peasant scatters the seed and hopes for the best. This method of sowing was typical throughout Palestine. First the seed is sown, then the field is plowed so that the seeds will be planted as deeply as possible in the soil, which has been ploughed for many generations. There is no place for optimism in such a process. The best that can be hoped for is a good year, despite the weeds and the poor soil. This image of the sower is an image of agrarian poverty and its critics. The peasant must not only feed his family and pay land taxes, he must also pay tax on the earnings from the sale of his harvest. If he has too few tools, he must rent them from various lenders, which only raises his costs. And to make things even more difficult, he must save seeds for the next year to have enough to sow again. This sort of agrarian policy of repression of the multitude explains the fact that 75 percent of the seed sown is wasted because it never sprouts. If there is not enough of a harvest at the end of the year, the peasant must rely on loans from the large landowners at steep interest rates, forcing him to mortgage what little land he has and go into debtor's servitude. He finally arrives at a situation where he must sell his land for a price which is several times lower than its market value. In this way he becomes cheap labor or, in the more extreme cases, sells himself into slavery for a period of time so that he can pay off the principal on his loan. The big landowners become richer and richer, while the poor grow poorer and more desperate.

At such a moment Jesus speaks of a good seed flourishing beyond belief and bringing a plentiful harvest, something that confounds the multitude. It would be realistic to expect thirty-fold more than what was sown, but a hundred-fold—that seems more than a bit much. In fact, it would be by no means excessive for a peasant with a family to feed, taxes to pay, seed to set aside for the next year, and the need for surplus to share with those

who have nothing. It would seem that Jesus had taken a perilous lunge at the rationality of the materially and psychologically dev-astated poor. But, Jesus, when speaking of Messanic practices, has something else in mind and he conveys it only enigmatically. Those who wish to hear the parable of the seed, the sower, and fertile soil must have ears and must listen. Nothing, it would seem, could be easier. Let us take a closer look at the parable of the sower, which was, for Mark, the most important of them all, and, as we'll see later, provides the hermeneutic key for an understanding of all of Jesus' parables.[127]

We can imagine a simple musical backdrop to Jesus' parable such as the song recorded by the Rastafarian band Bad Brains (in my opinion one of the most important bands currently in America) that speaks of how the meek will inherit the earth. Bad Brains' theology is in this case of greater help than a modern historically critical exegesis because HR, the lead singer, links intertextually, as does Mark, several theological traditions in his song, desiring to describe anew the political reality by calling for change. It is obvious that the meek have never inherited the earth nor will they. But HR largely changes the meaning of the song by interpolating the first Psalm into his lyric:

> Blessed is the one
> who does not walk in step with the wicked
> or stand in the way that sinners take
> or sit in the company of mockers,
> but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
> and who meditates on his law day and night.
> That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,

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127 Aside from this one we have only two more parables in Mark's text, and these are the one about the crime in the vineyard (Mark 12:1–12) and the one about the theology of revolutionary watching (Mark 13:1–36).

which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.

Not so the wicked!
They are like chaff
that the wind blows away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

If we read HR's song through the prism of the first psalm, an entirely new vision of reality opens up before us. This is precisely the same thing Mark is doing in his story of Jesus' parable of the sower.

Jah children, jah children, yeah
The meek shall inherit the earth.
Jah children, jah children, yeah
The meek shall inherit the earth.
In due season, each will pay
according to the works that
they have done on Earth today.
So I and I, we shall live in truth.
His Majesty, His Majesty
has shown us a better day.[128]

Let us see what transpires with the seed and of what sort of seed Jesus speaks:

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128 Bad Brains, "The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth," from *Rock for Light* (Caroline Records, 1991).

› The first portion of seed sown falls by the wayside and is eaten by the fowls of the air. This is a metaphor for capricious unreliability and refers in large part to the multitude which followed Jesus, a multitude who adored him as he entered Jerusalem, the selfsame multitude who witnessed his miracles and who later shouted and hailed his public condemnation and violent death.

› The second portion of seed sown falls on stony soil and is scorched by the sun. This is a metaphor for superficiality and rootlessness. This seed refers to the *Jerusalem religious elite*, who do not recognize Jesus and do not respond to his call, with the exception of Joseph of Arimathaea (Mark 15:43).

› The third portion of seed sown falls on thorny ground and is soon choked by brambles and weeds. The seed, here, serves as a metaphor for an avaricious and anxious obsession with wealth. The brambles and weeds in this case are the domestic political elite as well as the Roman imperial government, with the exception of the centurion under the cross who gives the most accurate confession of faith. "Truly this man was the Son of God."

› Finally, only the fourth portion of seed falls on good ground. Good ground is a metaphor for the cultivation of plentiful fruit of the field. This is fruit so plentiful as to defy the imagination. This last part of the parable refers to *all those who wish to participate in Messianic practices* regardless of the position they hold in society. Mark tells us that a variety of people responded to Jesus' call, and followed his example.

If the disciples do not understand this parable, how will others understand it, as this parable is the key for understanding all the rest? According to Fernando Belo, this parable is key because *it is the paradigm for Jesus' Messianic mission*. Not only is Jesus the sower, sowing the word *in our hearts*, but herein is shown the success or failure of the Messianic mission, which is the thrust of Mark's whole story. Moreover, Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed from which the Jews made no herbs, viewing it as a species of pesky weed to be controlled to keep it from destroying the harvest. In terms of the current order of things, the Kingdom of God is nothing more than that weed. It should therefore come as no surprise that the disciples need an explanation for the parable about the sower and the unusual seed. In these parables Jesus is publicly presenting the doctrine of the Kingdom while, when conversing in private with the disciples, he explains the points they have not understood. When he was speaking in parables, of course, it was not his intention to muddy things or hide them, rather to disclose what had been concealed: with what measure we mete it shall be measured to us. Jesus is not being cynical when he warns us that he who has many possessions will be given even more. That was, after all, a practice his listeners knew far too well. It was the raw everyday reality of agrarian relations in which the rich landowners became all the more powerful while the poor had what little they owned wrested from them.

Jesus is no heartless demagogue when he confirms what the multitude already knows only too well: Things are as they are, we can change nothing, so it is in the world. Yet with his narrative organization Mark is telling us something altogether different. Mark is cautioning the reader: *behold* and *hear* (Mark 4:3, 4:24). Those are Messianic practices. Seeing and hearing. It is, in fact, a call to revolutionary patience which the disciples are

being asked to embrace. Later Jesus asks them to *pray* and *watch*. The Announcement of the Word is the strewing of the seed. The seed of the new social order eludes notice as it sprouts and the disciples are called to a patient hearing, beholding, praying, and watching. Mark's Jesus elaborates on this yet again in what is known as the apocalyptic discourse in Chapter 13, where he calls for perseverance, described by the imperative "Watch" (Mark 13:37). Is this not the most radical form of Messianic practice?

We return once again to the fact that Mark's text is a circular story of two parts, two constitutive narrative threads which could be treated as two separate books. The first thread is Mark 1:1–8:7.

The second thread is the rest of Mark's Gospel (Mark 8:8–16:8). The text turns on the passage in 8:22–9, relating the crucial event in Mark's story about Jesus. In conversation with the disciples, Jesus addresses them at first by introducing himself (Mark 8:27), and then asks the key question: "Whom say ye that I am?" (Mark 8:29). The question is addressed to us, the readers. Who do we think Jesus to be? Every answer we offer commits us, but we cannot fail to answer. If we have nothing to say in reply, we must continue on the path of the disciples until we come to the answer, for the story proceeds in a circle.

François Laruelle, "inventor" of non-philosophy, literally helped me to read the Gospel According to Mark. Laruelle suggests a model known as the Möbius strip. In Mark's text the
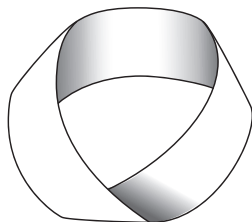
Möbius strip is doubled, not only connecting the two parts of his story of Jesus but, foremost, helping to answer the question asked of us as readers. The strip as it is twisted around leads the reader and practitioner (the disciple) from the outside to the inside and then back out again. The circularity of the two-sided strip as proposed by Laruelle explains in the simplest way possible the message Mark's Gospel is sending to the reader.
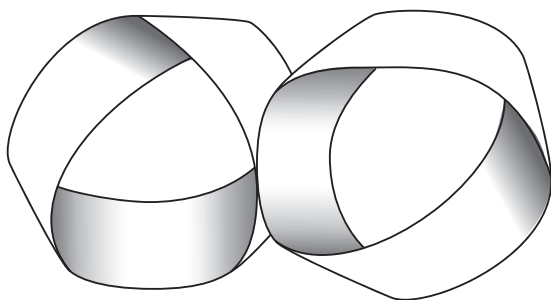
And when he had called the people [*ochlos*—multitude] *unto him* with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it. For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. (Mark 8:34–8)

Jesus' "anti-triumphal" entry into Jerusalem happens within this narrative framework. From the margin of society, the periphery of Judea, Mark describes Jesus' arrival at the seat of power in an unusual and imaginative way. The path of radical discipleship runs from the desert which is controlled by no one, through rural pagan toponyms, all the way to the seat of power in Jerusalem where rules an urban elite of a number of different provenances. Without concealing his irony, Mark is bent on showing us that we will not encounter God's presence in the Jerusalem Temple (which is the guarantee, for every Jew, of God's presence among his people), but that God is, instead, encountered in the desert. In fact the desert could be considered a privileged place of radical discipleship where, in a particular apocalyptic way, the text itself begins.

Mark gives us the specific, though ambivalent, toponym of the desert. The desert is the site of coercion, anxiety, exile, and especially ordeal, hence we have very few positive statements about it. It is a difficult place, a playground for evil spirits and demons, and when we are there we must answer only one question: how to survive? But the desert is a space of silence and peace which is far from the noise of the city and civilization. In the desert there is no wrangling over space, no quibbling as there is in the city, and what is quite important to say, the desert offers a kind of shelter because all social bonds are broken and physical needs are reduced to a minimum. We go to the "desert" when we would like to distance ourselves from the city and its "complex and urban" style of life. Mark warns us that we must adopt the primordial Messianic practice of confessing sin, which begins, paradoxically, in the desert, since the desert is the only privileged place for encountering God. But at the same time the desert is a place to leave in order to confront in terms of ideology the elite in the seats of power who oppress the poor on the margins of society.

Mark describes this journey to the seat of power in a lucid and "moderately" deconstructivist way.

In Mark's case deconstruction should be understood as a specific strategy of reading that brings into doubt every privileged structural taxonomy by introducing a new difference, trace, and supplement to the reading. Deconstruction insists on a marginal irreducible remainder which generates heterogeneity by insisting on digressions, quotes, commentaries, parodies. And finally, deconstruction in this instance should be thought of as a tool that brings into question a reading which claims to be privileged. Understood in this way, deconstruction in Mark's case can be a form of political strategy.

I will maintain that by writing his own text Mark is deconstructing the Messianic scenario by refusing to endorse any version of Jewish Messianism, while, at the same time, never dismissing the Messianic discourse out of hand—indeed indirectly he is endorsing it. Ched Myers remarks that Mark describes all opponents of God's Kingdom with irony and bitterness, in fact he *caricatures* them, offering "a political cartoon, which to be effective must at once be exaggerated and unmistakably recognizable."[129] Equally Mark portrays the disciples as amazed, anxious, and afraid. Disciples are those who know not, cannot, and will not. They have no faith and they do not recognize the path of radical discipleship (Mark. 10:32). Jesus' grotesque entry into Jerusalem has, in a specific way, a therapeutic pedagogical function which is intended for the disciples. It is well known that moments of nervousness or uncertainty are best "healed" by a sudden outburst of laughter at a pun or a joke. A well-tempered joke performed publicly can prompt a sudden shift of perspective that offers us completely new insight into a situation. This is just

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129 Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 107.

the sort of change that the disciples need in the predicament into which they have been thrust. De Certeau calls the parodical twist of Jesus' street theater an everyday practice of resistance, while Sloterdijk describes it as cynicism.

An unexpected clinical incision can provoke an entirely new vision of ourselves which we couldn't have seen until that shift, having been obsessed by our own phobias and fixations. This is what Jesus does with his "carnivalesque" entry into the city, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey foal. This is his stab at parodying the title of Messiah that represents, at a symbolic level, a complex power structure. At the same time it is an instructional way of lightening the heavy burden of anxiety borne by his disciples. For all those who want to follow Jesus, Mark is not offering instant solutions, for in the political chaos of the "state of emergency" in which Mark's interpretative community found itself, between AD 66 and 70, such a solution would not have been feasible. Mark means to confound us, despite everything, with his intertextual strategy which is largely reminiscent of what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as the construct of partially folkloric literary forms of a parodical and satirical nature known as carnivalization. In Mark's case we understand intertextuality as textual analysis that asks the question of the range of interlinkages among various texts which correspond to a specific "material production of meaning" within the various interpretative communities standing "behind" the text itself.

Jesus, together with the disciples, arrives at the Jerusalem suburbs, reaching Bethany on the Mount of Olives, which is a Messianic toponym and heterotopy of the future apocalyptic

battle between the Lord's people and enemy nations.[130] Mark
naturally wishes to re-symbolize this eschatology and place
it in the context of the civil war he is witnessing as he writes.
Jesus sends two of the disciples to prepare their entry into Jeru-
salem—a practical tactic of solidarity on the path to a risky and
subversive action. Mark wishes to show that the Sicarii, Zealots,
and other political and revolutionary movements were not the
only ones who had a wide-reaching network of aiders and abet-
tors. He is showing that Jesus' collective was also well organized
within Jerusalem, the seat of power. Mark gives us the story of
Jesus' entry into Jerusalem with the greatest possible dose of
irony, reducing to absurdity any form of Messianic triumpha-
lism which might have been expected by an enslaved population
longing for freedom.

Blind Bartimaeus is the first to see that Jesus is "Son of David"
(Mark 10:46–52). "Son of David" is a royal title and a complex
theopolitical symbol which every Jew from that time readily
understood. If Jesus was a "royalist pretender" then he would
have been expected to arrive at his Jerusalem inauguration with
great imperial pomp, horses, chariots, a powerful armed force, a
personal guard, and other royal trappings. He behaves in exactly

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130 "Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, and the spoil shall be divided in the
      midst of thee. (2) For I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle; and
      the city shall be taken, and the houses rifled, and the women ravished; and
      half of the city shall go forth into captivity, and the residue of the people shall
      not be cut off from the city. (3) Then shall the Lord go forth, and fight against
      those nations, as when he fought in the day of battle. (4) And his feet shall
      stand in that day on upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on
      the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof towards
      the east and towards the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half
      of the mountain shall remove towards the north, and half of it towards the
      south. (5) And ye shall flee to the valley of the mountains; for the valley of the
      mountains shall reach unto Azal: yea, ye shall flee, like as ye fled from before
      the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah: and the Lord shall come,
      and all the saints with thee" (Zechariah 14:1–5).

the opposite way. With his entry into the Palestinian metropolis on a donkey foal—a form of "political street theater"—he ridicules, parodies, trivializes, and takes to the absurd the political symbols of the "earthly kingdom" that, in Mark's case, was incarnated by the Roman Empire. In this madcap way, within a "liturgical carnival," the carpenter from Nazareth is not merely mocking the title of emperor but bringing into question the very notion of Messianism while at the same time getting a laugh out of the crowd, particularly his anxious disciples.

Mark constructs this event very carefully in intertextual terms as a separate socio-literary paradigm which will serve to legitimize Jesus' confrontation with the religious and political elite in Jerusalem (Mark 11:14–12:40). Mark is clearly referencing events from the glorious Jewish past that he carefully interweaves with the present, in order to bring into question:

> ❯ a populist ideological Messianism and popular fatalistic apocalypticism;
> ❯ nationalistic mythology (legitimized through the banal practice of violence);
> ❯ the guerilla folklore of peasant bands who with equal intensity loathe the wealthy, the colluding Jewish elite, and the Roman occupying forces.

How does Mark implement and interpret the Old Testament prophesies? The answer is: as a subversive model of resistance to the dominant ideology of nationalistic Messianism. Mark's textual paradigm is the barely legible or negotiable apocalyptic prophet Zechariah:

> Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he

is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an
ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass. (Zechariah 9:9)

It is enough to use words such as "just," "having salvation,"
"lowly," and even more, "riding upon an ass," to provide a con-
trast to the triumphalist entry and military victory of Simon
Maccabee about which the Book of Maccabees speaks:

And the Jews entered into it the three and twentieth
day of the second month, in the year one hundred
and seventy-one, with thanksgiving, and branches of
palm trees, and harps, and cymbals, and psalteries,
and hymns, and canticles, because the great enemy
was destroyed out of Israel. (1 Maccabees 13:51)

Within these two texts, Mark situates Jesus' entry into Jeru-
salem, lending it an entirely different meaning. But these two
texts intermingle with a number of other Old Testament texts
and allusions to these texts (Genesis 49:11, I Samuel 6:7, 2 Kings
9:13, Psalm 118:25) that he arranges skillfully and with great
precision into a collage which, like a palimpsest, shows different
images under diverse refractions of light. Not only does Mark
read the political events which stand behind the text of the "his-
tory of salvation," but he reads and inscribes these events into
the contemporary social, economic, and cultural relations in
which he, probably indirectly, took part. In a specific way, Mark's
story is an historical interpretation intended for the present-day.
Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is not the slightest bit like the entry
of Menahem, who had become one of the leaders of the rebellion,
joining up with other less organized "rebels" against Rome in the
year AD 66. Nor is Jesus' entry into Jerusalem similar to that
of yet another Messianic royalist pretender, Simon bar Giora,

or that of the radical John of Gischala. All three of these others pretended to the Messianic royal title, squabbling among themselves, and, in this way, weakening the otherwise well-organized defense of Jerusalem at a time of a "state of emergency" which lasted for four years.

Let us use Horsley and Hanson's sociological studies about that time to present in brief the political reality "behind" Mark's text, describing the state of emergency within which he is criticizing these Messianic royalist pretenders. Jesus' non-violent and humble entry into Jerusalem is not, as we have said, remotely similar to the entry of the Sicarii leader and rebel Menahem (some even claim he was son or grandson of Judas of Galilee) who attacked Herod's armories in the year AD 66 with several other rebels and "robbers" at the Masada fortification. Menahem armed the men he had assembled in rural Galilee and, together with some other insurgents, began a bloody uprising, swiftly capturing Jerusalem. He does not deserve credit for the Jerusalem uprising but he did assert himself as the leader of various Zealot groups in the city. Through his remarkable organizational skills (and despite his followers being in the minority) he drew together what is known as the Zealot coalition, within which he had his own set of bodyguards, and quickly proclaimed himself "king."

Menahem's followers (a heterogeneous band of Sicarii) were responsible for the slaying of the high priest Annas and his brother Ezekiel at the very start of the uprising. Portuguese writer Fernando Belo, the most radical left-wing interpreter of Mark's story of Jesus, attributes this claim to Josephus.[131] There is an interesting fact worth mentioning here: immediately upon entering the Temple treasury and archive, the rebel leader gave an order for all Temple books and lists of

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131 Fernando Belo, *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* (Ann Arbor: Orbis Books, 1991), 84.

debts to be burned. Apparently he thought that by doing so he would destroy the stranglehold of the religious elite and political establishment which repressed the people using various forms of loans and interest, holding them in the thrall of debt and slavery.

As Mark shows us, Jesus is not in the least like another Messianic pretender, Simon bar Giora, who took part, like Menahem, in the uprising against the Romans as commander of Jerusalem's defense. We can only imagine what the clash must have been like between royal pretender Menahem and Messianic pretender Simon bar Giora when the radical John of Gischala leaped into the political fray. Aside from John, Eleazar ben Ya'ir, the captain of the Temple guard, also played a decisive role, slaying Menahem because he had killed Eleazar's father, the high priest Annas. We mustn't forget that at the time of the siege there had been negotiations underway with the Romans that only aggravated the internal Zealot struggle for power within Jerusalem. John of Gischala was one more Messianic pretender who was not entirely harmless as he had mustered a considerable band of disgruntled peasants in northern Galilee and formed them into a respectable military unit.

Simon bar Giora meanwhile became an renegade, a robber and a despot, and was politically unsuccessful because he failed to win over the well-organized Sicarii guerillas who had their checkpoints in the nearby hills. This did not, however, sway him from his violent attempt at conquest and forming a provisional government. In a move of political intrigue he proclaimed an end to slavery and indebtedness and in so doing drew a powerful army and began to comport himself in a royal fashion. He consolidated his ranks, and with a relatively large and well-supplied army, he captured Idumea and Judea without a fight (which served him as a robust logistical support for food, weapons, and troops),

but lost control of Jerusalem. An internal struggle over the city ensued (which weakened its well-organized defenses) between Simon bar Giora and John of Gischala, to whom the "city fathers" had begun to shift their support. These were chiefly non-aristocratic priests, and, unexpectedly, John of Gischala received a burst of support from the Zealots who were holding the Temple. Simon bar Giora slayed several prominent figures of the Sanhedrin, even Matthew from one of the high-priestly families, son of Boethus (who had arranged for Simon's entry into Jerusalem at the start of the uprising), accusing him of high treason and colluding with the Romans.[132]

But four years after the Jewish "revolution," Jerusalem was in Vespasian's hands, despite the valiant fight put up by its defenders during a five-month siege. In September of the year AD 70, the Temple fell to the Romans, and the Zealots valiantly gave up their lives. Simon attempted to flee with a handful of his most fanatic adherents, but he was apprehended. Wearing a white tunic and a purple cap, wrapped in a royal cloak, Simon bar Giora appeared at the site of the Temple ruins and almost symbolically offered his life as a sacrifice to God on the demolished Temple altar. However, unlike John of Gischala, who was jailed and put to death like the most ordinary lowlife criminal and rebel, Simon was escorted to Rome in an almost solemn cer-

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132 Fernando Belo describes this chaotic, almost Balkan, situation as follows: "the Zealots chose a new high priest by lot from among the old legitimate high-priestly families that had effectively been excluded from the office since 172 B.C.; the choice fell on a simple man who was practicing a manual trade. Finally, the Zealots put up a desperate defense of the Temple throughout the war, and especially in its final phase. All this shows that the Zealots were not seeking a 'revolution' that would do away with the subasiatic mode of production, but a 'rebellion' that would restore it to its pure form. In a number of ways the Zealot movement reminds us of the Deuteronomist movement (the notable exception, of course, being that the monarchy was no longer an issue)" (ibid., 85).

emony as proof of Vespasian's triumph in Judea. There he was put to death as the Jewish king.

In this extended historical digression I wished to elucidate Mark's narrative about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, which begins under a telling and suggestive aegis, directed to the players in the story: "Why do ye this?" In other words, why do you prepare in such a way so that Jesus should enter Jerusalem as did Menahem or Simon bar Giora, as did the self-proclaimed kings and Messiahs? Such distasteful alternatives were unthinkable for Mark. For Mark's Messiah, about whom the Book of Maccabees and the prophet Zachariah had spoken, the entry into Jerusalem was not to involve a military siege, an uprising, a "revolution," or the torching of the Temple archives.

Jesus enters the Jerusalem Temple quite late in the evening, unobtrusively, one might even say in a self-effacing manner, he has a look around, and then he returns to Bethany. He comes back to the Temple the next day and there begins his public confrontation with the religious and political elite, the high priests, scribes, elders, Pharisees, Herodians, the Sadducees, and the Zealots. This is quite unanticipated for someone who aspires to the title of Messiah. Clearly Mark's Jesus had something altogether different in mind. Who knows what? Though he was greeted with Messianic greetings and presented with Messianic trappings (palm branches and cloaks) that suggest a royal pretender, Mark's Jesus rebuffs any vestige of Messianic identification. His conduct at the Temple and the conflict he provokes with the religious and political elite suggest a new notion of Messianism. In this notion of Messianism, the man from Nazareth identifies with those who are helpless, with the disempowered and the multitude, "incarnated" by a poor widow making a donation to a corrupt Temple which was soon to be destroyed. "There shall not be left one stone upon another" (Mark 13:2). Messianic practices are an anticipation of

that destruction and a model of how to live when the old structures are in ruins and there is nothing new on the horizon.

Mark offers us a radically different interpretation of Jesus' Messianism in which the most obvious meaning remains hidden. Mark seems to want to suggest that one can only come to know the Messiah by participating in Messianic practices—hearing and seeing, watching and praying. Despite the fact that the model of Mark's community is quite specific, it welcomes as allies those who do not formally belong there, though it expels "evil ideological spirits" in Jesus' name. Jesus confirms this to the disciples with a simple inclusive formula: "he is with us who is not against us." This is yet another motive for endorsing a Messianic practice which pertains to the nomadic body of the community on the way to Jerusalem.

> And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. For every one shall be salted with fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt. Salt *is* good: but if the salt have lost his saltness, wherewith will ye season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another. (Mark 9:43–50)

Hand, foot, and eye are metaphors for virtues which represent at the same time portions of a community founded through virtue. Messianic practices of that virtue place in a paradoxically inverse sequence charity, hope, and faith. The hand is a metaphor for charity, the organ with which we feed ourselves. It is the symbol of labor and the member we use for defense, to shake hands, and touch the community. A pointing finger and a clenched fist are an authoritarian expression of power concentrated in a single person, while extended arms and hands represent the power of participation and solidarity founded on charity. The leg and foot are a metaphor for hope, with which we stride forth into the future. Feet propel us in motion, conquer space, and allow us to walk together. If we are to come to someone's aid and extend to that person a hand, we first must wish to see them with the eye of faith. Eyes help us realize our first contacts and the moments of a future relationship and to open ourselves to those we wish to get to know. If we want to get to know them, we look them in the eye, if not, we evade their gaze. This is not merely a question of lust, to which we are enticed by the eyes, but of the desire to deliberately not see the obvious, or to see only what one wants to see. This is a form of blindness. We scandalize others when we have not the courage to look them in the eyes, for the eyes represent faith. It is no coincidence that Mark calls us to Messianic practices of hearing, seeing, prayer, and watching. The disciples, of course, fail in these practices at the most difficult moment of Jesus' mortal anguish in Gethsemane (Mark 14:30). What is easiest seems to be indescribably difficult. Messianic practices are not cheap even if they are free. Although they may seem remarkably harmless and naïve, for Mark they are profoundly subversive and dangerous. As Ched Myers puts it so well:

the literary *novum* called the Gospel of Mark was produced in response to a historical and ideological crisis engendered by the Jewish war. In this apocalyptic moment, a community struggled to maintain its non-violent resistance to the Roman armies, the Jewish ruling class, and rebel recruiters, while sowing the seeds of a new revolutionary order through practice and proselytism. To be sure, 69 C.E. was not the best of times for a radical social experiment. Perhaps this would explain the urgency of the story, its expectation of suffering, and its ideology of failure and starting over.[133]

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133 Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 443–4.

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