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## Preface

This book certainly did grow in the writing, although the full extent of that growth becomes clear only with this “author’s cut.” I have told the story often enough orally. After submitting, retracting, writing some more, submitting again, and then waiting interminably for the poor reviewers to read the manuscript, I was finally told by the keen editors at *Historical Materialism*: we’d like to publish the book, but it is a little on the long side. Do you think you can “shave off” about 100,000 words? Shave, hack, slash I did, while sitting in an apartment in Sofia, Bulgaria, for a couple of weeks in 2005, gradually drawing closer to that magical target. I shared the space with a scholar of French from Romania, communicating by broken French, hand signals and grunts. Eventually the pared-down version made its way into the *Historical Materialism Book Series* with Brill (2007, paperback by Haymarket in 2009).

All the same, I have often joked about putting out an “author’s cut,” glossing Ridley Scott’s director’s cut of that great movie, *Blade Runner* (1992). One day the joke fell on the ears of Chin Ken Pa, indefatigable scholar, editor, and publisher—he took the joke seriously and asked for the manuscript. Not only does Ken Pa edit the journal *Sino-Christian Studies*, but he also edits a number of book series, so it is with one of those series, the supplement series to the journal, that the book now appears in full regalia.

What will the reader find in this book that was not in the shorter *Criticism of Heaven*? Whole sections of chapters are now restored, sections I was forced to cut. Those long stretches of text often contain



detailed and patient textual interpretations upon which I base my conclusions. Some of the more personal engagements with each critic are also back in the text, giving the argument a greater overt investment of my own. No chapter is unaffected, for each has welcomed back the excised parts with much celebration. The conclusion itself it back to its full glory, bearing the seeds of a number of lines of thought that came to fruition after I had written the manuscript. In short, the “author’s cut” is almost fifty percent longer than its shorter incarnation. But is this an act of pure self-indulgence, publishing a much longer version of a book? Is not the initial version enough? Initially, I thought so, but as I began the careful task of re-reading and editing the manuscript, I realised how much text I had cut, text over which I had thought long and hard, had written carefully and revised often. And they are texts that give the whole argument a resonance and depth that was occasionally missing from the initial *Criticism of Heaven*.

To those I thanked in the original preface—Fred Jameson, Ken Surin, Cath Ellis, Deborah Bird Rose, John Docker, Andrew Milner, David Roberts, Kate Rigby, George Aichele, Ed Conrad, Ibrahim Abraham, and Peter Thomas—I would like to add Philip Chia of Hong Kong and Chin Ken Pa of Taipei. Both have been instrumental in opening up the myriad opportunities of China to me, involving me in their projects, enabling more and more translations into Chinese, especially at the intersections of Marxism and theology. Yet in that first preface I also told a little story, of a train journey and an ancient church in Sofia, Bulgaria. The other person in that story was Christina, for we had journeyed together, from northwestern Europe to the southeast, from Copenhagen to Sofia. That we still deeply enjoy journeying together, we are still thoroughly interested in one another’s work, that we still prefer travelling by train and bicycle above any other form of travel, that she puts up with no crap from me, for all of these things I remain thankful.



## Preface to 2007 edition

This book grew in the writing. The product of too many long and difficult years, it often sat quietly while I was engaged with other pursuits only to return to this one yet again. For this book brings together two great passions, the Bible and Marxism. My starting point, however, is Marxism itself, and my search is for the way the engagement with theology and the Bible by some of Marxism's greatest exponents is an indispensable part of their work.

I began writing this book in Northmead, Australia and finished it in Sofia, Bulgaria after a train journey with Christina Petterson across Europe from northwest to southeast. On the way we walked through the Jewish quarter and over the Pest hill of Budapest, were thrown off a train at the Romanian border, travelled over incomplete tracks and through half-rebuilt villages in Serbia only to stay at the magnificent Hotel Moskva in Belgrade, home of the Lefebvre archives. Finally we made our way on an ancient train that slowly rocked its way to Sofia. There, in the midst of the ambiguous and troubled imposition of the worst of US-style capitalism, and after Christina returned to Copenhagen, I found a small second-century Christian church within the walls of the presidential palace. Built before the conversion of Constantine, perhaps at the time when the last of the New Testament texts were being written, in fact before the canon of the New Testament itself had been determined, it came as a complete surprise. Now it is, of course a fascinating and contested site: re-opened once again as an Orthodox church, after some five centuries as a mosque and then for



half a century neglected under Communist rule, it marks both a futile re-assertion by the church of its lost power and the sheer indifference of most Bulgarians to Christianity or even religion of any sort. Much of what this book covers is or will be contested, fascinating, occasionally well-known but mostly surprising territory. I should say, for those who may harbour some suspicions, which my agenda here is not to uncover or debunk these Marxists by uncovering some badly kept theological secrets. Rather, given the crucial role of the Bible and theology in their work, we ignore those elements at our peril.

Let me thank those who have been part of the process of the book. Many have been graceful enough to listen to, read and comment on earlier versions of sections of this book—biblical scholars, literary critics, philosophers, and other sundry Marxists. In particular, various audiences in Australia, Europe, and North America have provided lively feedback to papers that gradually made their way, after many reformulations, into the book. However, the major context has been the Bible and Critical Theory Seminar, perhaps the most important forum for critical biblical studies in Australia today, where a whole wealth of comments and discussions have taken place of various parts of this book. As far as individuals are concerned, I would like to thank Fred Jameson, Ken Surin, Cath Ellis, Deborah Bird Rose, John Docker, Andrew Milner, David Roberts, Kate Rigby, George Aichele, Ed Conrad, Ibrahim Abraham, and Peter Thomas, who have discussed and/or read sections of this work. However, the greatest thanks go to Fiona Marantelli and Matt Chrulew, my untiring research assistants who undertook the formidable task of comment, formatting, and editing with gusto.

A note on translations: my references are to the existing English translations, mainly because these are easier to find for most. Yet there are many snares in doing so and I have cross-checked every translation with the German and French, altering where necessary. Only with the Italian have I relied wholly on the English translations, for Italian is beyond me. As I know from biblical criticism, translation is always a vexed issue, even though one always benefits from the hard work of



others. Apart from the incomplete status of translations, notably with Lefebvre, Althusser's early work, Gramsci's prison notebooks, and some of Bloch, the translations themselves are, as is often pointed out, patchy, with E.B. Ashton's effort on Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* the most woeful of the lot. Fortunately, Robert Hullot-Kentor's work on Kierkegaard is one of the examples of how translation should be done; fortunate for me since it is one of the major texts on which I focus in my discussion of Adorno. The situation with Benjamin is perhaps the most uniform and extensive, with recent translations of swathes of texts and the quality is generally quite good. But even so, what appears to be a reasonably good translation may turn out to have its pitfalls. For instance, J. T. Swann's translation of Bloch's *Atheismus im Christentum* has a knack of leaving out the odd phrase, sentence or section. What we end up with is in many respects an abridged version. And John Osborne's generally good translation of Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book offers some curious, and for my argument crucial, glosses, such as the unaccountable translation of *Heilsgeschichte*, salvation history, as "story of the life of Christ." Of course the translations themselves have generated a whole new wave of criticism that demands yet more translations and re-translations, Robert Hullot-Kentor's work with Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* being the most notable. Sometimes that criticism is somewhat skewed, depending heavily on the choice of which texts to translate, as the history of translations of Lefebvre and Gramsci shows only too clearly.

The Hill, New South Wales

February 2006



## Introduction

This is a work of commentary, that venerable and somewhat neglected tradition that emerges from millennia of biblical criticism. I engage intimately with the writings of some of the major Marxist critics of the twentieth century. But the subject matter that draws me in is not what has drawn most of the critical passion, with its concern for the great themes of Marxist criticism. Rather, my commentary picks up the often extended reflections and deliberations over theology and the Bible that we find in these critics. Apart perhaps from Walter Benjamin, my surprise is how much theological material there is in their work and how little critics have dealt with it. To my great pleasure, in each case—Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Louis Althusser, Henri Lefebvre, Antonio Gramsci, Terry Eagleton, Slavoj Žižek, and Theodor Adorno—I discovered a wealth of material in which to immerse myself.

My purpose here is twofold. Let me frame it in terms of Marx's famous dictum, that the criticism of heaven must become the criticism of earth, the criticism of theology the criticism of politics. What I do first is engage with the path from theology to politics, a path that manifests itself variously as a secularising of theology in the political, the search within theology for political insights, the effort to overcome theology as a whole and the enabling force of theology in subsequent thought. Thus, I offer sustained critiques of the engagements of these figures with theology and, in some cases, biblical studies. This calls for detailed readings of certain, oft-neglected works and parts of works. If I imagine a gathering of all eight Marxists, it is hardly a furtive meeting in a gloomy





and rubbish-strewn alley, collars up against the rain, surreptitious glances cast over hunched shoulders to ensure that no tail is in sight. Each of them—and this is one of the reasons for their presence here—sits down at midday with the Bible and theology, in full view of passers-by, who happen to be made up of literary critics, philosophers, sociologists, and the odd theologian and biblical scholar.

Each of the Marxists I consider is important in contemporary political, cultural, and philosophical debates, which is perhaps reason enough to invite them to the table. But despite their own openness concerning theology and the Bible, their willingness to bare it all in some collective critical confession, others have been far less willing to talk about this part of their work. (Best accounted for, perhaps, by lapses in materialist rigour.) If I asked each of them to bring along a book or essay in which they have written about theology or religion, but which their critics and commentators have mostly ignored, we will be in for some surprises as the worn volumes emerge from backpacks, satchels, coat-pockets, and battered leather brief-cases.

Ernst Bloch, giving the others a messianic stare, produces with a flourish his *Atheism in Christianity* (1968), loudly bemoaning the fact that critics pass by this volume looking askance, preferring his other texts. Louis Althusser, hanging cigarette that is of one with the black circles under his eyes, thrusts forth a fist-full of essays, hastily typed in a frenzy of exhilaration during the high moments of his bipolar state—some of the early theological essays, his famous ideology essay with the Christian “example” highlighted in red, and the collection of lectures *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* (1990). Henri Lefebvre, with a twinkle in his eye that belies his asthma, draws from his pocket a few “Notes Written One Sunday in the French Countryside,” written in 1947 at his village church in Navarrenx. Soon he would be cursing the “crucified sun,” the Gallic crosses scattered about those same hills that represented for him the Church’s systematic stifling of life and joy. The diminutive Antonio Gramsci, silent now after his years in Mussolini’s prisons, places on the table the pages concerning the Roman Catholic Church from



his *Prison Notebooks*, content to allow the neat script of these pages to express his fascination with the Church and the lessons it might provide for the communist movement. Sitting close by Lefebvre, Althusser, and Gramsci, the last of the Catholic Marxists, Terry Eagleton, makes not a move. He has some books with him, but is reluctant to bring them out. Eventually, one of the others produces a number of slim volumes from his days among the Catholic Left in England, books found in the basement of some library and to which Eagleton resolutely refuses to refer in his later works—*The New Left Church* (1966), *The Body as Language: Outline of a 'New Left' Theology* (1970), the *Slant Manifesto* (1966) and various essays from the 1960s journal *Slant*. As prolific as Eagleton but much more willing to proffer his works, with an emphatic gesture of his left hand Slavoj Žižek thumps down on the table his theological trilogy—*The Fragile Absolute* (2000), *On Belief* (2001) and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003). Žižek offers to say grace, much to the surprise of everyone else, before Alain Badiou prods him in the ribs. Žižek withdraws the offer, realising that it is hardly of the stature of his rediscovery of the Protestant reformers' doctrine of grace itself. Finally, the melancholy Theodor Adorno carefully extracts from his leather briefcase his second<sup>1</sup> *Habilitation* thesis from the 1930s, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*. Everyone at the table knows about this first book in philosophy, but few have read it recently if at all and only a few register that it is fact is a theological work through and through. Adorno, however, encourages a retiring Walter Benjamin, whose work everyone seems to know despite the fact that much of it was unknown when he wrote and even more remained unpublished. Of all those gathered here, Benjamin is the exception, for his engagement with theology and the Bible, from early essays such as “On Language as Such and the Language of Man” to the final theses on history, is by far the most well-known and most commented upon.

These, then, are the texts, along with one or two others, that are the

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno's first effort, “Der Begriff des Unbewußten in der transzendentalen Seelenlehre,” was submitted in November to the philosophical faculty at the university in Frankfurt am Main, only to withdraw it (it was technically sent as an “inquiry”) when his teacher, Hans Cornelius, recommended to the committee in January 1928 that it be rejected. See GS 1: 79–322.



centre of my critical commentary. At times this calls for the treatment of vast slabs of text in a synoptic fashion, but more often than not I come in for a much closer look, discussing key passages in detail as befits the genre of commentary itself. And my preferred mode of dealing with these texts is to offer, where possible, criticism on the basis of each writer's own methods. Often this will require hauling in material from elsewhere in their writings, seeking cross-references, comparisons, and questions that arise from such comparisons—in short, a mode of reading that comes from the tradition of biblical commentary. For instance, since I feel that Bloch's strategy of the discernment of myth is one of his major contributions, I argue that at times he lives up to the method itself and provides some brilliant readings of biblical texts, and yet at other moments he falls short of the method's requirements. Or Žižek's identification of the revolutionary potential for the doctrine of grace is one that he realises only fitfully, pursuing all too frequently cul-de-sacs of ethics and the law that are diametrically opposed to grace.

There is, however, a second agenda to this book, namely the development of a materialist theology. But let us return to Marx's dictum to see where this purpose fits in. For Marx the necessary path was from theology to politics, from heaven to earth, but I find myself wanting to ask what the implications are for heaven, for theology itself. Apart from Lefebvre, who maintained a resolute criticism of the Roman Catholic Church in France, each of the critics who appear in this book wittingly or unwittingly develop political and philosophical insights from theology and biblical studies. Theology is useful, in other words, as a resource for political reflection and action. While my engagements in each chapter will critique this direction of their work, at another level I seek to reverse the flow and ask what the possibilities are for theology. But this is not quite the right image, since I want to push as hard as I can, beyond fatigue, when your body cries out for rest and all that you have left is the last drop of mental stamina, to see what theology looks like when it has passed through its saturation with politics and reached its dialectical limit.

This work, then, may be understood as prolegomena to such a



materialist theology. There is, however, another distinction that runs beneath much of my discussion, and that is between theology itself and the philosophy of religion. At times I will move between the two terms, religion and theology, but there is in fact a difference. Apart from the point that “religion” so often means Christianity, the philosophy of religion needs to be understood as reflection on theology itself, which in its turn is an attempt to provide a rational and systematic order to that curious combination, the practice and belief of religious observance. In this light, the philosophy of religion becomes a third-order activity, after theology’s own second-order engagement with the experience of religious belief. And yet, I am not one to agree with Anselm’s description of theology as “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*), for as this book makes clear, it seems to me that theology is not predicated on religious commitment: it is in fact a discipline that can take place without such a commitment.

In the end, however, I am after a materialist theology, and so, in my commentary on and criticism of the work of these Marxists, I will be on the look out for various elements that will begin to build such a theology. For instance, Althusser’s unwitting argument for the philosophical necessity of such a theology and his reflections on myth, Bloch’s notion of the discernment of myth and the political criticism of sacred texts, Gramsci’s political critique of ecclesiology, Lefebvre’s reflections on space and women, Eagleton’s argument for political forgiveness, Žižek’s long search for a materialist grace (following Badiou) and Adorno’s theological suspicion and criticism of secularised theology are all necessary items for a materialist theology. In each chapter, the critical engagement with their work also identifies and discusses the items I want to retrieve. But it is only in the conclusion to the book as a whole that I bring these various bits and pieces together in order to construct what I hope will be less a static structure than some rolling stock, always on the move and ready to take on some new development and discard another obsolete piece of machinery.

Although there are obvious overlaps with the standard Marxist criticisms of religion, usually based on the well-known sentences from



Marx's early philosophical manuscripts concerning opium, oppression, and flowers, as well as with what has become known as political theology in its European forms (especially Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann) and liberation theology in Latin America and the Third World, my effort at this level differs in a number of ways. The various Marxist theories and criticisms of religion seek to use standard Marxist categories to analyse religion, especially the notion of ideology and class consciousness. The most interesting concern themselves with the revolutionary forms of religious thought—Bloch is the major example in this study—such as the Diggers in England or the peasant wars in Germany under the leadership of Thomas Müntzer. By contrast, the fascinating work of liberation theology, which will in fact appear in my discussion at various points, comes from the side of theology, causing something of a scandal in the Church when it came to attention in Latin America in the 1970s, alongside black, feminist and queer liberation theologies at the same time. And yet, liberation theology sought a conjunction between theology and Marxism, using the insights of Marxist social, economic, and political analysis, but still maintaining the priority of theological solutions—what may be called the “ontological reserve.” In attempting to build bridges between Marxism and theology, it conjures up the cafes and conference rooms of the 1970s when the Marxist-Christian dialogue was in full swing in continental Europe, or the furore caused in England with the Catholic Left in the 1960s, or the political theology of German theologians such as Johann Baptist Metz. Finally, I am less taken with the more recent efforts to show the theological core of Marxist thought, of which the most sophisticated effort is that of John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*,<sup>2</sup> nor indeed to so-called post-secular theologies of the likes of John Caputo, Jean-Luc Marion or even Jacques Derrida, for these are notable by their avoidance of the distinctly Marxist strain I consider here. All the same, these earlier moves in some way inform what I do, immersed in them as I have been in various ways

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<sup>2</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Roland Boer, “Second Isaiah: Biblical Theology and Historical Materialism,” *Biblical Interpretation* 6, no. 2 (1998): 181–204.



for the past two decades, but I should point out that I do not seek a rapprochement between Marxism and theology (as the youthful Althusser and Eagleton sought to do), nor do I want to apply Marxist categories to theology, nor am I interested in pointing out that beneath the various systems lies a covert theology. What I am after, as I mentioned earlier, is a glimpse of what theology might be after it has been thoroughly politicised in Marx's sense, when, in other words, it has run the full dialectical gamut from theology to politics and out the other side.

I have organised this book in three sections or parts—biblical Marxism, Catholic Marxism, and the Protestant turn. I begin with those whose primary engagement is with the Bible, namely Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin. Their assimilated Jewish background plays a role here, but it is by no means the only reason for such an interest in the Bible. As for the Catholic Marxists, three of the four worked in dominantly Roman Catholic cultures (Althusser, Lefebvre, and Gramsci), and three of them moved from intense involvement in the Church to Marxism (Althusser, Lefebvre, and Eagleton, who has recently moved back again to the Church). Finally, there is what I have called the “Protestant turn.” In Slavoj Žižek we find a move from a distinctly Roman Catholic emphasis on ethics to a Protestant concern with grace, particularly in the effort to develop a materialist theory of grace. Lastly, Adorno also appears in this section, for not only is the Lutheran context of Germany significant, but his most sustained theological work engages with the one who is perhaps still the leading Lutheran philosopher, Kierkegaard.

As for the biblical Marxists, the major issues that bind both Bloch and Benjamin to each other are the nature of biblical interpretation, the potential contributions from the Bible to Marxist thought and practice, and the relationship between biblical studies and theology. Yet, their primary focus is the Bible: Bloch is the most enthusiastic, and he urges the importance of the Bible in any revolutionary politics, so I begin with him. Benjamin is much more enigmatic, always evading the efforts to pin him down, slipping out at the moment when we think have him sorted out. And so he appears guarded, toying with biblical interpretation while



drawing from it some fundamental categories for his own thought, albeit problematically.

Thus, in the first chapter I follow the train of Bloch's enthusiasm, for he is the only Marxist in this book to have written a monograph on the Bible, *Atheism in Christianity*. But the Bible also constitutes, along with Goethe's *Faust*, one of the major inspirations for that endless book, *The Principle of Hope*. There is much that I want to retrieve from Bloch: his infectious language; the subversive potential of the Bible against the Church; his call for a discernment of myths; an effort to deal with the continued appeal of the Bible to revolutionary groups; and a distinctly political exegesis of the Bible. However, in the end he runs the Bible and theology together, moving from one to the other in a grand sequence: I will argue that the two are by no means on the best of terms and that at this point Bloch tends to lose sight of his most useful strategy, the discernment of myth. Although I keep finding myself referring to Bloch, drawing elements from his work for other projects, I would rather that he kept the Bible and theology at least at arm's length.

As for Benjamin, he was enchanted by allegory, saturated as it is with biblical exegesis. Some key essays, "On Language as Such and the Language of Man," the translation essay, along with "On Violence," the major texts of *The Origin of the German Mourning Play*, *The Arcades Project* and the final theses "On the Philosophy of History," all indicate a sustained concern with the Bible and theology. In this chapter I focus on Benjamin's use of allegory, arguing that it is primarily a theological mode of biblical interpretation. This theological dominance has its most obvious and powerful presence in the way it highlights and extends the deeply mythical dimensions of the Bible, especially those around creation, the coming of Christ and the parousia, Christ's return at the end of the age, the eschaton. So Benjamin's attempt to develop categories from the Bible in order to break out of the mythic hell of capitalism paradoxically perpetuates the myth he seeks to escape. Thus, Benjamin's favoured motif of creation and origin in order to speak of the communist break from myth, his use of a "salvation history" moving from creation to



eschaton, and his reversion to images of procreation and birth when he speaks of the revolutionary break, of origin, creation, and the eschatological new world—all of these are signals of the dominance of theological thought in his favoured method, allegory, that perpetuates the deepest myths of the Bible and theology in his work. Still, I will argue that in his failure Benjamin provides a possible way of understanding how a criticism of religion might work in Marxism.

The second and largest part of the book deals with the small “c” catholic Marxists. I use the term “catholic” here in a double sense. Most obviously, Althusser, Lefebvre, and Gramsci wrote in environments saturated, culturally, socially, and religiously, with Roman Catholicism. The most pervasive mark of such an environment in their work is the way neither theology nor the Bible but the Church dominates their reflections on religion. They deal, in other words, with ecclesiology first and foremost. Eagleton’s difference, working in the context of a Roman Catholic minority in a Protestant England, shows up in his concern for biblical and theological categories. And yet Eagleton’s emphases will turn out to be indelibly Roman Catholic, particularly the focus on ethics and Christ as exemplar. But there is another side to their “catholicity,” namely an inherent tendency to universalise in a particular fashion. Such catholicity shows up clearly in the assumption that the Roman Catholic Church is the “Church,” but also in the various philosophical and literary arguments that assume a comparable universality. “Catholicity” in this context means not an inclusive universalism, but an exclusive one: in the same way that the Roman Catholic Church constituted itself by means of excluding a whole range of “heretical” groups, so also the universalism of these four thinkers is singular.

In the third chapter, my major argument is that Althusser’s expulsion of the Roman Catholic Church from his life and work, after a deep commitment to the church, enabled it to permeate all of his work. Not so much a return of the repressed, the Church becomes the absent cause of his philosophy. So I will follow this subterranean presence of the ecclesial, its shortfalls and promises, the possibilities and limitations





for Althusser's own thought that such a social, political, and theoretical context enables. I organise my discussion in four sections. First, the form of Althusser's rejection of religion is not so much in terms of theology or the Bible, but of the Church with which he had a lingering connection after many years of involvement and religious commitment. History comprises a second dimension of Althusser's treatment of religion: ostensibly religion is a feature of his analysis of the transitions from feudalism to capitalism, in which the Church is a major institution, the dominant Ideological State Apparatus of feudalism. However, I will argue that in his efforts to account for the supersession and decline of the Church in capitalism—its ideological role was taken over by education—Althusser is also historicising a particular theoretical element of his thought. Third, since Marxism itself is a system and practice that arose in response to capitalism and the ideology of liberalism, Althusser must also deal with religion, which he takes as a feature of idealism, in the effort to understand the enemy a little better. The world outlook of liberalism is idealism, within which religion, by which he means Christianity and specifically the Church, is essential. Finally, I explore the logic within Althusser's arguments for a reconsideration of religion from the perspective of materialist philosophy. At this point Althusser's own unwitting contribution to a materialist theory of religion begins to emerge.

From Althusser I move to another Frenchman, Henri Lefebvre. My concern in this chapter is Lefebvre's continual negotiation of religion, specifically the strange ghost of Roman Catholicism and catholicity that continues to visit his work. That Lefebvre's comments on religion assume that the Roman Catholic Church is the norm of religion, that religion in fact means ecclesiology, that the presence of the Church in his work may be designated "catholicity" in a range of senses, points to the situation of Marxist intellectuals in France in the middle of the twentieth century. For all his earlier fractious commitment, Lefebvre sought to excise the Church from his life and thought, but the vitriol of his rejection speaks more of its continued influence. My discussion of Lefebvre exegetes his



late essay from *Critique of Everyday Life* of 1947: “Notes Written One Sunday in the French Countryside” (201–27). In his passionate polemic against the parish church near the Navarrenx of his youth, narrated through an existential tour of the church and then worship, Lefebvre reveals more than he realises concerning the continued hold of the Roman Catholic Church on his life. From this essay and his predilection for heresies, I extract three key categories of his thought—everyday life, space and women—that will become important in my moves towards a materialist theology.

The fifth chapter crosses the Alps to Italy and Antonio Gramsci, whose writings on “religion,” scattered characteristically throughout the *Prison Notebooks*, take on a distinctly ecumenical scent. I read these various notes as an extraordinary example of what a Marxist analysis of religion, or rather Christianity, might look like. The Church leaves its stamp at various places in his writings as he seeks out possibilities for communism and the party, particularly in the four areas on which I focus in this chapter, namely ecumenism, the politics of a global Church, the role of the intellectual, and the possibilities for “moral and intellectual reform,” a phrase he takes directly from his infatuation with the Protestant Reformation of northern Europe. To begin with, Gramsci’s ecumenism shows up most clearly in his interest in the ecumenical movement itself, the questions of conversion, proselytisation, and a definition of religion itself. Further, in a complex analysis that rivals Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Gramsci is fascinated by the institutional structure of the Roman Catholic Church, its political status and machinations, concordats, internal debates, Catholic Action, and the complexities of events in which the Church as the first global movement was a crucial player. In short, the Roman Catholic Church in Italy shows in relief the intricacies of the Church as a temporal and political institution. Third, the organic or democratic intellectual takes on a different shape in light of his reflections on the Church. His interest in the clergy, the variations from region to region, the transitions from the clergy as a medieval class to a “caste” of intellectuals, their moral and intellectual work to further the cause of



the Church, constitutes a major slice of what he comes to describe as the organic intellectual. Finally, there is his astonishing valorisation with the Protestant Reformation: the notion of moral and political reform, a central feature of the program for a communist revolution, is modelled on that Reformation that took place to the north but did not filter down to the Mediterranean. As one of the only models for social change that worked its way through all levels of society, the transformation the reformers wrought in Northern Europe, in terms of culture, politics, economics, and social organisation provides a paradigm for communist revolution in Italy and elsewhere.

The final “catholic” Marxist is Terry Eagleton, coming out of the sectarian and minority position of Roman Catholics across the channel and a world away. For Eagleton there is distinct political mileage in theology itself, rather than the Bible or the Church. The early political theologian of books such as *The New Left Church* (1966), *The Body as Language: Outline of a ‘New Left’ Theology* (1970), the “*Slant Manifesto*” (1966) returns belatedly in texts such as *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (2003), *The Gatekeeper* (2002) and *Figures of Dissent* (2003). I am interested in three regions of Eagleton’s writings: the transition from the deadly seriousness of his theological texts to the pugnacious wit of his screeds on English literature and politics. Patiently pedagogical, it is still Eagleton, and yet I argue that it has much to do with the content of an apostate theologian. Second, the crux of Eagleton’s theological recovery in the later works is that christology has a distinct political dynamic that the Left ignores at its own peril. In my search for categories of a materialist theology, I find this christological focus the least helpful, since it exacerbates Marxism’s fascination with messianism and the personality cult (here I look forward to Adorno’s criticism of the personality cult). Third, there is his deep involvement with the Catholic Left of the 1960s and 70s. This very public controversy in the English Roman Catholic Church and outside it is something that Eagleton rarely if ever acknowledges, and I argue that his late notion of autotelism also enables him to cover his tracks. Yet there are some elements I want to pick up from Eagleton,



particularly his emphasis on political forgiveness and the question of transcendence.

Two Marxists exhibit what I want to call the “Protestant turn.” Slavoj Žižek moves from a distinctly Roman Catholic position, with its emphasis on good works, the law and love-as-ethics, to a Protestant emphasis on grace. This comes belatedly, with many byroads, and then only under the heavy influence of Alain Badiou. Adorno joins Žižek in a strange conjunction: coming from the Lutheran-saturated situation of Germany, Adorno’s major theological text was an engagement with perhaps the premier Lutheran philosopher, Kierkegaard. However, even Adorno’s most Jewish notion, the ban on images that he made a philosophical principle, is also a very a thoroughly Protestant motif. Yet it is the implicit emphasis in grace, as well as the deep iconoclasm that renders Adorno a Marxist of the Protestant turn.

As for Žižek, I take a strong position and argue that he can emerge as a Leninist, that is, as a distinct political thinker, only by means of Paul in the New Testament. For Paul enables Žižek to get out of the closed circuit of Lacan’s psychoanalysis, particularly in response to the criticisms of both Judith Butler and Badiou. Or rather, it is only via Alain Badiou’s deeply Reformed reading of Paul that enables Žižek to break, however partially and with deep angst, from his Lacanian basis. After considering the marginal status of both Marxism and Christianity in some of his earlier texts, I focus on the dialogues with Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau in order to show how Žižek at first juxtaposes Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis as a first effort to become a political writer. Subsequently, I offer a close reading of Žižek’s engagement with Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject* (1999), where Žižek seeks to answer Badiou’s charge that psychoanalysis cannot give us any political position. While Žižek initially attempts to answer the charge in psychoanalytic terms, by the time of *The Fragile Absolute* (2000) he changes direction and moves through Paul to a more distinctly political position. However, he is still caught within the Roman Catholic concern with love-as-ethics and good works, having missed Badiou’s emphasis on the search for a materialist



notion of grace. This is the major element of Žižek's contribution to my underlying search for a materialist theory of religion, and in *On Belief* (2001) he makes the Protestant turn, carried through in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003). In effect, he finally realises Badiou's point, undergoes his own Reformation and focuses on grace.

Finally, I turn to Adorno, with whom I remain deeply enamoured and yet whom I take to task most consistently. One of the most neglected areas of Adorno criticism is his engagement with theology, and so what I do here is bravely venture into what is widely agreed to be one of his densest texts, the *habilitation* thesis and first philosophical work on Kierkegaard. And from this text I draw two of the fundamental categories for a materialist theology, namely theological suspicion and the closely related criticism of secularised theology that saturates the work of all the other Marxists I consider in this book. These points require a close reading of *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, for which I make no apology. But I also find that the attempt at a thorough demolition job on Kierkegaard goes too far, that Adorno's effort to show how Kierkegaard's philosophy fails under the weight of its theological and mythical paradoxes falls short precisely where he refuses to say anything positive concerning theology. At this point, I explore what the possibilities of his famous elevation of the ban on images from the second commandment of Exodus 20 (Deuteronomy 5) might be for women and nature. I close my discussion of Adorno by pushing him to say what is implicit in his writing but what he refuses to say himself—that love must be a radically collective practice if it is to offer reconciliation (drawing on his little known essay “Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love”), and the possibilities of grace as “undeserved salvation” in connection with nature itself.

If all this is not enough, especially the exploration of the extensive engagement with theology and the Bible, then in the conclusion I make some preliminary steps towards a materialist theology—the possibilities for theology after the full gamut of political options has been explored. Here I draw together the various items that emerge in each of the preceding chapters, focusing on the key items of theological suspicion, revolutionary



grace and the whole problem of myth and the future. Thus, under theological suspicion I bring together Althusser's widely influential comments on ideology, based as they are on his ecclesiological "examples," Lefebvre's notion of everyday life, Adorno's criticism of idolatry (the ban on images) and the criticism of redeemer figures, and Bloch's politicised approach to sacred texts. The section on revolutionary grace is heavily indebted to Badiou and Žižek's texts, along with my rediscovery of the wonderful complexities of Calvinism (believe it or not!). Here I argue that grace is always-already political, and that it entails the possibilities of political forgiveness (Eagleton) and materialist ecclesiology (Gramsci) that move in radically new areas. Finally, I am deeply interested in the question of myth, pushing Althusser, Bloch, Benjamin, and Adorno into a reassessment of myth that includes the issues of the inescapable mythical core of theology, the need for a political discernment of myth, and the relation of myth to the future in the notion of "eschatological transcendence." And since I would like to retrieve a positive use of myth for the Left, I brave some prescriptions for mythmaking itself, suggesting that we both need such myths and laying out the way such myths might be written in light of both Lefebvre and Kim Stanley Robinson's political novels.



## Chapter One

### Bloch's Detective Work

Implicit in Marxism—as the leap from the Kingdom of Necessity to that of Freedom—there lies the whole so subversive and un-static heritage of the Bible . . . . So far as it is, in the end, possible to read the Bible with the eyes of the Communist Manifesto (AC: 69; WA14: 98).

The first of the biblical Marxists, Ernst Bloch offers more than any would-be investigator of the intersection between Marxism and the Bible, as well as theology, might want, let alone the basis for a materialist philosophy of religion. As I indicated earlier, my inquiry operates at two distinct levels, namely a critical appreciation of how Bloch engages with the Bible and theology and his contribution to that philosophy of religion and indeed a materialist theology.

One of a collection of European Marxists noted for longevity, exiled in the United States during the Nazi era and then opting to live in West Germany after the building of the Berlin Wall, Bloch came to Marxism after his interests in mysticism and expressionism. In fact, Bloch has been a figure of continued interest for theologians, particularly in light of his readings of major figures in the tradition of European Christianity, such as Augustine of Hippo and Joachim of Fiore, let alone his engagement with the great flowering of biblical studies and theology in Germany in the first half of the twentieth century: his critiques of Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Johannes Weiss, Albert Schweitzer, Hermann Cohen, and Jürgen Moltmann (AC: 38–58; WA14: 69–86) show more than a fleeting interest in the debates and issues, particularly over eschatology



in the Bible and theological reflection. In fact, the first translations of Bloch's work into English were enabled by the theologians Jürgen Moltmann and Harvey Cox, specifically the compilation of various excerpts and essays, *Man on His Own: Essays on the Philosophy of Religion. Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom* followed in translation soon afterwards. This comes as no surprise, since as Tom Moylan shows, Bloch's work had a profound effect on a range of theologians, including various liberal theologians (the death-of-God, developmental and secular theologians), as well political theology in Germany (Jürgen Moltmann and Johannes Metz) and liberation theology (Gustavo Gutiérrez, Franz Hinkelammert, and others) in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of these theological responses came during the revolutionary turmoil of 1968 and afterwards, and I remember reading them avidly in the 1980s when the debates were over the connections between the earlier secular and political theologies and the emergent liberation theologies.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Moylan argues that political and liberation theologies acted to pass Bloch's work, preserved and transformed, into other areas of political and philosophical work, such as postcolonialism.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Moylan, "Bloch against Bloch: The Theological Reception of *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* and the Liberation of the Utopian Function," in *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*, ed. Jamie Owen Daniel and Tom Moylan (London: Verso, 1997). Moylan's work is interested in the way political and liberation theologies have received and questioned Bloch's writings. My interest, although obviously related, is quite distinct, focusing on the intersections between the Bible and theology. See Walter Capps, "An Assessment of the Theological Side of the School of Hope," *Cross Currents* 18 (1968): 319–36; Walter Capps, "The Hope Tendency," *Cross Currents* 18 (1968): 257–72; Harvey Cox, "Ernst Bloch and the Pull of the Future," *New Theology* 5 (1968): 191–203; Frances P Fiorenza, "Dialectical Theology and Hope I," *Heythrop Journal* 9 (1968): 143–63; Frances P Fiorenza, "Dialectical Theology and Hope II," *Heythrop Journal* 9 (1968): 384–99; Frances P Fiorenza, "Dialectical Theology and Hope III," *Heythrop Journal* 10 (1969): 26–42; Kenneth Heinitz, "The Theology of Hope According to Ernst Bloch," *Dialog* 7 (1968): 34–41; Johannes B Metz, "God before Us Instead of a Theological Argument," *Cross Currents* 18 (1968): 295–306; Johannes B Metz, "Hoping and Planning," *Cross Currents* 18 (1968): 307–19; Johannes B Metz, "The Responsibility of Hope," *Philosophy Today* 10 (1976): 280–88; Jürgen Moltmann, "Hope and Confidence: A Conversation with Ernst Bloch," *Dialog* 7 (1968): 42–55; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM, 1974); Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The God of Hope," *Cross Currents* 18 (1968): 283–94; Paul Tillich, "The Right to Hope," *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 7 (1965): 371–77. The volume of *Cross Currents* in which many of these essays appear also contains a short excerpt from Bloch himself. Ernst Bloch, "Man as Possibility," *Cross Currents* 18 (1968): 282–83.





In the critical literature, Bloch's use of the Bible has been less of a focus,<sup>2</sup> although Brecht's admission might as well apply to Bloch. When asked by a German newspaper as to what book made the strongest impression on him in the course of his life, Brecht answered: "You're going to laugh: the Bible": "Sie werden lachen: die Bibel."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, for Bloch communism was all the poorer for not studying and considering the Bible, given the way it was woven into the fabric of the ideological and social life of the rural and urban poor, providing an indispensable language to frame their disappointments, fears, hopes, and struggles. All one needs for a preliminary sense of the pervasive presence of the Bible in Bloch's work is a look at the column upon column of references to the Bible in the indexes of his books (especially his massive *The Principle of Hope*), or to read his assertion that the Bible has a strange ubiquity that speaks to all people across vast times and spaces (AC: 21–24; WA14: 42–45). In fact, along with Marx and Goethe, particularly his *Faust*, the Bible forms the major inspiration in Bloch's work.<sup>4</sup>

So, it seems useful to explore a little further the ways in which the Bible's cadences may be heard in Bloch's texts. The pattern I will use in this book involves making use of the methods that each writer himself uses in order to locate the key questions and contradictions of their work. For Bloch, this means running with the wind for a while, tracing

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<sup>2</sup> Thus, the various monographs on Bloch deal with his biblical reflections in a minor register, if at all. See, for instance, John Miller Jones, *Assembling (Post)Modernism: The Utopian Philosophy of Ernst Bloch* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995); Wayne Hudson, *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch* (London: Macmillan, 1982); Vincent Geoghegan, *Ernst Bloch* (London: Routledge, 1996). Jameson's essay in Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 116–59 relates Bloch's program to medieval biblical exegesis in which the four levels of allegory became a strategy for incorporating non-Christian elements into Christianity: in the same way, Bloch's work draws a whole and disparate range of items into his philosophy and hermeneutics of utopia. And yet Jameson neglects to mention *Atheism in Christianity*.

<sup>3</sup> Referred to in Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1997), 162.

<sup>4</sup> "The Bible on the one hand, and the humanist principles of Marx's theory on the other, thus form together the two fundamental cornerstones of Bloch's utopian vision." Ze'ev Levy, "Utopia and Reality in the Philosophy of Ernst Bloch," in Daniel and Moylan, *Not Yet*, 180.



closely his use of the Bible, during which I ask precisely what is happening when he interprets the Bible and why he would want to do so in the first place. Under what used to pass as the conventional place for biblical criticism—namely, the Church, especially one of its academic institutions—this was hardly a question that needed asking, for it was assumed that one studied the Bible as Scripture, as the text of the Church or Synagogue which it claimed as its own and from which it sought guidance. One studied the Bible, in other words, for reasons of religious commitment, the search for God's word to “us,” and so on. Contested though this might be at times, the Church maintained its claim, and continues to do so, to the Bible. A begrudging acknowledgment, perhaps, to Islam and Judaism were allowed for the Hebrew Bible, but this was a somewhat foreign text anyway and the nervousness of its appropriation showed through in the various schemas designed to domesticate it for Christianity.

The challenge from Marxists like Bloch is that they read the Bible, not begrudgingly, nor with an agenda of ridicule or unmasking (characteristic more now of those who have moved beyond the Church and still associate the Bible with the Church), but with enthusiasm, seeing the Bible as a central piece of literature. The urgent question that arises from Bloch's work is precisely why Marxist atheists like him should be interested in the Bible, and why he should wish to reclaim it as a document crucial to Marxism's own wellbeing and survival.

In what follows, I argue that Bloch's distinctive contribution to a materialist philosophy of religion lies less in his notion that sacred texts like the Bible provide store-houses of utopian images and possibilities than in the idea that class conflict must be a crucial feature not only of biblical interpretation but also of any consideration of mythology. In other words, assuming that myth is an important category, the discernment of those myths will become crucial for any Marxist criticism of religion. By contrast, I cannot find much use for his teleological argument that atheism is the outcome of the Bible and Christianity. Not only is Bloch's breathtaking enthusiasm for the Bible something that draws me to his writing,



but I am also intrigued by his advocacy that Marxists study the Bible not only so as to grasp the thought-world of so many peasants and workers who were part of the struggles for communism, nor even that there “is certainly no German *culture* without the Bible” (HT: 46; WA4: 51–52), but also to see the revolutionary potential within the Bible itself.

However, in what will turn out to be a central aspect of my discussion of both biblical Marxists, Bloch and Benjamin, I argue for a necessary distinction between theology and the Bible, particularly as the two are so often conflated. For the Bible is not necessarily a text that must be read with a theological agenda—that it can tell us something about God, about the relationships between human beings, the world and God, in short that it relates in various ways to the issues of religious commitment, ie., faith—although that has been the default position. However, if we understand the Bible as a disparate and unruly collection of texts that has been subdued and brought into line with ecclesiastical requirements, then its break with theology is a little clearer. This uneasy relationship, often at loggerheads with each other, is precisely what I want to highlight in my reading of Bloch. In fact, I wish to argue that Bloch’s best insights into the Bible come when he takes the Bible as the Church’s bad conscience.

Given that Bloch is in the unique situation of having written a monograph on the Bible itself—*Atheism in Christianity*—I will begin with this text, leading on to his magnum opus, *The Principle of Hope*. Other texts will also appear, such as *The Spirit of Utopia* and the collection in *Literary Essays*, but my major concern is with the first two. My reading often runs close to the text, but even in what appears to be exposition, I perpetually fill in the context, especially in biblical studies, in order to critique Bloch. In *Atheism in Christianity*, which should be read as an introduction to a Marxist utopian interpretation of the Bible, Bloch shows that he is fully conversant with the high moment of German biblical scholarship in the early twentieth century, a moment that still determines many of the issues of biblical scholarship in the early twenty-first century. While he makes many of the same assumptions, he also offers a critique that comes out



of the Marxist and anti-capitalist political and intellectual background from which he comes.

In the end, he will argue that there is a consistent theme, with however many turns, of a rebellion against the Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible and the God of the New Testament. Not so much a moral atheism that refuses to believe in God on theodical grounds, but a political atheism that sees an internal logic to the Bible in political revolution against God that can only be realised, not with a refusal to believe in God, but a rebellion against God. I will explore the implications of this central argument as I proceed, for over against a plea for the consideration or appropriation of religious, or more specifically Christian, texts and ideas into Marxism, Bloch argues that the internal logic of the Bible leads us to Marxism itself.

Having followed through this argument, and in light of the questions that begin to appear in this reading, I inquire about the implications of his treatment of theology and the Bible for Marxism and a Marxist criticism of religion, as well as why he should make such use of the Bible and theology. Apart from the specific question as to how much influence the Bible has on Bloch's thought, especially in the light of his avowed atheism, I am also interested in the deeper issue of whether the Bible itself, now a very unpopular text in so many quarters, is inseparable from the construction of a Marxist philosophy like Bloch's. In the end, though, I wonder whether Bloch's biblical criticism is still not too heavily influenced by theology, however he may try to free it from that theology.

## Argument and Advocacy

Marxism and religion (by which is meant the Christian tradition of Europe) have rarely been even the remotest of friends. The mutual suspicion of an irreducible atheism on one side and complicity with the rulers of this world on the other have not helped matters. Thus, for Bloch the specific interpretation of the Bible itself is at the same time a dual advocacy: Marxists need to take the Bible seriously as a revolutionary



document, and biblical scholars and theologians cannot avoid Marxism in their interpretation. I have no trouble with the second side of the equation, I having argued precisely the same for some time now, but I am very interested in the first, as will become clear as I proceed.

Two moments in *Atheism in Christianity* give voice to the double-front of Bloch's struggle: an explicit apology for the Bible directed at Marxism; and then a call for a common front against the institutionalised forms of religion, a call that has its main appeal to Christians. Let me begin with the first, which seeks to counter the Marxist rejection of the Bible as part of the cluster associated with theistic belief. For Bloch, an Enlightenment that rejected the Bible was more often a pseudo-enlightenment—the path of such a rejection led as easily to bourgeois rationalism as it did to Nazi neo-paganism and socio-biology. For the Marxist, Bloch argues, the Bible is a document that should not readily be discarded, since it is the book of the peasants and workers with and for whom the Communists worked. Not only that; it is also a book with revolutionary force. So it seems that even with the possibilities for appropriation by the rich and powerful, even with texts that propound outright justifications for oppression, these texts within the Bible run over and counter to a subversive and questioning deeper stratum. In the end, the revolutionary peasants and oppressed classes have a better sense of what the Bible is about: their reading, in other words, is less a subsequent appropriation and more of an appreciation of the utopian nature of the stories themselves.

Bloch's point is that the "Bible speaks with special directness to the ordinary and unimportant" (AC: 24; WA14: 53). In the end, despite its ambiguity, the Bible is the priests's bad conscience, condemning the way religious professionals have used it. Bloch claims a heritage of the Bible's revolutionary potential for Marxism from the Peasant Wars in Germany, France, Italy, and England (the children of these peasants ensured the success of Marxism in Eastern Europe and the USSR). In fact, such a revolutionary tradition, in which human beings are by no means effaced before God, comes through in mysticism as well, the work of Meister



Eckhart, along with Bloch's favoured Joachim of Fiore and the Hussites (see AC: 64–65; WA14: 93–94). However, when it is used for oppression, when it is “often a scandal to the poor and not always a folly to the rich” (AC: 25; WA14: 53), then the texts interpolated by authority come into play. Despite its status as a text with mixed messages, a text in which class conflict is played out time and again, a text demythologised in the hands of Rudolf Bultmann or transcendentalised by Karl Barth, at its deepest levels Bloch claims it for the peasants, for ordinary people and the revolutionaries. Bloch plays a double game here, for he recognises the tensions, contradictions and class conflict in the text and its use. But he also has an apologetic agenda, determined to find deep within the Bible a restless, expectant utopian stream. With such a hermeneutical principle—*itself dialectical*—he can look more closely at biblical interpretation.

But those who assume the Bible to be their own—believers and the Church—also need some persuading (AC: 58–63; WA14: 87–92). The resolute critique of clericalism, of the various compacts with wealth and power, of the blessings or outright competition for worldly power with the rulers of the age—all of these must remain, urges Bloch. For the Church, as an institution of power, cannot but be part of the status quo. He argues, by stressing the textual and historical conditions, that Marx's famous criticism of religion in the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* is directed more at the Church and its ideological function. As far as religion and religious belief is concerned, Marx was much more ambivalent, the well-known opium reference also allowing religion a role as the expression of misery and suffering and as protest against it. This point is so well-worn that it hardly requires comment any longer, although it is worth the imaginative leap to the freshness of an observation well after it has become tired and foot-sore. Bloch's third and closing moment is the call for a common front between Marxists and Christians, for “conversations between believers purged of ideology and unbelievers purged of taboo” (AC: 62–63; WA14: 92).

*Atheism and Christianity* may well be read as part of this conversation, attempting to persuade two audiences Bloch would rather see together.



These days there is a distinctly hoary feel about such efforts at Marxist-Christian dialogue, belonging more to the sixties and seventies, when the Eastern Bloc still existed and the Churches sought a way towards tolerance and accommodation. After an intense interest in Germany and the USA in the 1970s, *Atheism in Christianity* has led something of a half-life in theology and biblical studies, the source of some key hermeneutical ideas that have forgotten their point of origin (although it has now been reprinted by Verso). I am thinking here of the hermeneutics of suspicion and recovery, elaborated in by Paul Ricoeur and then adopted by those working with distinct political agendas within religious institutions. So, ecclesiastical feminism, liberation theology, and political theologies sought to use the hermeneutics of suspicion and recovery for a reforming effort within the various churches. It has also been the means whereby those on the fringes of repressive religious institutions have sought to remain within rather than walk out. Yet in the process of this adaptation, Bloch's central critique was lost: that the Bible and Christianity in general are inherently atheistic, that the contradictions within the institutions and its ideology cannot but unravel. However, it seems to me that the time for the dialogue in which Bloch engages may indeed be now or at some time in the future, for its possibility is greater with the fading away of the old ideological blocks of the Cold War and the need to combat a renewed imperialism of late capitalist dimensions. For Bloch, like Lenin, wants no Marxist fellow-travellers, a "half-grown centaur with two body parts, Church and Party, joined only in 'perpetual dialog'" (AC: 237; WA14: 314; translation modified), but rather a genuinely disillusioned godlessness that comes face to face with the irrepressibly rebellious biblical texts.

## From the Bible to Sentence Production, and Back Again

As for my closer reading of Bloch's texts, I begin with the general, and that is the question of sentence production, for it is Bloch's style that says as much about his engagement with the Bible as his sustained



exegetical labours. While most work on Bloch has preferred to speak of his utopian hermeneutics, especially in relation to a biography of one on the run, his polymathic interests and the length of his productive life, the style also looms large. Yet, in dealing with his style, I have always found useful one of Fredric Jameson's strategies, itself drawn from Adorno, which is to have regard for the sentence production itself, to treat the craft of creating a text as an issue worth consideration. So, let me spend a few moments on the sentence production, for there are some distinct indicators about Bloch's program to be found here.

*Atheism in Christianity* turns out to be one mode of Bloch's dealing with the Bible; the full range is found in *The Principle of Hope*.<sup>5</sup> Four such modes appear in *The Principle of Hope*: most obviously there is the explicit and sustained consideration of the Bible, especially certain themes such as the role of Paradise, of Eden, Exodus or the new Jerusalem. *Atheism in Christianity* is then the most extensive form of this mode, and I turn to consider this text in detail a little later. Characteristically, Bloch rarely refers directly to secondary literature, but in both works he shows more than a dilettante's interest in the major issues of debate in biblical studies. Second, there are continual references to ideas, texts, and biblical figures in other discussions; that is, biblical texts become part of the fabric of a larger argument. Third, there are whole series of allusions and passing references. Finally, we find the deeper patterns in Bloch's thought, the basic ideas upon which he builds his work. All four categories show the Bible working in Bloch's thought in a way that is formative of his whole agenda.

Beginning with the second mode, the Bible appears as one item in larger discussions, used as an example, or as evidence for certain beliefs and practices, or as a crucial piece of something else. For instance, in a

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<sup>5</sup> Bloch's biblical interpretation itself can also be seen as a specific moment in the much wider program that may be distinguished in terms of a hermeneutics, philosophy, and aesthetics of utopia. The first two categories are common in the secondary research on Bloch but the third, a utopian aesthetics, is the argument of Arno Münster. The key documents here are SU with its focus on music and expressionism (so also HI) and the role of aesthetics in PH. See Arno Münster, "Ernst Bloch: Une Esthétique De L'anticipation," *Revue d'esthétique* 8 (1985): 161–72.





longer discussion of the various attractions of the stars as a counter-utopia to death, Bloch refers in passing to Job 31:26–27 (PH: 1150; WA5: 1353), where the seduction of the heavenly bodies for worship is noted. And then, in a lament for the modern resistance to psychoanalytic dream interpretation, he offers the contrast of Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream and the crucial prophetic role of interpreting dreams (PH: 80; WA5: 90).

A more significant example is the tracing of death consciousness and a wishful consciousness of anti-death in Brahms's *German Requiem*, where Hebrews 13:14—"For here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come"—is the basis of the first movement and Isaiah 51:11—"Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads"—the basis of the second (1 Corinthians 15:51–52 also appears). Bloch reads this, with its robust core in a music of annihilation, as one of the "musical initiations into the truth of Utopia" (PH: 1100; WA5: 1293). Now, I am not a great follower of such music, but my point here is that Bloch notes the biblical texts used at the basis of this crucial piece of music by Brahms in a larger discussion of the utopian dimensions of music as such.<sup>6</sup> The Bible appears along with a whole array of other material in a wider analysis. It might be argued that it is precisely the biblical content that turns the *German Requiem* into an initiation into utopia.

*The Principle of Hope* is full of these types of biblical references, explicit parts of a larger argument, although they also appear in other places such as the *Literary Essays* and *Natural law and Human Dignity*. Other examples include the biblical references in the discussion of the "cryptic collective" and Christ-like utopia of marriage (PH: 330–31; WA5: 384–85), the gradual suppression of dance from the Bible onwards (PH: 401–2; WA5: 465–66), the task and suffering of the Jews in history (PH: 609–10; WA5: 711–12), the world-creator as modeller and

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<sup>6</sup> In the much longer discussion of music in *The Spirit of Utopia*, Bloch weaves in theological rather than biblical references and allusions: for instance, the possibility of reference to an outside or a beyond in music relies upon Christian motifs and illumination (SU: 159–60; WA 3: 202–4).



architect, taken from Egypt to Israel and then to the idea of the new heaven (PH: 730–33, 776; WA5: 855–58, 908–9), the model of Mary and Martha for quietude and activity (PH: 953–56; WA5: 1119–23), communion and baptism, in gnostic circles, as keys of the journey to heaven (PH: 1116–17; WA5: 1312–13), the temptation of Jesus by Satan on the mountain in a discussion of the alps (LE: 437; WA9: 493), the use of the Decalogue in Thomas Aquinas’s formulation of natural law (NLHD: 24; WA6: 37), the role of the Fall and the divine legislator more generally in natural law theory (NLHD: 36–39, 53; WA6: 50–53, 68), the use of Joseph’s recognition of his brothers in Egypt as an example of *anagnorisis*,<sup>7</sup> and, as an example of great moments that pass unnoticed, the conversation between a friend and an aged Pilate who forgets about his contact with Jesus of Nazareth (LE: 197; WA9: 220).

Closely related but less substantial are the allusions and passing references. For instance, biblical epigrams stand side by side with those from Marx, Yeats, Feuerbach, and Bloch himself (see, for instance PH: 1183; WA5: 1392). Biblical phrases appear in the flow of another point to be made, as in the reference to “honour and the hoary head” of Leviticus 19:32 in a discussion that signals a greater role for old age in socialist societies; or, Psalm 127:2—“the suspect god who gives to his beloved in sleep” writes Bloch, alluding to the Psalm’s “he provides for his beloved in sleep”—is a passing phrase in the discussion of day-dreams. And then there is the allusion to the “wise virgin” of the parable (Matthew 25:1–13), who, in the confidence of the expectant intention “in going into the chamber of the bridegroom, offers up as well as gives up her intention” (PH: 112; WA5: 127). The allusions run on, almost endlessly: Uriah the Hittite (NLHD: 257; WA6: 290), Joseph and his brothers (PH: 160; WA14: 183), the mother-image in Isis-Mary (PH: 172; WA5: 197), the iconoclasm of the first commandment in Exodus 20:4 (PH: 212; WA5: 244–45), the absorption of the individual into the *Totum* of making all things new in Revelation 21:5, and of the drive in

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<sup>7</sup> See Michael Landmann, “Talking with Ernst Bloch: Korcula, 1968,” *Telos* 25 (Fall 1975): 178–79.



religious art that this brings (PH: 215 and 221; WA5: 248, 255), the saying on salt's savour in Luke 14:34 in relation to Marx's criticism of Feuerbach (PH: 274; WA5: 318), in opposition to there being "nothing new under the sun," Ecclesiastes 1:9 (PH: 288; WA5: 335), Nero and Hitler not as the furthering of history but an aberration as the "dragon of the final abyss," from Revelation 12–13 (PH: 310; WA5: 362), an allusion to *Faust* and John 1:1 (PH: 313; WA5: 364), the basing of the traditional end to German fairytales—"still alive to this day"—on an Old Testament form of ending tales (PH: 353; WA5: 410), carvings of Adam and Eve in the Baroque garden, which itself has hints of the Song of Songs not mentioned directly by Bloch (PH: 388; WA5: 450), the play on Daniel 5:27 (PH: 402; WA5: 466), the play on the Lord's prayer: "give us this day our daily illusion," Matthew 6:11 (PH: 446; WA5: 518), the "supreme principle of Christianity" in Owen (PH: 560–61; WA5: 652–54), in Saint-Simon's last work "New Christianity" (1825) is to be found the combination of sacred socialism and a profane Vatican, and on and on and on. Time and again an allusion appears with no explicit reference to the Bible, merely a word or two that conjures up a text, well-known or not so well-known. Incognito, it enters into the very structure of Bloch's vocabulary, syntax and thought.

Out of this plethora of biblical allusions, I focus for a moment on two. His discussion of natural right alludes both to Jesus and paradise, including a saying of Jesus in Luke 12:14:

As a whole, justice (*Recht*) is a topic much closer to the class society than utopia is, and there is certainly no Christian, let alone chiliastic utopia in justice. Jesus expressly denies that it is his job to administer justice (Luke 12, 14), and the vernacular retains the old saying "Men of law (*Recht*) —Christians poor." And only the Natural Right (*Naturrecht*) of the sects, i.e., that which was not legally implemented, by going back to the primal state of paradise as a standard, kept aloof from amalgamation with the law of property, the law of bonds, debt, punishment and the like (PH: 542; WA5: 630).

Second, and more significant for its doubling over between the Bible and Marx, when he speaks of the road to utopia—Bloch's code word for socialism—his language is permeated with both the Bible and



Goethe's *Faust*: the road to the abolition of deprivation, which is itself socialism (not its goal), is also "the road which first leads to the treasures where moth and dust doth corrupt, and only then to those which stay awhile." The allusions here are to Matthew 6:19–21<sup>8</sup> and *Faust*, part I, 1700: "Stay awhile, you are so fair." And, as if to pick a recurring motif, at the end of the discussion of Brahms, Bloch writes: "In the darkness of this music gleam the treasures which will not be corrupted by moth and rust, the lasting treasures in which will and goal, hope and its content, virtue and happiness as in a world without frustration, as in the highest good:—*the requiem circles the secret landscape of the highest good*" (PH: 1101; WA5: 1294; see also PH: 1181; WA5: 1390). Of course, this is a double allusion, both to a saying in the gospels and to Marx:

The less you eat, drink and buy books; the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, , the public house; the less you think, love, theorise, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you save—the greater becomes your treasure which neither moths nor rust will devour—your capital. The less you are, the less you express your own life, the more you have, i.e., the greater is your alienated life, the greater is the store of your estranged being.<sup>9</sup>

Where the language slips into the sentences without the signal of biblical references or even the mention of the Bible we come closest to the function of the Bible in the conceptual structure of Bloch's work. Like Johann Peter Hebel and Jeremias Gotthelf, whom he critically admired, he sought a "Bible-educated, Bible-infused style" "illuminated by the sun of biblical German" (LE: 323; WA9: 367–68). What I want to suggest in this last category is that some of the deepest currents in Bloch's work—most obviously the utopian—could not have been

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<sup>8</sup> "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt 6:19–21).

<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 309.



thought in the first place without the Bible. A weaker version of this argument is that the specific shape of utopian longing and reflection has been affected profoundly by the Bible, by the figures of Moses and Jesus, and by the themes of Exodus and the Kingdom of God, particularly in light of the Bible's foundational role in the fabric of medieval culture and society in Europe. Yet I would like to hazard the stronger version: that the category of the "utopian" in Bloch's work is unthinkable without the Bible, as well as ideas such as the *Novum* and *Ultimum*; that it is the Bible itself that generates these categories.

Bloch himself teases us with passing claims, extraordinary statements, such as that both the *Novum*—"the eschatological conscience that came into the world through the Bible" (PH: 221; WA5: 254)—and *Ultimum*, central categories in Bloch's philosophy, find their earliest expression in the Bible. The Bible provides the source of the "total expansion of hope that we find in humanism," it is the "basic manual of hope," but also the sources of the "consciousness of evil" and the "concept of hazard" (MOHO: 116; WA13: 51). Despite the sheer volume of written work, the shelf space that his books consume, reading Bloch is rarely tedious, and one of the results of a patient reading is a collection of delectable phrases and sentences that mark in their own way his love of the Bible and its permeation of his thought. So he speaks of the "socialist wealth" of the Bible (Isaiah 55:1), of the "original model of the pacified International" (PH: 498; WA5: 578 on Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3–4; see also PH: 501; WA5: 581) and the "communism based on love" (PH: 497; WA5: 577). Then there is the mindfulness of utopia itself: "The highest conscientiousness of this mindfulness is set down in the words of the psalm: 'If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning'" (PH: 189; WA5: 216). But perhaps the most striking of all, and the motivation for my whole project in the first place is this: "Implicit in Marxism—as the leap from the Kingdom of Necessity to that of Freedom—there lies the whole so subversive and un-static heritage of the Bible" (AC: 69; WA14: 98). Such permeation in his writing of biblical allusions, phrases, and vocabulary indicates a profound absorption of the Bible that is more than the cultural



background of a German philosopher. It would seem that Bloch's system itself is unthinkable, in its present form, without the Bible.

Indeed, another pleasure in reading Bloch, the extraordinary charge that fires once again when returning to his texts, may be found in the very sentences themselves that glow with hope. Bloch's style has always been a source of delight and consternation, often incomplete, missing the various elements of the more conventional sentences (most notably the verb), declaratory when speaking of the most ephemeral of matters and tentative where the ground is firmer. There are thoughts and ideas thrown forward full of suggestion and promise; the longer sentences in which he juxtaposes two or more ideas or metaphors (these halt the reader who needs to reread them and think through the implications); and then the impossibly long paragraphs that run on for pages. But it seems to me that this is precisely part of the appeal of Bloch for readers prepared to immerse themselves in these texts.

The style is energetic, allusive. The absence of footnotes, the incomplete in-text references add to this, but it is the almost ecstatic, prophetic feel of the sentences, the heavy use of Latin and Greek terms, and the conscious effort to generate a style that is distinctive. Picking up my earlier point about the influence of both the Bible and Goethe, this influences not merely the issues with which Bloch deals, but also the style itself, which is halfway between Goethe's poetry and the various elements of the Bible (although in this case there is a vast range of styles in this massive compilation of disparate materials). More specifically, along with the expressionist presence, there is a prophetic and poetic feel to Bloch's sentences, paragraphs, and discourse, one that seeks not only to speak with the urgency of prophetic voices but also the encyclopaedic allusiveness of Goethe's poetry, dealing with what were felt to be central themes of human existence, running through from childhood to old age. This will be a recurring problem with all of the critics I deal with in this book, but it seems to me that Bloch sought by means of style itself to allow what he called the "spirit of utopia" to speak, to create a new way of writing through which the utopian would emerge.



Rarely annoying, it is a style that has a certain strangeness about it. On the one hand, for one so accustomed to the reading and analysis of religious documents, Bloch's writing, "illuminated by the sun of a biblical German" (LE: 323; WA9: 367), breathes an air of religious promise, generating a peculiar desire to read more, that there is, somewhere in the midst of the words and phrases, a "word" from elsewhere. For Bloch this is the future, and his prose may be read as an effort to produce a language that enables the future to emerge.

I want to suggest, then, that Bloch's sentences themselves have a distinctly biblical cadence about them, a feeling out for the promise of the *Novum*, the hints and glimmers of the future. It is not just that he wrote extensively about the Bible, or that it is a crucial item in discussions of major trends in music or in architecture, or even that he alludes to it time and again—although these are themselves important—but that the vocabulary and structure of the sentences and paragraphs show a consistent reading of the Bible for many years, an intimate knowledge of its texts and ways of writing. Bloch takes these up and seeks the potential for his own German.

The distinct pleasure in the style, an almost utopian charge in the syntax itself tempts me to apply the comment to Bloch that Terry Eagleton first used for Jameson, namely, that he would have the oppressive pleasure of knowing that his works will be read in some future, post-capitalist, socialist society. For it is not so much the impossibility of socialism that afflicts in these days of rampant capitalism, but rather the fear among the most ardent advocates of capitalism that it will by no means be the last socio-economic formation under which humans live and thrive. It seems to me that Bloch always presses on in the very structure of his prose to this post-capitalist moment, especially since he caught a glimmer in the communism of Eastern Europe. For utopia is not merely hard work but also an extraordinary pleasure, an intense charge of which we can find moments now but not the continuity it should have. This is what Bloch's prose provides—a glimmer of such a perpetual pleasure. For instance:

In tendency it [order] is inscribed within it [the material], so that chaos,



which is not or does not remain such, itself holds latent within it the star and the star and the star-figure. Common to the manifestations of freedom is the desire not to be determined by something alien to or alienated from the will: but common to order is the value of builtness, the elapsion in need of no emotion any more. It is this element of release and of having found its place, indeed this realm-like element, which in other worlds lying less in wickedness [1 John 5:19] than the political one indicates best repose and indicates it as the best; as in Giotto, as in Bach (PH: 533; WA5: 619).

But style also merges into the content. In a characteristically aphoristic fashion—also practiced in their own ways by Benjamin in *One Way Street* and Adorno in *Minima Moralia*—a new section will begin tangentially, subjectively. And so on the first pages, entitled “Round the Corner” (AC: 13–15; WA14: 29–31) the point that the sly irony of subversive slave talk is found above all in the Bible emerges slowly and only after the style has made all the preparations:

Remorse alone does not bring maturity, above all when the conscience that pricks still does so childishly, still according to custom, but in a slightly different way. The voice still comes from outside, from above—“the One above,” so often suspiciously at ease. Thou shalt be still: this downward, exclusively downward cry from above, against too many demands from below, looks exactly like the well-disguised, indeed apparently good slogan that one should not covet one’s neighbour’s goods, or that even the Jews are now men once more. And it has the same purpose. (AC: 13; WA14: 29)

By the time the major point does appear—that the Bible itself has a lesson or two to teach in the subtle ironies of subversive slave-talk (AC: 15; WA14: 31)—the tangential and allusive style has prepared the way. Certain phrases, small hints, also work their way in through the reading process: in the text quoted, the lack of identification of “the One above” suggests an elision between God and rulers, so that the demands and protests are directed at both. A biblical allusion—“one should not covet one’s neighbours goods”—and the mention of the Jews cease to be floating phrases and start to link together in a theme that Bloch will pursue throughout the book.





Although he does concern himself at times with specific texts, the sweep of *Atheism in Christianity* is none other than the whole Bible. Yet his sense of “Bible” moves outside any canonical restriction, bringing into his discussion Ophites, Marcionites, and others. Rather than merely reiterating the book’s content, I want to concentrate on the major elements of this text, unique as it is for being a full study on the Bible by a Marxist: the question of method, the critique of theology, the three foci of Exodus, Christ and the Soul, and his final argument about the atheistic logic of the Bible and Christianity.

### Method: Class Conflict as a Hermeneutical Key

Yet I have been enticed too quickly, seduced by a style that has all too many ambiguous resonances, for the category I have held back until now—Bloch’s more extensive engagement with biblical texts—also needs some sustained attention. And on this question, especially in *Atheism in Christianity*, Bloch provides not only a lengthy methodological discussion but also extended analyses of biblical texts that sweep throughout the canon.

The most intriguing section of *Atheism in Christianity* is the ultimate one before Bloch ranges into the biblical material itself, a politicised presentation of the implications of critical biblical scholarship at the time he was working on this text. This scholarship is nothing other than the great enterprise of historical-critical biblical studies that came to a slow dominance from the middle of the nineteenth century and is now in an equally reluctant decline at the opening of a new millennium. And it was precisely in Germany that historical-critical study of the Bible first won significant ground after some precursors such as Jean Astruc and Baruch Spinoza. Bloch delineates five zones in his characterisation of biblical criticism as detective work:<sup>10</sup> the vagaries of the written text; the

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<sup>10</sup> See the introductory although cursory essay by Jack Zipes, “The Messianic Power of Fantasy in the Bible,” in *Fantasy and the Bible*, ed. George Aichele and Tina Pippin, Semeia 60 (Atlanta: Scholar’s Press, 1992).



relation between oral and written literature; the forces of redaction; the emergence of biblical criticism; the political and religious implications of the repressed stream such a criticism unearths. What is needed is a background to Bloch's text, a context within biblical criticism for his own comments on the discipline.

### Vagaries of Writing

Bloch is no slouch in regard to biblical criticism, for the first three items in his investigation of biblical criticism as detective work relate directly to source criticism, form criticism and redaction criticism, named in this order largely because of their moment of discovery. Concerned respectively with literary sources (source criticism), oral tradition and genre (form criticism), and the editorial process of putting the various texts in the Bible together (redaction criticism), the conglomeration of the three approaches together formed the core of what became known as historical-criticism or simply biblical criticism. The drive behind historical-criticism was twofold: the reconstruction of the literary history of the Bible from the first oral units to the final form of the text, and the use of the Bible as evidence, however tricky and doubtful it might be, for the reconstruction of the history of Israel and then of the early Church.

In many respects, Bloch is indebted to what was at first a dangerous and critical current within biblical studies, regarded as a threat to the faith until its co-option within the ecclesial system. However, I will want to argue that there is an internal theological logic to historical-criticism that has ramifications for Bloch's own use. Further, his appropriation unavoidably takes up some major assumptions of biblical criticism, particularly in terms of its deeper drives to literary and political history that I will also want to question. Yet, what interests me is the way Bloch encounters historical-criticism and how he develops it for his own purposes. Thus, on the question of writing—source criticism—he begins: “There is nothing that cannot be changed somehow, for better or worse” (AC: 69; WA14: 98). For it is precisely in the changes, the various overlays and efforts to adapt texts, especially religious ones, that show the seams and contradictions



on which biblical criticism fixes. To be sure, these problems have been noticed ever since the text began to be studied. But the questions and methods with which interpreters came to the text—for instance, the allegorical exegesis of the middle ages or the theological drive to literal consistency of the reformers—have varied, and it was the new questions of literary sources and historical formation, derived from wider practices in philology and literary criticism, that led biblical historical-criticism forward. But it is the seams and contradictions that also hinted at various written sources behind the final text—most famously the four sources (JEPD, the Yahwist, Elohist, Priestly and Deuteronomistic sources) in the Pentateuch or Torah—a theory that provided a comprehensive explanation for the nature of the text.

Apart from the intrigue of such texts, the detective work that is required to unearth them, what interests Bloch is the way such a method suggests various ideological ways in which such sources make their way through into the final form. This is also very much a redactional issue—the various methods cannot finally be separated so easily—but Bloch traces two possible ways in which these sources are altered and edited without entirely effacing them. First, “each change in the text should keep whatever was good and make it better and clearer, not pervert it” (AC: 69–70; WA14: 99). In contrast to the second, the first is alteration without distortion, something of an ideal that just cannot apply with a text as loaded politically and ideologically as the Bible. Thus, second, the author’s voice becomes suppressed and falsified, a deceptive text with a heavy influence. This is where Bloch sees the value of biblical detective work, a digging and searching for the suppressed voice that has been distorted. And here he has already made a shift, for he is not only interested in the conventional sources uncovered by biblical criticism, but even more the repressed sources that express a subversive politics, one that sits ill with the later reactionary editing of the biblical material. This will mean that Bloch seeks for different hints in the sources of the Bible, hints for a subversive current, one he ascertains by means of the category of class conflict.



## Oral and Written Texts

I will return to the question of class conflict in a moment, but in his own way Bloch moves to the second string of biblical historical-criticism, form criticism. The appeal lies in the emphasis on oral texts as a stage before writing, a long and indistinct period of a text's production that leaves traces all over the written, for the oral continues alongside the written as alternative readings, pronunciations, or commentary. Bloch is less overtly interested in the two other major emphases of form criticism, the concern with genre or *Gattung* and the setting in life (*Sitz im Leben*) of such genres.

By now, the appeal for Bloch of form criticism's identification of distinct oral units that later made their way into written texts should be clear, for these are the tales and songs of the people before the scribes got hold of them. These are the stories that become repressed in the endless revisions and editorial decisions the priestly scribes make. But in such a situation *Sitz im Leben* becomes important for Bloch, since the social and political setting for these oral texts is as far away from the intellectual and political elites as possible, among the peasants, those dissatisfied with the political and economic structures under which they were forced to live.

Unfortunately, although understandably in light of his political sympathies, Bloch assumes what was a bulwark of form critical studies, namely the reliability of oral tradition over against the written. I remember lecturers trotting out the arguments and texts, particularly with regard to the New Testament stories about Jesus (not surprisingly), about how phenomenal the memories of the ancients were, before writing, and how reliable such oral tradition must be. The theological motivation for such a position should be obvious, and it derived from a wilful ignorance of folklore studies that showed time and again the regular variation of oral tradition, both inadvertent and deliberate, as well as its sheer inventory power and ability to forget.

This means, of course, that Bloch's argument for the distortions that took place in the editing of texts is on thin ground. What he wishes to



preserve, so that he can recover them, are the more reliable oral traditions, but also the first written text, the desired object of source criticism, in which an oral text writes itself: the truth of the oral text “did not change till the written texts were re-copied, or till they were put together to form a new book” (AC: 70; WA14: 99). In many respects, Bloch replicates the assumptions of source and form criticism, for corruption occurs after these earlier moments, when redactors can get their less-than-skilled hands on the material in order to bend it to a new religious and political agenda. However, even if we stay within historical-criticism, the notion of pristine oral texts, or the first written texts, is highly problematic, for vested alteration along with unavoidable sloppiness is there from the beginning.

Yet, Bloch has a slightly different task in mind, using the tools and findings of historical-criticism. Here the detective comes into the scene, for apart from chance, scribal sloppiness, misguided gap filling and so on, there is a more sinister and deceitful pattern of textual alteration, pretending perhaps to be sloppy and innocuous, but all the while working the text towards the official party line. In fact, the rendering of a text as illegible, the conglomeration of materials into an incoherent whole, such as the book of Job, may itself be seen as a subtle way of neutralising protest and opposition, of preserving a revered text while blunting its critique.

Bloch's question has not been asked often enough: *cui bono*, for whose benefit? His surprise is that precisely with the Bible, the most politically loaded text of the tradition, and biblical criticism (“as the most famous of all philological activities” (AC: 71; WA14: 100)), this question has not seemed relevant. Historical-criticism has provided, as far as Bloch is concerned, the tools for uncovering what has been repressed. What it has not done is carry such an investigation through with political questions in mind. It seems to me that this question remains pertinent despite the futility of biblical criticism's, and Bloch's, wish for an earlier, pristine, moment of oral and written texts before the great corruptions of the redactors. However, this means that *cui bono?* applies just as much to the oral units and traditions, to the first writing down of these materials, as to the later process of revision, editing and adapting that Bloch finds



so objectionable. But Bloch has also fallen under the sway of the deeper logic of historical-criticism, which is a search for origins that replicates in so many ways the biblical text itself, with its desire to locate the origins of human beings and their world, but above all the state of Israel or the Christian Church.

### Forces of Redaction

I have unavoidably moved into the issues of redaction criticism, the third element of historical-criticism of the Bible. The end run of the other methods, with their search for the underlying and earliest written and oral sources, redaction criticism traces the piecing together, the myriad alterations and ideological agendas of the long editorial road from origin to final form, including the various canons of the Bible. But what interests Bloch is the moment of first distortion, when the untampered text was altered for distinct religio-political reasons, and he finds it, for the Hebrew Bible, in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, circa 450 BCE. Ezra, the scribe and “Church Commissioner” appointed by the Persians, marks the definitive moment of canonisation, the excision of much earlier material and the alteration of other sources, all in light of a theocratic agenda whose manifesto was the “Book of Laws.” The popular, non-conformist texts that Ezra excluded took on a life of their own, disappearing in the unrecorded realms of oral literature, some of them turning up in the Haggadah, but none of them in the official version of Ezra. Or for the New Testament, it is Paul, with his sacrificial-death theology and the concerns of a missionary movement, who sets up the depiction of Jesus in the gospels, which were written after Paul’s letters.

It would be too easy to point out that the historical reconstruction around Ezra and Nehemiah is a pious fiction, or that the critical image of Paul is but one of a number of possible ones. As for the Hebrew Bible, which Bloch recognises to be the point at which most critical issues are debated, the theory of a significant moment of canonisation with Ezra belongs to a particular type of biblical criticism that still held the text itself to be a somewhat reliable source of information. For the only evidence



about Ezra and Nehemiah is in the books that bear their names in the Hebrew Bible, and this is always a problematic procedure. Yet, although biblical scholars have given away the notion of a distinct redactional and canonising process with Ezra, many of the theories about the formation of the text suggest that much of that activity—that is writing rather than editing—took place at some time in the Persian period or even the Hellenistic period (well after 537 BCE).<sup>11</sup> The particular names have gone, the pre-existent sources have disappeared, but the importance of the period remains. In the end, this is a historical hypothesis upon which nothing too solid must rest, yet it does away with any notion of pristine earlier texts, of long stretches of oral tradition. Or, more cautiously, it points out that we just do not know about anything prior.

What are the implications for Bloch's method in *Atheism in Christianity*? He predicates his reading of the Bible on a condemnation of "redaction by reaction" (AC: 73; WA14: 102), of the pious and not so pious distortions of subversive passages or their complete removal. Bloch feels that biblical criticism, particularly the high form of historical-criticism that he witnessed in Germany at the time, provides him with the tools to uncover vast slabs of subterranean material that run against the official theocratic line of the Bible. On this matter, Bloch is not alone in his method, although he is rarely if ever cited in biblical criticism: we find Norman Gottwald on the communitarian shape of early Israel;<sup>12</sup> David Jobling on the repressed memory of a more just Deuteronomistic law code;<sup>13</sup> Carol Meyers on the possibility that women had a greater role in early Israel than the text allows.<sup>14</sup> In these cases, Bloch's political detective work is more useful; but that is to see in the Bible a moment

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<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Philip Davies, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 BCE*, rev. ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> David Jobling, *I Samuel* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).



of redemption, a possibility of something good arising from it, and that is unavoidably a theological reading.

I will return to that point in a moment, but what has happened in the biblical criticism that remains concerned with the origins of the texts—I am thinking of those who suggest the origins of the texts in the Persian or Hellenistic periods—is that the question “for whose benefit?” has become central. This is still historical-criticism, for it continues to seek for a history of the literature of the Bible and for the history that lies behind it. But now the ideological and political reasons for the activity of writing have come to the fore: the question of the ideological dominance of a text as crucial as the Bible dominates such considerations.

### Biblical Criticism

The Bible must, for Bloch, be approached by the critic as detective, its redactional overlays removed, as far as possible, in order to catch glimpses of the fuller stories of subversion and protest against the conservative forces of religion and the state. I have already suggested some problems with this—the futile search for purer origins, the theological motivation behind this, and specific problems drawn from historical-criticism (“reliable” oral material, the shaky hypothesis of Ezra-Nehemiah)—and I will draw these together a little later. Although the main impression is that Bloch is searching for the pristine earlier texts of protest, he does allow the possibility that later usage may render a text subversive (see AC: 13–14; WA14: 29–30). That is to say, apart from the production of these texts themselves as slave talk, their usage also comes into play. Thus, certain texts may take on a new life when reread and appropriated, such as those of Balaam (Numbers 12), whose mix of curse and blessing becomes a means for cursing the local lords while apparently blessing them. But there is a difference, however tangled it may be, between arguing for the initial function of texts as surreptitiously subversive, and the subsequent use of texts for a similar purpose.

Once he has cleared his way through the methodological assumptions of biblical criticism, along with a few political questions of his own, Bloch





outlines in a broad sweep the development of biblical criticism. I suspect this is largely for a readership—Marxist and otherwise—less familiar with the findings of biblical criticism. There is little point reiterating the discrepancies and contradictions of the Bible, some samples of which Bloch rolls out before us, or even the signal moments on the way to a fully-fledged historical-criticism, via Spinoza, Jean Atruc through to Julius Wellhausen (the most coherent statement of source criticism) and Herman Gunkel (the whole method of biblical form criticism), or the summary of Pentateuchal criticism in the sources J (Yahwist in the ninth century BCE), E (Elohists in the eighth), D (Deuteronomist in the seventh along with the fusion of J and E) and P (a final priestly redaction in the early fifth century that was completed by Ezra).

These are but the standard assumptions of historical-critical work on the Pentateuch (Bloch follows German biblical criticism here instead of using the Jewish term *Torah* for the first five books), and Bloch uses them as an example. Another signal example is the book of Job, whose textual mess can best be understood in terms of a source hypothesis. The dislike of pious editors can hardly hold off for more than a page or two: “the editor must be thought of not so much as ‘mechanical’ but rather as a member of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, with the law-book *De Puritate Fidei* in his hand, proceeding against this heretical text by pruning where he cannot condemn, and by inoculating all he opposes” (AC: 78; WA14: 107).

Bloch argues that it is precisely with texts such as Job, or Genesis about Cain, Jacob’s struggle with the angel, the serpent of Paradise or the Tower of Babel, among others, that the editorial activity is strongest because of the buried message of protest and subversion. But here the problem of the vanishing redactor, as it has been called by John Barton, becomes apparent: the more sophisticated and comprehensive the redactor, especially the ideological redactor, has been with the text, the less obvious, the more seamless and smooth, is his work. Redaction criticism can only operate with all the breaks, seams, tensions, and contradictions of what is in the end a messy text. And this has led biblical critics into a divide over the dull and mechanical redactor who does a sloppy job, or



the highly skilled redactor who works in very subtle ways with precisely those breaks and gaps in the text. But even here the problem returns, for one of the logical outcomes of the skilled redactor is a move away from redaction criticism to the narrator or writer of a text produced out of whole cloth.

For Bloch, the many problems and contradictions are sufficient evidence for sources and redaction, especially for the more tense and weighty redactions of politically sensitive material. That the seams and breaks appear at all is more a problem of *aporia*, an inability to think through the implications of the vast project of joining and editing disparate materials. I would also suggest that such slips and problems indicate other problems, the ideological limits of the text, or perhaps hints that are the first points of a more comprehensive psychoanalytic reading. But that is another project. Bloch is less interested in the everyday breaks that show the hand of the redactor with monotonous regularity. Rather, he wants to focus in his closer reading of the biblical text on the relatively few political texts, the ones written over and neutralised by the counter-revolutionary priestly redactors. The leitmotiv for these texts is the hint of opposition to Yahweh, the rebellious voice, however subdued it might be.

### The Politics of Interpretation

Lest he be accused of being one of a myriad of idiosyncratic interpreters of the Bible, Bloch is keen to set himself apart from what he calls “defective criticism” (AC: 81; WA14: 110). This can be a fruitful misunderstanding (his example is Philo’s<sup>15</sup> reading of the two creation stories in Genesis 1–2 as the twofold creation of a heavenly and earthly first man that he exploits later), but what he wants to avoid is apologetic exegesis. Any effort to smooth over the disjunctions, to render the Bible harmless is anathema for Bloch.

In the end, it seems to me that the key feature Bloch wishes to introduce into historical-criticism is the category of class, since the Bible, he suggests, is very much a text of both those who labour and

<sup>15</sup> Swann’s translation has Philco for Philo.



those who live off the surplus produced by that labour and do none themselves. In all its variety and contradictions, some stories in the Bible have become homely in the smallest of peasant households, but others have been used by the overlords and religious professionals. And it is not just that such class differences indicate a different reading strategy, different assumptions about the various narratives, poetry and statements: the texts themselves tend in either direction, their content and form speaking with a double voice, one that is and is not folly for the rich and powerful. The Bible is then a text riven with class conflict: not a conflict that may be read in terms of bourgeoisie and proletariat alone—although it does that too—but in terms of the basic Marxist category of the class difference, however that may be articulated historically, between oppressors and oppressed, rulers and ruled.

The litmus for such a method of reading—which is very much part of Bloch's famous utopian hermeneutics—is the conflict between the reformer Luther and the peasant leader Thomas Müntzer, worked out in detail in his earlier (1921) *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution* (WA2). While the former could invoke Paul and the cross of Christ as the lot of all, the latter called upon the Exodus and the Bible's anger "against the Ahabs and Nimrods" (AC: 23; WA14: 44). But the deepest affinity of the Bible, despite its "adaptability to select master-ideologies" (AC: 24; WA14: 45), is to ordinary, uneducated people, who took the stories as their stories, something the clergy and rulers could not do.

For what Bloch seeks to do in *Atheism in Christianity* is to uncover both the way in which ruling class ideologies have been imposed on the text, and to examine the patterns and strategies of subversive slave talk. The interlacings, overlays and myriad complexities of such materials require readings that are attentive to the subtle shifts and changes that have taken place. Thus, Bloch is not interested in submissive varieties of slave talk (and so the Psalms do not appear),<sup>16</sup> but rather subversive texts that

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<sup>16</sup> Bloch extends such an analysis to the use Nazis made of Christian stories for children. For instance, in "The Foreign Child's Holy Christ," the frozen child starves to death only to be



have been altered by later authorities and which may be recovered, as well as texts that have been rendered subversive through later usage. The one that survives is the masked or underground text. Such texts have a double function, a “sly irony,” appearing to appease the rulers while openly criticising and lampooning them. “Men often spoke in parables, saying one thing and meaning another; praising the prince and praising the gallows to prove it” (AC: 15; WA14: 31).

As an example of the complexity of such readings, Bloch offers an interpretation of Korah’s rebellion in Numbers 16, a text that as it is now speaks of a priestly rebellion, centring on the issue of ritual and incense, which is crushed through divine intervention. As the story stands, it is an account of a “premature palace revolution” (AC: 80; WA14: 109) within the priestly upper class, but what catches Bloch’s attention is the way the revolt is dealt with: God opens the ground which swallows them up as an example to any one else who would rebel, who would burn incense before the Lord. This is not a God of war, waging a fight for survival, but a God of “white-guard terror” (AC: 80; WA14: 109), one who emerges from the redactor’s pen. For Bloch, an echo of political rebellion reverberates through the text. Not only does the punishment itself signal this, but the perpetual recurrence of the Israelites’ grumbling throughout the chapter indicates for Bloch a subversive, rebellious, anti-Yahweh voice that has been turned into something else—the sign of disobedience and recalcitrance on the part of the people themselves.

It is this kind of reading that Bloch undertakes again and again in the remainder of the book, sifting through the text, with the assumptions and strategies of biblical historical-criticism at hand along with the hermeneutics of class. And it leads him to argue that there are two concepts of God, one “which has the *Futurum* as its mode-of-being” and the other that “has been institutionalized down from above” (AC: 81; WA14: 109). The latter, with its radical transcendence, patterns of submission and atonement, is the one against which the rebellions of the text are directed.

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drawn up into the bosom of the angels, where the unbearable life on earth is forgotten (see LE: 56–57; WA9: 71–73).



Throughout the rest of the book, Bloch pursues such a bifurcation along class lines. He identifies two contrary principles: “murmuring,” in contrast to tail-wagging, is the leitmotiv for the textual and political strain that Bloch will seek in all its different forms throughout the Bible and its associated literature, the pseudepigrapha and apocrypha; and submission to those who rule. One of the criticisms levelled at Bloch is the difficulty of finding a continuous line such as this throughout the disparate literature of the Bible. In the end I am not sure that this quite identifies the more important questions that may be asked of Bloch, such as the implications of such a strong valorisation of religious discourse for a Marxist agenda.

But let us see whether he posits a continuous line or two first. There is the initial suggestion of two principles in tension with one another—creation and apocalypse. How such as opposition relates to that between murmuring and tail-wagging, or texts of the rulers and those exploited (whether originating from or used by them) remains to be seen. In regard to the first line, Yahweh the creator, Bloch dips into conventional German biblical scholarship of the time when it still dominated international biblical scholarship before a somewhat spectacular decline after the Second World War. According to such a position, Yahweh emerges from being a local, tribal deity, one in competition with many others, to become the all-encompassing creator. The transition from henotheism to monotheism was for Bloch the move that cut off any protest, “the pot arguing with the potter” (AC: 29; WA14: 59). The priestly creation story of Genesis 1 is its prime mark—its calm, untroubled “behold it was very good” (Gen 1:4, 10, 12 etc.) is profoundly suspicious for Bloch. The problem that arises almost immediately in Genesis—the wickedness of human beings in the Fall, the reason for the flood and so on—has a convenient scapegoat in Genesis, the serpent and human beings themselves. In this way the Creator can absolve himself from anything that mars his creation. Bloch seeks to trace the notion of God creating the world through the conception of a demiurge in Middle Kingdom Egypt and the growth of the sculptor-god Ptah into the creator God of all Egypt. But this creator God moves higher and higher into the heavens, shedding the other gods around him since everything is subject to him.



However, the problem of misery itself opens up the other theme in the Bible, Exodus. Although one effort to deal with this was in the development of a whole realm of evil spirits who were to blame for misery in the world, with the consequent theme of salvation from such a terrible world, Bloch traces the more basic theme to that of Exodus. Here, he argues, lies not a directive from above, but one that “is filled with the hope that lies before-us” (AC: 31; WA14: 61). The utopian dimension is crucial here: the principle that leads out of this terrible world and into a better one cannot be the same as the one that leads into this present world.

The hermeneutical principle of creation versus exodus/apocalypse is a curious one, for it emerges as much from the Bible as from Bloch’s philosophical, hermeneutical and aesthetic imperative to read for utopia. *The Principle of Hope* manifests this principle even more clearly. In “The Bible and the kingdom of neighbourly love” (PH: 496–515; WA5: 575–82) Bloch pays out a line, responsible for the earliest form of social utopia, from the Bedouin nomadic communism of the desert, through the prophets and Jesus to the early Christian communism (and then on into the work of Augustine and Joachim of Fiore). The sharp distinction between such a line and its opposite—Canaanite hierarchies, wealth and poverty, the church of Baal that runs through to the Christian Church, the “ideologically profitable insurance company” (MOHO: 89)—is both illuminating and problematic, not least because the initial distinction of nomadic/settled, Israelite/Canaanite can no longer be held (see further below). Yet, this is an important distinction for Bloch, providing a basic structural element for his reading of the Bible in all his exegeses. At many particular points Bloch does identify something central, but, as Geoghegan points out,<sup>17</sup> the attempt to trace a structural dialectic continuously throughout the Bible strains the text. Bloch is well aware of the complexities, layers, varying voices to be found in the Bible, and I would agree that a dialectical reading is able to deal with such contradictory complexity better than any other approach. However, what is needed is an even more sophisticated dialectical reading that accounts even better

<sup>17</sup> Geoghegan, *Ernst Bloch*, 99.



for the twists, fold-backs, curious alliances, and changing oppositions of the text, one that reads back and forth between the ideological, social, and economic contradictions that are inevitably found there.

Yet, there is a distinct teleology to Bloch's own argument, let alone the stream he follows in the Bible. He has an unflagging zeal for anything that serves to raise and value human beings, and it begins with the interpretive rule: "only critical attention to the *veiled* and (in the book of Exodus) *ineradicable subversion* can bring to light the organon of the non-theocratic axis in the Bible" (AC: 82; WA14: 110; translation modified). All that rails against theocracy and its attendant hierocracy, against transcendence and obedience, and against the diminution of human beings has a distinct logic that sends it in a path beyond the Bible. He wants to bring the *homo absconditus* out of hiding and he does so through a number of strategies. One is a dialectical inversion of key theological categories, as we will see below: the *Deus absconditus* is in fact a cipher for the human being who remains hidden under the dominant religious systems of the Bible. Uncovering the suppressed rebellions of the Bible will bring him forth. Another is the argument that the God-hypostasis needs to be placed on its feet, in the same way that Marx performed a podiatric move on Hegel's idealist dialectic: "God" is merely a hypostasis of what human beings can and will be, the utopian possibility of a transformed human nature." This is a temporal, horizontal transcendence. A third way, and this is the burden of *Atheism in Christianity*, is to argue that the various protests against Yahweh or Elohim in the Bible have inherent within them what may be called protest atheism. Impossible within the various interlaced logics of the biblical text, such atheism can only emerge later, after that world has closed down. For the protest against God carries with it the assumption that human beings can only emerge in their full potential when everything that draws away from this potential and makes human beings subservient to something or someone else has been discarded. Thus a religion that raises human beings up from submission to powerful overlords, as Bloch finds in various parts of the Bible, is one that will wither away like a vanishing mediator once the lords of this and any other world have gone. It is precisely this type of promise and hope that he finds in the Bible and in no other religious literature.



Before passing on to consider the question of myth, I want to make a few observations on Bloch's method that will inevitably be drawn up into my longer discussion. It is too easy to criticise Bloch for either his lack of Marxist rigour or his lack of theological acumen—although it is true that he is remarkably astute on both counts and his bridging of the two sides is part of his attraction in the first place. On one side, the mystical and millenarian elements in his thought are too far from the need for detailed political and economic analysis that runs alongside the everyday realities of agitation, action, and the formation of a new society (where applicable). On the other side, Bloch's dependence on biblical historical-criticism leaves him vulnerable to many of the problems that are inherent within such an approach.

The first has been rehearsed often enough in Marxist debates,<sup>18</sup> so let me sit with the second for a while. Bloch was unavoidably tied to the nature of biblical criticism at the time of writing; after all, it was still the heyday of historical-criticism, with its interaction between form, source, and redaction criticisms. Anyone who dared to raise a critique of historical-criticism per se risked being lumped with theological conservatives or an unredeemable fringe. So Bloch engaged with and took on many of the assumptions of historical-criticism in his work; his criticism works inside the system, seeking the ideological and political dimensions of the overall method in order to exploit them in his own directions. Occasionally, there are observations that run at a deeper level, such as the anti-Semitism of Wellhausen and others, but more often than not it was an effort to render biblical historical-criticism in class and ideological terms, as I have shown above.

Whereas biblical historical-criticism is still quite strong, the hegemony it held at the time Bloch was writing has passed. A host of other approaches that do not assume historical-criticism as the pier at which they might moor their vessels now work without the assumptions of historical-criticism, take those assumptions as problems that might be dealt with in different ways, ask what they indicate about the nature of biblical scholar-

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<sup>18</sup> So Hudson, *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch*.





ship at the time and so on. Let me give a couple of brief examples. The first is a return to a more radical scepticism about the historical reliability of the biblical materials. This is a critique that in fact comes from within elements of historical-criticism's search for both a history of the text and the history that lies beneath it, for a focus on the former shows that, along with archaeology, there is extraordinarily little evidence for what many historical critics claimed: the patriarchs, an Exodus out of Egypt, a conquest of Canaan, a distinct people of Israel, the kingship of David and Solomon, prophetic figures, and so on. The second concerns the sources—the famous JEDP of the Pentateuch—upon which Bloch relies so heavily. Looked at in another way, such sources may be regarded as the constructs of biblical critics who came to the text with a series of questions: thus the sources, for which no evidence exists, become something that hovers between the biblical text and the critic's own writing, having the objectivity of neither. This is not to say that the idea of such sources is not interesting, nor indeed that it does not help in certain types of interpretation. To take an analogy from physics: Newtonian physics assists in the explanation of a good many phenomena, and it may still be used at times to speak about such phenomena (gravity, etc.), but its interpretative power becomes distinctly limited when a more universal perspective comes into play (Einstein et al.).

There are other problems as well; not least of which is the way the whole enterprise of historical-criticism was predicated upon a search for origins, in this case the ur-text, the earliest tradition or source, as well as the origin of Israel or the historical Jesus. A multiple ideological overlay played a role here, including, on a political and social level, the situation of a belated emergence of Germany into the arena of the nation state under Bismarck, as well as, in regard to psychoanalysis and sexual difference, the perpetually transferred search for individual origins. But what historical-criticism could not avoid was the way the text's own obsession with origins—of humanity, the world, Israel etc—replicates itself over and again in the methods used to study it. Bloch falls prey to all of this with little sense of the ideological effects on his own writing. He too searches



for origins, now of a subversive political nature, which reach back to the earliest moment. Or, the genuine strata of protest against earthly and heavenly overlords lies beneath the redactors' hands, in the earliest sources or in the oral tradition. The surprising thing is that Bloch himself does not make such observations, even though Marxism provides the best analytic approach for doing so.

The question, then, is whether Bloch's method is bound to historical-criticism. Certainly, many of his exegetical observations and conclusions rely on notions of sources, oral traditions and redaction, and some of them would not stand without such notions. However, let me come at the problem in a different way. The question that Bloch asks of the Bible and its multitudinous texts—*cui bono?*—need not be restricted to biblical historical-criticism. For both the Bible and biblical criticism are heavily laden with conflicting ideologies, political agendas and so on. He is quite clear on this, although he doesn't ask enough questions about biblical criticism itself. Despite all the work that has been done in ideological and political criticism of the Bible, this point still needs to be made, namely that of all texts the Bible is the one most overdetermined ideologically, the one with the highest stakes for interpretation and control. Hence Bloch's lifelong interest.

Further, Bloch is trying to account for the fact that the Bible is not merely a canonical text for the powerful, but that it has been and continues to be a revolutionary text, that it has become the ideological centre of the Diggers, Hussites, Müntzer, and his peasants (I might add political and liberation theologies today). This, he argues, is not just a misreading. There is something here that ensures that the Bible does not “work in the same way as every other religious book of the upper classes and of deified despotism” (AC: 75; WA14: 103–4). Bloch's solution in *Atheism in Christianity* is to account for such a revolutionary potential through a positive detective work whose aim is “to see through and cut away the Ezraean matter, and to identify and save the Bible's choked and buried ‘plebeian’ element” (AC: 75; WA14: 103; translation corrected). Beneath the various priestly redactions, and over against the ideologues of the state such as Paul in the New Testament, lies the origin of a revolutionary Bible.



I am not sure that this is the best answer, but I will outline a couple of possibilities to which I will return at the end of this chapter. A common argument is that for such revolutionary groups operating in a world in which the sacred was the cultural dominant through which all modes of thought and culture operated, the Bible provided a certain language of revolt in which the Diggers, Hussites, peasants, and others could express their political and economic grievances. Another angle is to argue that a religious document such as the Bible will provide sources of critique of any form of oppressive politics and economics from a transcendent perspective. This reminds us of the radical contingency of any human social and political form, but it falls into the trap of granting too much to transcendence. A third possibility is that the Bible does indeed give voice to a political agenda which, however flawed in terms of gender or race or sexuality, is opposed to exploitation and domination. That is, in a round-about way Bloch may be on to something; in all of the complex ways in which texts respond to their social circumstances—as reactions to a dominant way of thought, as political pamphlets, as escapism, as a crystallisation of what others feel at an inchoate level, as providing a new way of thinking that points the way forward, as efforts to provide ideological resolutions of social and political tensions, and so on—the oppositional politics of the Bible arise from such contexts.

## The Critique of Myth

One of the surprises of this study is the recurring interest in mythology by many of the writers I consider here. It seems as though any discussion of the Bible or theology cannot, in their eyes, avoid the question of myth, which then becomes one of the major features of their work. Their reflections move well beyond the tired point made in theological circles that myth is an effort to express the deeper truths of human existence, religious belief and so on. So it will turn out that Bloch, Benjamin, Adorno, Althusser, and Žižek all come back to myth time and again, assessing, critiquing, retrieving, for it is part of the continual Marxist problematic of ideology. Bloch is, with his detective's nose, the most enthusiastic about the revolutionary possibilities of



certain types of biblical myth, although it requires the full range of his dialectical skills to enable such a move. Benjamin, I will argue, is less enamoured, although he cannot escape the cycle of biblical myth. Althusser's early writings provide some surprising insights into biblical myth, and Žižek will identify myth with the passage from the Real to the Symbolic. It is only Adorno, it seems to me, who is able to offer the most sustained criticism of myth as part of his comprehensive ideology critique. And yet, the others miss out on Bloch's dialectical discernment of myth, wanting to close down myth and its baleful influence; Bloch, by contrast, cautions against such a sustained dismissal, for myth can be revolutionary as well as reactionary.

Bloch manages, in his discussion of myth, to provide a distinct example of the more sophisticated ideology critique that takes ideology neither as false consciousness that needs to be unmasked, nor as a positive force in its socialist form. For Bloch, all ideologies, no matter how repressive, have an emancipatory-utopian dimension about them—he will later make such a move with the astral myths he at first criticises—that cannot be separated so easily from deception and illusion. Thus, in the very process of manipulation and domination, ideology also has a moment of utopian residue, an element that opens up other possibilities at the very point of failure.<sup>19</sup> And so it is with biblical myth, for the subversive elements in the myths that interest him are enabled by the repressive ideologies that show through again and again. All the same, I find Bloch a little too enthusiastic for such emancipatory and anticipatory elements; he moves too quickly from repression to emancipation and would have done well to tarry with the negative somewhat longer.

Alongside myth, metaphysics emerges from relative obscurity in the work of Bloch, Benjamin, Adorno, and Althusser. That Marxists should be interested in metaphysics would be enough to make anyone curious. Historical circumstances play a role here, for the extraordinary influence of Heidegger and existentialism means that some engagement with metaphysics is inevitable. Bloch is hardly going to let metaphysics or myth

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<sup>19</sup> See further on this, Douglas Kellner, "Ernst Bloch, Utopia, and Ideology Critique," in Daniel and Moylan, *Not Yet*, 82–87.



remain the preserve of fascism, since to give discursive ground like this and abandon such vast arenas to the opposition is hardly Bloch's style. In response, he argues that what passed for metaphysics under Nazism is a decayed version, using the label of metaphysics to purvey "rot-gut." But the danger is hardly there: Heidegger's much more sophisticated return to the pre-Socratics and his argument for an end of metaphysics means for Bloch a cementing in of the categories of metaphysics that denies the dynamic and temporal promise of metaphysics. In the end Bloch criticises Heidegger for an implicit equation between metaphysics and myth, with the result that Heidegger's mythological thought ends up on the side of domination and power. Heidegger's argument that the end of metaphysics must arise from within metaphysics itself turns out to be an argument for the status quo, an emptying of any possibility of change. Bloch may well have read Heidegger too rapidly here, for the impossibility of moving the earth beyond its own sphere of possibility through human will may itself be read as a utopian dialectic that Adorno was to pick up.

Bloch insists that the central theme of metaphysics, Being, must be understood as Not-Yet-Being, as Being open to utopia; this makes dialectical materialism the only viable form of metaphysics, for it is by definition an open process. Again, Bloch presses against the Marxist rejection of metaphysics, the opposition between metaphysics and dialectical materialism, suggesting not merely that the openness of both brings them together, but that even the mechanistic world-views of vulgar Marxism are also metaphysical. Yet, it is the Bible, he suggests, that will return the distinctly temporal dimension to metaphysics and Marxism, the recovery of the *Novum* and the *Meta* of metaphysics.

As far as myth is concerned, Bloch engages in a prolonged theological discussion over precisely how the myths of the Bible are to be understood. Here the philosopher wades into theology itself, taking up the point that the key issue for him is how human beings fare in the theological equation: are they great or small? While Protestants allow no room for any human work, Roman Catholics provide a small space that proves to be far too inadequate. But it is only a difference of degree in denigrating human beings, providing the logic within theology for a redeemer.



The names that appear in this discussion are either major theologians such as Augustine, or central theologians in Germany of the first half of the twentieth century like Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. The last two were not only profoundly influential theologians, but also biblical scholars; Bultmann was a theologian and New Testament critic, while Barth filled his *Church Dogmatics* with large slabs of biblical exegesis. Further, Barth made his initial impact with a theological commentary on the Epistle to the Romans that relied heavily for its theological dialectic on Kierkegaard. Yet, all of those who appear suffer at Bloch's hands; the primary charge is that they have removed human agency and passed it over by and large to God. Thus, Augustine, who saw human will as a powerful faculty, makes a sharp break between human history and theistic absolutism. His major contribution for Bloch was to read history, on the basis of the Bible, as a drama of events, acts, and a denouement, a history with a crux in Christ and a distinct end in the Last Judgement. Although he presents history as the march of the City of God on earth, history and the coming of the Kingdom are two irreconcilable categories that are the result of "a theistic absolutism of enormous proportions" (AC: 32; WA14: 62). Karl Barth's massive exaggeration of this, stressing as far as possible the sheer transcendence of God, merely takes the logic of Augustine's deflation of human agency to its logical conclusion.

However, Augustine's greatest achievement that Bloch wishes to undo is the merging of the creator-deity with the apocalyptic one, thereby enabling the clean break between history and its end. But what it does do is provide the standard Christian narrative running from creation to salvation to the Last Judgment. Bloch's point is that this is a profoundly non-biblical conjunction, something put together to make Christianity cohere (Benjamin was to make full use of such a schema); yet, the apocalypse is not the garden of Eden, for in such a yoking together, a proper utopian perspective loses its focus on the future, reverting to reactionary recreations of the past. The Apocalypse itself—and the shift between genre and the name of last book of the Bible is deliberate—registers not a satisfaction with the world, but a profound dissatisfaction.

As far as the theological scene in Germany contemporary to Bloch



is concerned, his first target is Bultmann (see also LE: 299; WA9: 342), although Bultmann's name does not emerge for a few pages. Despite his admiration for Bultmann's "invigorating" arguments, Bloch's target is Bultmann's program of demythologising, in which he argued—although Bloch assumes this rather than spelling it out—that the Bible cannot help but to contain the forms of thought, language and belief of the time in which its various parts were composed. In fact, Bultmann pushed this further to argue that the predominant mode of expression was myth, and that for the gospel, the kerygma, to be meaningful in the contemporary situation of the early 20th century, this myth must be excised from the Church's message. It was not merely the accretions to the central message he had in mind: focusing on the Gospel narratives, Bultmann urged that the central notions of Christianity derived from the New Testament, such as a three-tiered cosmos with heaven above and hell below, the miracles of Jesus, especially the empty tomb and the resurrection, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the return of Christ on the clouds at the end of history, should all be discarded as unworkable and unbelievable myths. The list could go on, but once the demythologising task was complete, the program called for a remythologisation in terms of the contemporary patterns of thought, specifically the Existentialism that had swept through European philosophy.

Controversial at the time and influential for decades afterwards, so much so that Bultmann is one of the major figures in the history of theology and New Testament criticism, Bloch directs his argument at demythologising itself. Although he can well understand the reasons for being "wary of the mythical sphere in its entirety" (LE: 296; WA9: 339) after the Nazi myths of blood and soil, he argues that the "myths" dispensed with are those that contain accounts of murmuring, subversion, and rebellion, that is, the possibility for human beings to assert themselves with dignity against oppressors, of whom God is so often the chief. What happens with the ban on myth, argues Bloch, is "that the primitive, uncultured specters are thrown out, but the directives and announcements from on high remain to haunt as they always did" (AC: 34; WA14: 64).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> In one respect, Bultmann carries through an older logic that saw the Bible as the be-



But it is not merely demythologisation that is a problem; it is also the “myth” with which Bultmann seeks to “re-mythologise” the New Testament—Existentialism. Adorno also, as I will show, took on the baleful legacy of Existentialism, but Bloch argues that the directives from on high now “withdraw a bit and operate on the inner perceptions” (AC: 34; WA14: 64). The formative influence for Bultmann was the Existentialism of Heidegger, through which Bultmann sought to provide a fresh and meaningful *Kerygma*. In the end, Bultmann was a perfectly conventional evangelical Lutheran, seeking to give the Christian message a form that would appeal once again in a Europe under monopoly capitalism. Bloch’s criticism, however, is of Existentialism itself, arguing that it attempts to do away not only with myth, but also with bodily, social and cosmic elements so that the pure individual remains—a privatised soul. The *Kerygma* then becomes one of speaking from existence to existence, and anything else is nonsense or confusion. The revelation of God becomes a direct address to “man,” the Word itself. But here the Protestant, specifically Lutheran, nature of Bultmann’s work comes to the fore, with its absolute focus on the Word (the elision between speech, text, and Christ is quite deliberate), that which addresses human beings in the here now.

Bloch’s second critique—apart from the nature of Existentialism—is that Bultmann and others who followed him do not distinguish between myths, lumping all together, including the subversive ones, “blithely ignorant of the gunpowder they are handling” (*ohne Ahnung solchen Sprengpulvers*; AC: 39; WA14: 70). Assuming a fundamentally individual reading of faith, existence and myth, Bultmann misses the worldly, global dimension of myth. I have already hinted at a third critique, which is that of the privatised nature of Bultmann’s theology and hermeneutics—“the realm of the lonely soul and its solid middle-class God” (AC: 40; WA14: 70; see LE: 300; WA9: 343). In the process of adapting the by now well-known Marxist critique of reification, along with its associated elements of fragmentation and individualisa-

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gining of a completely rational faith free from myth, from Maimonides to Hermann Cohen’s *Religion of Reason* (see LE: 298; WA9: 341).





tion, Bloch's criticism of Bultmann has made its way into certain forms of theology, especially liberation and political theologies: Christianity has by and large been privatised, restricted to the realm of the private individual which is itself a fundamental feature of liberalism and capitalism. It was of course Lukács, a contemporary of Bloch who was critical of the former's "right epistemology," who developed the notion of reification in his extraordinarily influential *History and Class Consciousness*. And yet, while using the concept—it does after all come out of Marx's writings—Bloch does not use the term itself or refer to Lukács (his acknowledgement of Marxist contemporaries is sparse at the best of times). The argument that Bultmann's theology is profoundly reified, that it drinks deeply from the tainted waters of capitalism and the ideology of liberalism, may well have been a much sharper point had Bloch deigned to refer to Lukács.

In Bultmann's capitulation to the logic of capitalism, Bloch identifies Kierkegaard as a source for Bultmann's reconstruction (as also for Karl Barth's "dialectical theology"). I will interrogate Adorno's own sustained engagement with theology and the Bible via Kierkegaard later in this book, particularly in terms of the inability to escape history via "objectless inwardness," the mythical underlay of theology and the paradoxes that break up his system in the name of dialectics. As far as Bloch's assessment of Bultmann is concerned, Kierkegaard, with his eschatology of the present moment, is a means of sidestepping the political and theological import of the Bible's eschatology. Further, the gnostic tendencies Adorno identified in Kierkegaard's theology become apparent in Bultmann, where enigmatic information about the eschaton is but self-knowledge that leads to the awakening of the individual.

The final criticism is that in the end Bultmann cannot avoid myth, this time of a distinctly Protestant type: in arguing that "man" need only be delivered from himself to experience *metanoia*, or change of mind in God's presence, Bultmann relies on the myth of the Fall. The individual must still put aside sin and pride, although now of an existential kind, before God. Bultmann's present Moment assumes that the only one met in the encounter is God himself. Yet, the submission to God in the end replicates all that is politically objectionable in the Bible—and here politics creeps back into



Bultmann's theology from where history, politics, and economics appeared to have been banished. In the name of demythologisation, Bultmann has in fact recuperated the myths of authority and suppression, or rather he has enabled their preservation precisely through existentialism.

The criticism of the liberal sources of existentialism are exactly to the point, as is the impossibility of avoiding myth, albeit the most repressive types, in anything that wants to retain some theological meaning, but I want to return to the lumping together of all things under "myth." For Bloch's hints at the differences between subversive and repressive myths take a much fuller form in the lead-up to his discussion of Bultmann. In place of a program such as Bultmann's, Bloch—no stranger to myth, fairy-tale and related genres—feels that it is the purpose of such materials that counts rather than the pre-scientific ideas they contain. Do they speak of transformation and liberation? Do they have cunning heroes who win through a ruse? But this requires some distinction within the broad category of myth (too often a blanket term without specificity, lumped together by Marxists and others in Engels's phrase, "the imbecility of the primeval forest" (LE: 297; WA9: 339), between the despotism and domination of myth proper and those that, like later fairy-tales, subvert such domination (see also UFAL: 163–85). The story of Prometheus in Greek mythology, or of the serpent in Paradise in the Bible, gives voice to this "fairy-tale" element in myth. Should we take demythologisation seriously, then both conformist and non-conformist materials would disappear. Bloch would much prefer to have them both rather than no biblical myth at all, for Bultmann's demythologisation discards the "joyful message," the "deepest utopian theme" (LE: 300; WA9: 343) of biblical mythology along with all that is oppressive.

If the first step of his argument is to seek out the purpose of myth in order to make a political distinction, his second step involves distinguishing further between different types of myth. In part, this is because Bloch does not want a wholesale recovery of myth, for this would render him an anti-Enlightenment thinker beyond the wide circle of Marxism. And so, the results of fear, ignorance and superstition may go, but those that give expression to the quality and wonder of nature should not. Fairy tale, legend, saga, and



myth all become separate entities (see also LE: 301–2; WA9: 344–45). Here he invokes Greek art, science (Kepler) and the Romantics. He is, of course, trying to run myth through dialectics—“destroying and saving the myth in a single dialectical process” (AC: 37; WA14: 67)—that is different from Bultmann’s position.

It seems to me, however, that Bloch falls away from a more rigorous dialectical reading. He prefers, in the end, to urge a “particularly sober and discerning mind” that does not see myth as uniformly undifferentiated, without shades of difference (AC: 37; WA14: 67). Rather, what he needs to argue regarding the problem of myth in the Bible, or the Bible’s status as myth, is that it is precisely through and because of the myths of dominance and despotism that those of cunning and non-conformism can be there too. It is not merely that we cannot understand the latter without the former, but that the enabling conditions in a text like the Bible for subversive myths are precisely those myths that are not so.

For one who has dwelt too long in the abodes of theology and biblical studies, I find the subtle Marxist critiques of Bultmann (and the others who follow) extremely pertinent. Bloch sweeps me along, his enthusiasm emerging from the text, whether in translation or not. Yet, a question keeps returning: does Bloch not seek to defend and rescue the Bible not only from Marxists but also from theologians? Apart from engaging in a strategy that forestalls any criticisms from theology and biblical studies—at least in Germany—Bloch plays a tricky and dangerous double game. He wishes to rescue the Bible and yet resists the truth claims that theology imposes on anyone who reads the Bible. Both dimensions—rescuing the Bible and theology’s truth claims—have their own problems. Whereas the Bible itself makes no necessary truth claims for any “reality” beyond its own text, theology is a different matter. In this light, Bloch’s criticisms of theology from the primary basis of a discussion of the Bible is an astute move in light of his fuller argument, but he does make some claims about the representation of God in the Bible against the theologians. To my mind, this is fraught with problems. In developing his argument for the logic of atheism within the Bible and then in early Christianity, Bloch enters



into theological thought: he must use the same language in order to make his point. However, while doing so he rejects the representational assumptions of this language. The move is both daring—using the internal logic of the Bible and theology to show that the claims about God's existence do not necessarily follow—and problematic—the common language of theology sets up a debate about the nature of God which is precisely a theological debate.

The second part of the problem is the effort to rescue the Bible. Here it is not merely a matter of arguing that the Bible is a classic text of Western culture well beyond its colonisation by the Church. Rather, he wants to retrieve the Bible as a text with potent political force for the present situation in Europe. Although there is a distinct twist—an atheistic one—the energy expended in this move is comparable to the various factions of church or synagogue arguing over who reads the Bible correctly, of “rescuing” it for, say, fundamentalists, social action groups, young people and so on. The problem is that any effort to rescue the Bible falls prey to the notion that this literature is good for you if you read it (correctly), and this is very much a legacy of its appropriation as sacred scripture by the Church, for whom the Bible by and large operates for edification and building up the faithful. Bloch does not in the end avoid such a tendency.

Although I find some elements of Bloch's attempt to rescue the Bible for revolutionary politics problematic, another dimension of his work is very appealing: he debunks the assumption of religious institutions that this is their own text. It is not, for Bloch, a document of religious communities by default. Less an effort to wrest the Bible away from its “natural” home—church, synagogue or mosque—his argument assumes that such institutions have in fact appropriated and colonised the Bible. The marks of such a troubled appropriation, of a text ill at ease in these contexts, are precisely those elements that Bloch seeks to uncover, those that run against and subvert the institutions in question. This is where I find Bloch's treatment of the Bible the most persuasive and full of potential, not only for theology, but also for literary criticism, philosophy, and politics.



The location of the discussion of Karl Barth immediately after Bultmann is more than the mere consideration of leading contemporaries in German biblical and theological scholarship, for Barth presents a bold counterpoint to Bultmann's existential gospel. But Bloch's reading of Barth is hardly conventional. To be sure, he notes Barth's emphasis on God's absolute transcendence, the eternal "No" to the world, which itself flows on from Rudolf Otto's *mysterium tremendum*, the very Reformed reduction of "man's" activity, singularly or collectively, into nothing, and the utter reliance on God that this should produce. Even those elements from the Reformed tradition that feed into Barth's theology which draw God and human beings closer together become yet further means for ensuring God's transcendence: in refusing the distinctions between the *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus*, between the fear of the law and the gospel of love, in the incarnation, God's "Yes" to an utterly fallen world that is still his creation, and in his appropriation of eschatology as entirely immanent—all become in Barth marks of sheer difference between God and world.

Bloch's criticism of Barth's unremitting emphasis on the utter unknowability of God due to his transcendence is a variation on the well-known question about the ladder that enables one to peer into God's mind. The perpetual arrogance of theologians to speak on behalf of God is insistent: "Barth must have considered himself the one creature exempt from the boundaries of the creaturely knowledge he so radically asserted" (AC: 48; WA14: 77). In a move that Adorno was to borrow in his lectures on metaphysics, the excessive loftiness of Barth's god in effect demonises him, for he is no better than the lowly Moira of Greek mythology, or the adversary Satan who also utters a "No" to the world.

This radical transcendence sucks all the history out of such a god: static, alien, beyond history, it lacks any sense of an eschaton that is anything other than the lived experience of today. Thereby, it becomes another part of the oppressive mythology that justifies the status quo. Adorno was to make this point much more concrete, arguing that the high terms, retooled from traditional theology, were signals of a totalitarian tendency that



both used such concepts for oppression and effectively demonised the absolute. By contrast, Bloch approves, in a characteristic lack of humility, of Moltmann's appropriation of his own thought: the emphasis on the eschaton as a necessary response to suffering is a welcome corrective, despite its heavily theological flavour and Lutheran reliance on the cross.

Yet Barth is useful for Bloch, particularly on the question of the *Deus absconditus*. Precisely at the moment that Barth gives new power to all of those elements in the Bible that valorise the On-High at the expense of human beings, who can do no more than submit, Barth also, dialectically and unwittingly, provides space for the elevation of human beings. For in accelerating God's departure from any contact, from any point in common with human beings, Barth gives them space to grow and rise from subjection. *The Deus absconditus* is a means of uncovering the *homo absconditus*, the one hidden and oppressed. But, as we have seen, such a figure can only emerge by retrieving the subversive myths of the Bible and elsewhere, especially Bloch's favoured myth of Prometheus. Here Barth falls short, for although he does not seek, like Bultmann, to discard myth in itself, his myths are those of lordship and transcendent hypostasising—those myths against which Bloch sets the subversive ones. For Bloch, then, Barth's emphasis on radical transcendence is not merely an expression of his theological arrogance, but it also leads to a demonisation of God, an a-historical and timeless eschaton, and the possibility that human beings will be able to come out of hiding and stand on their own feet when this God has well and truly departed the scene.

Barth and Bultmann are by no means the end of Bloch's more explicit theological engagement, since the logic of his reading strategy begins to repeat itself. The ideological supports for domination and oppression are only one side of the story, especially with myth. And it is Albert Schweitzer, musician, doctor, and sometime biblical scholar who, in the midst of his comfortable bourgeois research, makes a discovery that he could not deny: Jesus was by no means a quiet wisdom teacher, supporter of the status quo, or even purveyor of bourgeois morals (family, work, church etc); a reading of the Gospels suggests that he was a revolutionary, a firebrand who



opposed the Roman colonial authorities and the Jewish religious leaders, all in the name of an immanent Kingdom of God that left barely enough time to announce its arrival. Bloch, not unexpectedly, favours Schweitzer and his forerunner Johannes Weiss, but he stresses the point that neither of them were in any sense revolutionaries.

Schweitzer's great work, *Von Reimarius zu Wrede: Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu Forschung* (1906), still holds its own in biblical studies, particularly in the context of the continuing phases of the so-called search for the historical Jesus. Dealing with each of the major efforts of that search in the first phase, that of the nineteenth century, Schweitzer concluded that as each of the researchers sought to reconstruct the fragments of Jesus' portrait they uncannily constructed an ideal image of themselves. By contrast, Schweitzer's own Jesus was such a radically distinct figure that Schweitzer could do nothing else but give up his established career in biblical studies and his potential careers in music and medicine and go to Africa to live out the demands of such a person.

Bloch had no such personal commitment, but the realisation by Schweitzer of all of the subversive mythology in the Hebrew Bible takes Bloch a significant step further in his argument. His obvious relish at the shock to Schweitzer himself—whose notes read more like those of a millennial crackpot in the years 1000 or 1525—and New Testament studies also shows up in his enlistment of Jesus among the revolutionary biblical figures. The effort is breathtaking, for instead of dumping Jesus as a purveyor of mainstream religiosity and politics, Bloch can enlist him in his own counter-reading of the Bible, backed up by a motley assortment of writers who stress the *skandalon* of Jesus in the gospels—Chesterton, William Blake, and Gerhard von Rad (see AC: 55–56; WA14: 84–85). And this despite the argument by Schweitzer that the delay of the parousia led to all sorts of accommodations, whose marks can be seen in the later material of the New Testament. Jesus is, for Bloch, one in a long line that runs through from the Exodus and the Hebrew prophets to Thomas Müntzer, and the key lies in eschatology. Any effort to water such a message down, to render it palatable, belongs to the forces of reaction. Bloch lays the



blame in various quarters: the myths of domination in the Hebrew Bible, the connection with being-oriented Greek thought in the early Church, with the struggle for state control in the Middle Ages, and Jewish efforts such as those of Hermann Cohen to distil a messianic ethics apart from any temporal reference.

Here Bloch sounds very much like a Protestant reformer, except that he has little time for either Luther or Calvin. The catch of course is that he is still squarely within the realm of myth, however much his text threatens to leak into history. For it is the myth of Jesus rather than any historical reality that draws Bloch's enthusiasm, a myth that draws on all the motifs of insurrection and slave talk in the Hebrew Bible, one that rebels against God himself.

So again at this end of things we see how the person of the rebel, along with the apocalyptic Promise-myth, is implicitly an important figure in biblical exegesis. And how these very myths, in their clarity, shed decisive light on others of their kind outside the Bible, too: on crypto-Messianic myths, which are by no means lacking in the "light of his fury," but which still, despite that, need the words spoken in the Bible, "Behold, I make all things new," if they are ever to come alive with fire (AC: 57; WA14: 86).

The recovery of myth is the linchpin of Bloch's reading of the Bible, vital for his advocacy of the Bible in Marxist circles. He plays with two options in the treatment of biblical myth, based on a prior assumption of an opposition between myth as the ideology of power and dominion and as the rebellion against such an ideology. The default position is that one is not possible without the other, that the two are inseparable—his commentary on the Bible relies on this. Yet he runs so close to the other side of this position, namely the rejection of myths of domination in favour of the subversive ones, particularly with his focus on utopia where the latter will be realised. This side becomes more decisive when he reverts to an argument similar to that which valorises the earliest layers of the Bible: mythology begins before the division of labour and the formation of classes, only later becoming imaginative





normalisations of social contradictions, that is, ideologies (see UFAL: 114–15). These earliest myths come from primitive communism and they may be discerned in the mix of later mythology by their rebellious elements—Prometheus is the favoured example (see UFAL: 35). As with my criticism of his treatment of biblical sources, Bloch's dialectic slides away at these points and falls prey to the spurious favouring of the earliest and supposedly pristine layers, as well as taking up the unexamined presuppositions of scholarship on myth and the Bible.

There is, however, a deeper problem that will recur with Benjamin in another key, and that is the implication of using any biblical myth. Although Bloch wants to read a protest against Yahweh in these myths, he pushes it beyond the text to a protest that removes Yahweh as a distinct entity. Any notion of protest in the biblical texts—and we must remember that they remain written texts with little if no access to any external reality apart from the texts themselves assumes the continued existence of Yahweh, although now in a more negative sense. Further, as I will argue with Benjamin, a significant blind spot for these writers is any sense of the way sexual difference plays a role in their readings. These myths, whether subversive or not, utopian or regressive, still come from a text that presents a male phalanx, in all its many hues, to any would-be reader.

## Exegesis

How does this method work itself out in the specific practice of biblical exegesis? The remainder of *Atheism in Christianity* attempts precisely that, passing through long chapters on the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, to the development of a distinctly a-theological argument concerning the internal logic of the Bible's protest against God. The vast span of *The Principle of Hope* also includes significant stretches of detailed exegesis, although here the Bible is a major, but by no means the only, feature. Our pursuit of Bloch's exegesis takes us into the remainder of *Atheism in Christianity*, which I have characterised as an introduction to a Marxist utopian interpretation of the Bible as a whole for both Marxists and



biblical scholars, except that now my discussion merges with an analysis of *The Principle of Hope* itself.

Some differences between both works exist: *Atheism in Christianity* runs more systematically through the Bible, while *The Principle of Hope* is a little more selective. In this case, it is around the beginning and end of human life, both individual and collective, that religious symbols tend to cluster and clot, and Bloch's own hermeneutics of hope zeroes in on both moments. He slides very quickly from the individual to the collective, preferring at one end the theme of Eden/paradise/promised land as a key utopian feature, and at the other resurrection, the Day of Judgement and the return of the messiah.

### The Hebrew Bible

Eden (PH: 758–94; WA5: 887–929) is a paradigmatic example in Bloch's work of how a particular biblical motif launches a trajectory that he then follows through centuries of thought, only to come back to the biblical moment once again. After a run through vast territories, seeking the wished-for geographical Edenic utopias, he concludes: "Eldorado-Eden therefore comprehensively embraces the other outlined utopias" (PH: 793; WA5: 929). But Eden itself cannot be separated from the idea of a Promised Land, which he suggests precedes the Babylonian story of Eden borrowed by the Israelites, nor from the new Jerusalem, when Eden will be restored at the end. But what interests Bloch is the way Eden remains a physical, geographical space, a garden to which entry is forbidden but the search for it and living close by are permitted. This space of unfallen nature is remarkably moveable, often connected with other legends, but Bloch finds it in Jerusalem; on the high mountain in the antipodes to Jerusalem (Dante); in India (in the broadest possible sense); in the Indian kingdom of Prester John; with the voyage of St Brendan and St Brendan's Isle, located in the Atlantic (which was often read as India); in what drove Columbus, who believed he had found India and that close by was paradise which would soon lie within Christendom; in the south land, terra australis; in the icy north of the kingdom of Thule; and then off



earth in the stars, or within the earth itself, as Franz Baader suggested.<sup>21</sup>

Even Eden becomes not so much an image of the beginning of life for Bloch, but rather a utopian, future-oriented image. So, his focus moves rapidly to the other end of life, where he finds the efforts to outdo death a reason to tarry awhile in the Bible, and a reason to exercise a major love, biblical exegesis (PH: 1125–33; WA5: 1323–33). In this case, he traces in great detail the rise of belief in resurrection—hardly to be found in the Hebrew Bible—in late sections of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, actively espoused by Jesus and the Pharisees, and then in early Christianity (he reads the New Testament as witness to precisely this group) with its strong apocalyptic feel, especially the hope for the end of the age when death would be no more. The fundamental drive of the resurrection from the first and second deaths (physical death and hell) is “*a thirst for justice*,” thus the wish became a postulate, the post-mortal scene became an out-and-out tribunal” (PH: 1126; WA5: 1324). Bloch does not, of course, find resurrection a believable concept, but rather it becomes a crucial feature of Bloch’s favoured apocalyptic thought, practice, and speculation. For on the last day, Judgement Day, a collective resurrection overruns the merely individual notion and justice is dispensed by a returned Christ. This advent of Christ was always more immediate, expected soonest by revolutionary groups at revolutionary moments, such as the Albigenian wars or the German Peasants’ War: “retribution for all the living after death, for all the dead after the last trumpet, retained a wishful revolutionary meaning for those that labour and are heavy laden, who could not help themselves in reality or were defeated in the struggle” (PH: 1132; WA5: 1331).

Then comes the immense section towards the end of *The Principle of Hope*, on “religious mystery” (PH: 1183–1311; WA5: 1392–1540). Here, along with Islam, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, the Bible is a central component of the discussion, with a distinct focus on the Exodus (PH: 1231–41; WA5: 1450–64) and then the continuation of the revolutionary

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<sup>21</sup> A comparable example of the way a particular biblical theme underlies a whole discussion is the role of the Tower of Babel and Solomon’s temple in the discussion of architectural utopias (PH: 711–21; WA5: 832–44).



moment with Jesus in New Testament (PH: 1256–74; WA5: 1482–1504). For Bloch, Moses is a key figure. Bloch argues strenuously for the lineaments of a distinct, flesh-and-religious leader over against the tendency in biblical scholarship at the time. Or at least the scholarship of a few years earlier: Bloch makes reference to a work by Jeremias of 1905 and the more well known Budde of 1900 and Wellhausen of 1901 (see PH: 1231–32; WA5: 1251–52). Given that *The Principle of Hope* was written between 1938 and 1947, albeit on the basis of earlier notes, these references are somewhat dated. Only with *Atheism in Christianity* is Bloch's recalcitrance regarding secondary literature overcome somewhat. All the same, Bloch maintains his argument in the face of major elements of biblical scholarship that emphasised the legendary status of Moses. Reluctant to lose such a historical Moses in the layers of myth and legend, he reaches out to grasp the real hand of Moses and draw him out of the realm of myth. The reason: Moses signals the first religion that began not in the territory of astral myth, but with rebellion. Moses is thus the “first *heros eponymos*, the first name-giving originator of a religion, of a religion of opposition” (PH: 1232; WA5: 1453); “The earliest leader of a people out of slavery . . . the first distinctive founder” (PH: 1230; WA5: 1450). Moses and the Exodus become the archetype of all other religions that began with rebellion and so these two items hold a special place in Bloch's appreciation. Not only this, Moses is for Bloch the “earliest leader of a people out of slavery” per se, religious or otherwise (PH: 1230; WA5: 1450). Add to this the primitive communism of the Bedouin-type existence of the first Israelites (PH: 496; WA5: 575)—at least those for whom Moses was the leader—and we have the prime conditions for the kind of religion Bloch would find congenial, a religion that runs through the prophets to Jesus. Yet this Yahweh of the Exodus is opposed to another image of God that comes through in the Hebrew Bible, namely, the high “lord-god,” the god of rabbis and Canaanites in one, who is equivalent to none other than Baal, the “lord” (which is precisely what Baal means in Canaanite) of all. For there is plenty in the Bible that Bloch finds objectionable: high gods, priestly privilege, opiates for the common people. But all of this is not what the Exodus God signifies. “The God of exodus is different



in nature, in the prophets he proved his hostility to lords and opium” (PH: 1235; WA5: 1457). This God is ultimately the God of the future: “*Ich werde sein, der ich sein werde*,” “I will be who I will be” (PH: 1236; WA5: 1457, quoting Exodus 3:14), the Hebrew *Eh'je ascher eh'je* (Bloch's transcription) used as a leitmotiv throughout his work.

Although his advocating of Eden as a utopian myth does not appear in *Atheism in Christianity*, the material on Exodus certainly does, albeit in much greater detail. Some questions already emerge, most notably the need for a flesh-and-blood Moses, but the emphasis in *Atheism in Christianity* is less on the founding figure than on the Exodus itself. It constitutes a signal of what he calls the “exodus out of Yahweh,” that is, the move out of a Yahweh who functions as an ideological sanction of priestly power and demands for obedience and submission. Bloch is after the break from Yahweh, the departure from tradition and authority, whether that is the Exodus, Ruth, or Jesus. Although Exodus is the key motif, Bloch draws into this a range of texts that sweep through the Hebrew Bible. Thus, the myth of the serpent in Genesis 3 fascinates him—“the most outstanding passage in the whole of the ‘underground’ Bible” (AC: 86; WA14: 117)—and he will return to the continuation of the serpent as a rebellious figure later on with regard to the Ophites. Drawn into the net are Genesis 32 and Jacob's wrestling with God (El on this occasion and not Yahweh), Exodus 4: 24–26 where Yahweh attempts to kill Moses and is appeased by circumcision, Genesis 11 and the rebellion of the Tower of Babel and the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. In each case a bloodthirsty, vengeful God faces subversion and ruse by human beings keen to avoid his fury, whether that is listening to the serpent and gaining the knowledge of good and evil, or wrestling with a God who is unwilling to grant a blessing.

The problem that emerges here, however, has already been signalled by my note on Genesis 32 and El, but Bloch is aware of this and offers an argument. For the Hebrew Bible contains not one God, Yahweh, but a host of divinities with various names—El, El Shaddai, El Elyon, El Berit, El Olam, El Roi, Baal, Pahad, Shebaot, Adon, Elohim, Yahweh, and so on. Instead of exploiting such variety to argue that it is only



one of these deities that is vile and oppressive, against which humans rebel, he argues instead that it allows for alternative possibilities in the concept of Yahweh: “The change-ability exhibited by the divine lord-of-the-manor and exactor of tribute shows that there is in fact a very changeable, movable factor in the concept of Yahweh himself” (AC: 92; WA14: 122). A suggested reconstruction of the development of the concept of Yahweh, from the Kenite tribal god to a monotheistic figure, allows Bloch to argue for what he sees as the “peculiar mutability” (*besondere Wandelbarkeit*; AC: 93; WA14: 124) in the concept of god. And out of this mutability, Bloch prefers the god oriented to the future, the one who leaves behind every previous conception of god. Here he tends towards the dualism I noted earlier in his reading of the Bible, although in this form it becomes a new concept of Yahweh that leaves all of the others behind. I cannot help but notice the residue of liberal theology’s “ethical monotheism,” despite his polemic against the “watery soul of fire of so-called liberal Protestantism” (HT: 369; WA4: 405), as the highest expression of religion in the Hebrew Bible: attained at few points, as with prophets like Isaiah, the Hebrew Bible foreshadows later developments that will render the most acceptable notion of God (one found in nothing other than liberal theology). Except for Bloch this is more of a future-oriented, utopian Yahweh, although with an atheistic twist that he will provide at the close of both *Atheism in Christianity* and *The Principle of Hope*.

If his interest in the serpent and the alternative concept of Yahweh itself is a little quirky, then his zeal for the Nazirites and prophets comes straight out of their centrality in various revolutionary movements, especially the radical edges of the Protestant Reformation. Yet the need for the prophets arose in the face of changes in political economics, argues Bloch, specifically the move from the nomadic, Bedouin-like life of wilderness wanderings to the settled life of post-conquest Canaan. Here Yahweh becomes more like Baal and the Israelite priesthood emerges from Canaanite priesthood. In opposition the Nazirites appear, from Samson through Elijah to John the Baptist, calling on the wilderness traditions that



oppose oppression. And from the Nazirites, with their vows of asceticism and bans on alcohol and hair-cutting, emerge the prophets, for whom Bloch has nothing but praise all the way from the foaming shamans of the books of Samuel and Kings to the full, considered, rational prophecy of the writing prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve. Such prophecy, for Bloch, brings about “the momentous union of *social preaching* and *the will for a new Yahweh and a coming of his Day* (AC: 99; WA 14; 19). “After the God of Exodus (*Auszugsgott*), the *second great ideal* of theology is Yahweh as the embodiment of moral reason” (AC: 104; WA14: 135), although it is a reason with a distinct apocalyptic dimension. All of the pre-agrarian, primitive communist memories are brought forth not only in the prophets, but also in legislation like that of the years of Festival and the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:5–17, 23–54).

The climax of this vast coverage is, for anyone vaguely familiar with the Hebrew Bible, the book of Job. This is the high point of murmuring, the voiced protest against an unjust and oppressive God to whom Job will not bow down, although Bloch does puzzle over Job's final submission, ruminating on the possibility that the poet knew no other way to finish. I do not wish to spend too much time on Job, for in order to get there Bloch appropriates a large number of positions in biblical criticism that are at best contested. Thus, he accepts the historicity of the Exodus from Egypt, Moses as a key figure in that escape, the notion of a distinct people of Israel who conquer Canaan and establish kingship—all to argue for the conditions of change in the concept of God. Here he must, like so many biblical scholars, take the text at its word, at least in a broad sense, for no evidence external to the Bible exists for any of these positions. In fact, if one keeps in mind the narratives of Romulus and Remus for Rome, or the Iliad for Greece, let alone the less well known Enuma Elish from Babylon, this narrative from Exodus to conquest and kingship, all by a distinct entity known as Israel, is much better understood as a political myth with little if any basis in historical events. In this respect, such a narrative becomes more suspect from an ideological perspective, one that is open to the strictures that Bloch himself applies to myth. What if, to take a growing consensus in biblical studies



and archaeology, Israel emerges late from within Canaan, a small moment in the history of Palestine, submerged under empires (Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman) and only achieving late independence under the Maccabees in the third century BCE? This means that Bloch's favoured material is actually a myth that lays claim to a distinct people, land and religion, with only the most spurious of bases in any historical reality. Further, in taking up the assumptions about the historicity of this material, Bloch takes on aspects of biblical scholarship, which itself are drawn from the text: the opposition between nomadic and settled, and above all between Yahwism and its Canaanite counterparts. Rather than seeing Baal and his priests as the embodiment of all that is negative about Yahweh, who then takes on these features—which replicates all of the most racist elements of the biblical text—what are the implications for Yahwism if that religion is itself seen as one form of Canaanite religion, inseparably connected to it? The assumption of Israelite distinctness from and superiority over its social and religious environment has waned in biblical criticism, although there is still a strong apologetic undercurrent. At the time Bloch was writing such an assumption dominated work on the Hebrew Bible: the reworking of myths such as those of creation and the high theology of ethical monotheism place Israelite religion on a much higher level than the animistic religions around about. And Bloch buys into this, drawing a line between Israelite and Canaanite, as well as Israelite and Egyptian, the latter of which solidifies as a staunch other to Israel. The Egyptian architecture of temple and pyramid closes down any utopian possibility that one finds in the Bible and, later, in Christianity and its Gothic drive to resurrection (see SU: 20–26; WA3: 32–40).

My final question concerning Bloch's treatment of the Hebrew Bible asks: what has happened to his rather astute observations on myth that I discussed a little earlier, along with the issue of sources and oral tradition. To be sure, the material about the serpent, or about Jacob wrestling with God, or Cain and Abel, or the Tower of Babel, or even Job, fall into the category of myth, or at least legend, and Bloch's treatment does live up to his methodological proposals. Let me take as an example the material in Genesis 3 and 4, the story of the serpent and that of Cain and Abel.





After noting the ambiguity of the serpent figure—poison and healing in the Aesculapian staff, dragon of the abyss and lightning high above, healer from leprosy and so on—Bloch zeroes in on a feature of the text long noticed, namely that the serpent speaks no lies. He mentions Genesis 3:22, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil,” but throughout the story the serpent speaks with a straight tongue. Thus, in response to Eve’s observation that touching the tree in the middle of the garden will lead to death, the serpent replies, “You will not die; for God (*Elohim*) knows that on the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like gods (*Elohim*), knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:4–5). Not only does God—or rather, “the gods” (*Elohim*)—admit, in verse 22, that the human beings have gained the knowledge of good and evil and become like gods, but Adam and Eve are not killed off: they are banished from the garden instead. In fact, the risk moves in reverse, not to the human beings for eating from the tree, but to the gods themselves: they fear that the man “might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (Gen 3:22). What are the results of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? “And the eyes of the two of them were opened” (3:7). What follows, in verses 8–19, is for Bloch a mythical overlay of the sort that he finds objectionable, a redactor’s narrative that turns the act of eating from the tree of knowledge into punishment for disobedience, although even here the punishment—for the serpent a legless existence, for the woman pain in childbirth and subservience to her man, for the man hard labour from a resistant and thorny ground in order to eat—hints at the sort of punishment meted out to rebels and revolutionaries. Were it not for this high-handed punishment, it is not clear that eating from the tree, desiring knowledge, wanting to be like gods, are acts of rebellion at all, let alone the sins that later exegesis and theology rendered them. Apart from the fact the fruit of the tree was anything but “deadly nightshade,” but rather “good for food,” a “delight to the eyes” and “desired to make one wise” (Gen 3:6), “countless pious people from that time on would most likely have taken willingness to be like God as the original sin, if this text had allowed it” (AC: 85–86; WA14: 116). In other words, the hand



of a redactor can be found here, an orthodox priestly apparatchik who turns an older source, perhaps an oral tradition, into a story of punishment for disobedience. Yet Bloch's point is that the earlier source is still visible, as biblical critics are wont to argue for slightly different reasons. The seams in the text, the contradictions and tensions, point to different sources that have been brought together, except for Bloch it is his hermeneutics of class conflict that leads him to argue for a tension along the lines of rulers and the repression of rebellion by those who are ruled. In doing so, he takes up the more conventional observation that Genesis 3:2–7 comes from E (the Elohist, since *Elohim* is used as God's name), verses 8–24 from a combined J and E account (the name Yahweh Elohim is used), all of which was then edited by the Priestly redactor, to argue that the serpent's role shows up more clearly in the older E source of verses 2–7. Even here, however, he needs to postulate an earlier echo—oral, although this is not explicitly mentioned by him—that remains in the early E source.

Bloch's interest in the serpent is not restricted to this text, for he picks up later the Gnostic-Christian sect of the third century CE, the Ophites (*ophis*: snake). Their innovation was to connect an old nature myth and cult of *Ophis* with the biblical material. Fragmented and distorted as the information is, coming only through the anti-heretical texts of the Church Fathers, particularly Hippolytus and Irenaeus, Bloch stresses the way they offered an alternative exegesis of the serpent texts: Moses' staff that turned into a serpent (Ex 4:2–5; 6:8–12); the wise logos of Eve in Genesis 3; the mark of Cain and Cain himself in Genesis 4; the bronze serpent set up by Moses in the desert for healing (Num 21:4–9); and Christ. The serpent of Genesis thus becomes the source of life and reason, saving Adam and Eve from the God who sought to restrict and punish them. The Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible becomes a lesser demiurge, a creator deity of this world from whom human beings had to escape. This Ophite tradition allows Bloch to pursue other texts, such as that concerning Nehushtan in 2 Kings 18:4, the bronze serpent, made by Moses, which had been worshipped until its destruction by King Hezekiah, or the text from John 3:14, "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the



wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up”—although he neglects to mention the verse that immediately follows, “that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:15). In the end, the God who punishes Christ with crucifixion is the same one who punishes the serpent and the first humans in Genesis 3. With the Parousia, Christ will return like the snake of lightning, destroying the world that the Demiurge had made. For Bloch this “a rebellion myth second to none” (AC: 186; WA14: 233). He ponders its complete disappearance, the restriction to a purely theoretical and spiritual plane and the absence of any political dimension, as well as the refusal of the Church Fathers to take it seriously. Bloch will not let Genesis 3 alone, for the problem it presents carries though into Rabbinic and scholastic reflection, especially Maimonides and Aquinas, where the problem—solved along conventional lines—as to why the desire to be more than unreasoning beasts is sinful. In his characteristic encyclopaedic fashion, Bloch traces the serpent through to the sixth century decree by Justinian against Ophite doctrine in 530 CE, the possibility that the Marcionites worshipped the serpent, its presence on the eucharistic cup in the Middle Ages, the decorations found on Templar churches and in Baroque Bibles, and even Nietzsche’s rebellion (HI: 331; WA4: 365–66), but what he misses is the fact that the Hebrew word *Seraph* or *Seraphim* also means serpent, deriving from the winged cobra of the representations of the Pharaohs and Egyptian deities. A whole slate of further texts then deal with the serpent as well, most notably Isaiah 6; 14:28–32 and 30:6.<sup>22</sup>

Once again, Bloch picks up an old exegetical conundrum and turns it around by means of the “discernment of myths,” now with Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. He espies a “half-concealed break in the picture of this God” (AC: 90; WA14: 120) where the issue is acceptable sacrifice. Abel’s sacrifice of the fat portions of the firstling of the flock is acceptable, but Cain’s offering of the fruit of the ground is not. Here, we have a blood-thirsty deity who requires the blood of animals as a substitute for human

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<sup>22</sup> See further Francis Landy, “Seraphim and Poetic Process,” in *The Labour of Reading: Desire, Alienation and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Fiona Black, Roland Boer, and Erin Runions (Atlanta, GA: SBL Publications, 1999), 15–34.



blood. After the murder of Yahweh's favoured Abel by Cain, the picture of Yahweh transforms into something quite different. Usually, the text that follows the murder—with its story of the mark of Cain to distinguish him from others—is read as the curse of Cain. He has, after all, killed his brother in a rage of jealousy, sin lying at the door as a result of Cain's fallen face (Gen 4:6 and 7). Bloch, however, exploits a break in the Masoretic text in verse 8: "And Cain said to his brother Abel . . . And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him." This syntactical blip alerts Bloch to a change in the representations of Cain and Yahweh. The nervousness of the other versions (Samaritan Pentateuch, Septuagint, Syriac, Vulgate, and others) which add "Let us go out into the field" points to a problem in the Hebrew—it simply does not make sense at this point.

The change in Cain is one thing; he is either a crestfallen man because his sacrifice was unacceptable, or a murderer. But Bloch is drawn by the break in the picture of God. On the one hand, we have the dystopian, bloodthirsty Yahweh who places a curse on Cain—"And now cursed are you from the ground, which has opened its mouth to take the blood of your brother from your hand. When you cultivate the ground it will no longer give you its strength; a fugitive and wanderer you will be upon the earth" (Gen 4:11–12, my translation). Yet, the text relents in mid stream: "Yahweh not only modifies his curse, but withdraws it. Instead of an imperial ban on the outlaw, what comes, as though from a different source, is quite the opposite" (AC: 90; WA14: 121). The mark of Cain is then a mark of protection, and Cain is blessed with a long line of fruitful and productive offspring—city-builders, tent dwellers, livestock owners, lyre and pipe players, bronze and iron tool manufacturers.

But, had he been able to read Hebrew, Bloch would have picked up another textual problem. In Genesis 4: 15, he quotes Yahweh's words in the text as "Not so! If anyone slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold" (AC: 90; WA14: 121). Yet here the "not so!" follows the various versions (Greek, Latin, and Syriac) rather than the Masoretic (Hebrew) text, which has "Therefore [*lkn*]," following on from Cain's



plea, "I shall be a fugitive and wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me" (Gen 4:14). Therefore, says Yahweh, Cain's killer will be avenged sevenfold, and for this reason the mark is a mark of protection, not punishment. Finally, Bloch lets pass in silence the verse that follows, for Cain with his sign of protection departs from "the face of Yahweh" (Gen 4:16). Is this not precisely the exodus out of Yahweh that Bloch seeks? Protected by Yahweh, Cain is now able to move out on his own.

If his discussion of Genesis 3 was able to exploit source critical work in his own way, he is on less sure ground with Genesis 4. To all appearances, this is a J text, with an E insertion in verse 25, regarded among source critics as the oldest source in the Pentateuch. Given that Bloch is indebted to source criticism, and historical-criticism as a whole, the conclusion must be either that there is a tension within the J source over the depictions of Cain and Yahweh, or he must postulate an earlier source behind J that expresses this different picture. According to his method this is the move he must make, and yet it remains unsaid, implied but not pursued.

Even so, these are among the best examples of Bloch's method at work, sorting out the tensions and contradictions of the myths in the Hebrew Bible. However, at other points he is not so discerning. For instance, I am not completely persuaded about the Eden material, for its utopian promise rests upon some of the most profoundly repressive mythology, unless one does indeed take the side of the serpent and the humans, as Bloch does in *Atheism in Christianity*. However, when it comes to a pinch he leaves myth behind, keen to espy the historical Moses behind the various myths that waft around him, or the concrete historical context of wilderness nomadism and the conquest of Canaan. It is as though he loses his mythical nerve, wanting Moses to be more than myth, for a mythical founder has less *gravitas* than a real one. In reply, I would suggest that the notion of an individual founder, a great man (at least) of history and faith, is the most likely form a religious myth will take.



## New Testament

I must admit that Bloch's enthusiastic appropriation of the New Testament does not have the quirky edge of his reading of the Hebrew Bible, although he is astute enough to realise that for the various revolutionary Christian groups, it is ultimately Jesus to whom they look for inspiration. As before, let me move through *The Principle of Hope* before returning to *Atheism in Christianity*. Apart from locating a revolutionary impulse in the prophets, the other point for Bloch is in messianism, which he follows through Zoroaster, Mani and Buddha to Jesus. And Jesus too must be a historical figure, embedded in a mythical and political context (PH: 1256–65; WA5: 1482–93). Bloch is out to establish the fullest revolutionary credentials of Jesus, who, with the prophets, provides the basis for social utopia. So he focuses on Jesus' "downward attraction," towards the poor, and his "upward rebellion against above," against the powerful, the money-changers, the wealthy. In the end, wealth prevents salvation, and the love-communism of the early community (comparable to the primitive communism of the early Israelites under Moses), where everything is distributed equally, provides the model of a new society. After his glowing appreciation of Jesus, Bloch accords a central place to the scandal of Christian love, which is the "stumbling block" to the world. "This is Christian love, a love which is almost micrological, one which gathers up its own in their out-of-the-way-ness, their incognito to the world, their discordance with the world: *into the kingdom where they accord*" (PH: 1262; WA5: 1490). Finally, Jesus' apocalypticism, the expectation of an imminent end to the world and the inauguration of the kingdom, marks him out as both a revolutionary and as the sign of the "perfection of the exodus god into the god of the kingdom" (PH: 1265; WA5: 1493). Bloch treasures this apocalyptic dimension from the Bible most highly, or, as he often calls it, messianism, the inauguration of the new age at the hands of the messiah.

While *Atheism in Christianity* offers a somewhat different approach to the Hebrew Bible, avoiding the focus on Moses that we find in *The Principle of Hope*, the dominating figure of Jesus in the New Testament dictates the terms of Bloch's engagement in both books. Bloch beefs up Jesus'



revolutionary credentials in *Atheism in Christianity*, stressing the tests that speak of his fury and divisiveness, the sword, fire, and preaching. Again, the radical apocalypticism of the New Testament texts is what draws Bloch in. He is, however, not the first to argue for Jesus the political revolutionary, for it has been a constant theme in various popular and scholarly christologies. To be sure, such a strident apocalypticism has been a source of embarrassment, or one that needed a soothing explanation. Further, Bloch's own zeal for a revolutionary firebrand like Jesus serves not merely to explain his appeal to the Müntzers of history, but it has been influential, as I mentioned earlier, in the development of political theologies in Europe (most notably Jürgen Moltmann and Johann Baptist Metz)<sup>23</sup> and liberation theologies in Latin America and elsewhere.

Some of the most enjoyable sections of his analysis come with the broadside delivered at the liberal, interiorising anti-Semitic christologies of Renan, Holzmann, Wellhausen, and von Harnack, particularly when he connects their work with the transcendentalising tendencies within the New Testament. He takes Paul, the bogeyman of such liberal christologies, the one who was felt to institutionalise Christianity and thereby lose its individual spirit, and shows how their work is in continuity with Paul. And yet, Bloch assumes such a position in his own critique, for Paul is in Bloch's eyes the Yahwistic ideologue of the New Testament, the compromiser with the state, the one who fashions Christianity into an ideology of oppression and domination—even if such fundamental social conservatism was necessary for the survival of Christianity to do so (see also NLHD: 158; WA6: 181). We will find a very different reading of Paul in my discussion of Badiou and Žižek later in this book: for Badiou especially, Paul is the model of the militant revolutionary who operates in terms of the truth-event. As I will argue, Badiou recovers and reworks a profound insight of the reformers, namely the revolutionary implications of grace. But not for Bloch, who picks up the profound

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<sup>23</sup> Johannes B Metz, *Theology of the World* (London: Burns and Oates, 1969); Johannes B Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (London: Burns and Oates, 1980); Jürgen Moltmann, especially in his first major text, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM, 1982).



dislike of Paul the institutionaliser that characterised liberal Protestantism at his time.

The most curious aspect of his treatment of Jesus in *Atheism in Christianity* is the mix of mythical and historical features. As in *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch engages in his own search for the historical Jesus, and in doing so he follows the dominant pattern of such research in biblical scholarship at the time of writing, namely speculation about the various titles of Jesus that are found in the New Testament: messiah, Son of God, Son of Man, kyrios (lord), and so on. And like that research, his concern is to identify the titles closest to Jesus' own usage, an effort at gaining access to his psychological processes. Bloch's preferences are for both messiah and Son of Man: "Subjectively, then, Jesus considered himself the Messiah in the thoroughly traditional sense; objectively he is anything but an artful dodger into invisible inwardness, or a sort of quartermaster for a totally transcendent heavenly Kingdom" (AC: 129-30; WA14: 176). If anything, the enigmatic and apocalyptic "Son of Man" is closest to Jesus, the one most often on his lips, giving expression to his anti-Yahwistic drive, the desire for human transcendence. But in pursuing the motif of the Son of Man through the Hebrew Bible and extra-canonical material, Bloch is squarely in the realm of myth, whether the suffering, dying, and returning apocalyptic figure or the heavenly man or Adam, Adam Kadmon of Jewish mythology, and the second Adam of other New Testament theology. Here he falls into the trap of myth that he wants to avoid in his method: on the one hand, he tries to sidestep the myth that seeps through the New Testament, arguing that Son of Man is a real term used by a flesh-and-blood Jesus in his revolutionary struggles; on the other, it is a designation that runs back to the earliest precursors of the Priestly source in Genesis 1, to the figure of Adam made in the image and likeness of God: "In the final analysis, then, the doctrine of the Heavenly Adam as the prototype of man belongs to the biblical Azores: to the remaining mountain-peak of a submerged, subversive, anti-theocratic tradition" (AC: 150; WA14: 195).

I am not so sure, for not only would Bloch have been on better





ground if he had argued that the myth of a revolutionary Jesus is one that undermines those of the Kyrios-Christos, the one who must be obeyed, but I cannot see how this transcendent, eternal Adam is not god-like. Of course, Bloch would argue that this is a manifestation of the god principle itself, namely that it expresses ultimately the desire by human beings to transcend themselves, to move into another state of social, species, and psychological existence free of any religious ideology that denigrates human beings. But the problem runs deeper than this, which involves both the difficulties of secularising theology and the related question of the elevation of man onto God's former throne. I will return to these questions below.

All the same, it is striking to catch the enthusiasm with which Bloch appropriates the Jewish and Christian materials. One can sense the immense value he accords Moses and Jesus, their historicity, Christian love and apocalypticism, but above all their revolutionary credentials. Is he, then, too sympathetic to religion, too blind to the atrocities and complications with the powerful that Christianity has manifested, as his critics in East Germany insisted? It seems to me that, for all his shortcomings in biblical criticism and in Marxist theory, the crucial question that exercised Bloch, and the question that makes a too ready dismissal of his work on the Bible the easy option, is why such a text was the main inspiration for the various revolutionary groups throughout European history. I have already raised this question earlier, but it remains central to some of the final moves that Bloch makes in his treatment of the Bible.

## The Return to Theology

Our consideration of his closing arguments in both *Atheism in Christianity* and *The Principle of Hope*—that is, the atheistic logic of the Bible—must return to theology. Thereby these closing observations become the most symptomatic aspect of Bloch's writing on the Bible and theology. For all the contribution that his work makes both to a Marxist critique of theology and to the issues relevant for a Marxist biblical criticism—class conflict as a key factor in biblical criticism, the need



to discern myths, the extraordinary insights his readings of biblical texts provide and even the nature of his sentence production—it is the theological turn that raises all sorts of questions about the nature of his biblical criticism.

Although the subtitle is “The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom,” the main title of the book as a whole is not *Atheism in the Bible*, but *Atheism in Christianity*, *Atheismus im Christentum*. And the questions with which Bloch deals are those of atheism, teleology, transcendence, sin and death. In other words, Bloch moves back to theology. The bold move that Bloch sets up here is a dialectical inversion of the central doctrines of Christianity, a homeopathic reading that pushes the concepts and contradictions to their extreme until their “truth” emerges. It is not unlike Adorno’s practice of the dialectic, except that Bloch was far more enthusiastic about the utopian possibilities of such a move.

After running through the impossibility of the biblical exodus out of Yahweh in Orphic, Stoic, and Gnostic beliefs, Bloch returns to what is now a theological opposition in continuity with the two lines he traces in the Bible: astral myth and logos myth. If astral myth—in which the fundamental stasis of the cosmos remains untouched—provides no way forward, what he calls the logos myth allows him to begin a transvaluation of one theological category after the other (see also SU: 212–18; WA3: 267–72).

## Atheism

Bloch’s well-known “religious atheism”—although I will want to criticise that term strongly in my discussion of Adorno—is not a stand against the Christian god and a call for the recovery of all the paganism that has been repressed in the name of Christianity. By contrast, Bloch fully endorses the break down and move beyond paganism enacted, as he sees it, in the Bible. Lumped under the sign of “astral myth”—chthonian matriarchal religions of the moon, fertility cults of the dying and rising god, the patriarchal religions of the sun, Canaanite and Greek myths that relate directly to the Bible, cyclical fertility myths—Bloch notes both the leftovers at various biblical moments, ranging from the story of Joseph to



the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the Bible's ability to cut through the whole seduction of paganism (Žižek will echo such a reading in his own fashion).

His argument is that the Bible first enables human beings to look upwards, into the whole realm of divinised and mythological heavenly bodies, and not be afraid, as the angels say to the shepherds in Luke's birth story. For Bloch, Feuerbach provides a major step towards understanding atheism: by arguing that the gods are transposed hypostases of human desires, made in the image and likeness of men, he enables human beings to begin to claim the heavens for themselves. What Bloch likes about Feuerbach is that he focuses on Christianity rather than pagan myths, for as the projection of what is best in "man" the Christian gods offer the royal road to an "anthropologization of religion." The reason for this: Feuerbach's method was heavily indebted to "the radically human line in Christianity" (AC: 210; WA14: 281). He sought to bring the gods to earth, to turn the focus of human ideals on human beings rather than the beyond; even if the result was nothing more than "a readily available ensemble of liberal desires" (AC: 210; WA14: 281), it still put forward an image of human beings that was distinctly utopian, a *homo absconditus* who yet awaits full emergence. Only possible by passing through Christianity, "Feuerbach's atheism, then, aimed both to destroy a strength-sapping illusion, and to fan the transforming flames which would change the theologically created infinity of man back into a truly human one" (AC: 211; WA14: 282).

But what kind of atheism is this? It is not so much the moral atheism of the Enlightenment in which the problem of theodicy led to the conclusion that, in the face of evil and undeserved suffering, God could not exist, nor is it historical, psychological or poetic atheism that Bloch notes as possible answers to the questions posed in the book of Job (see AC: 120–22; WA14: 164–66). Indeed, an unfeeling, cruel universe still exists and it is as unfair to human beings with or without God. What interests Bloch is the utopian drive beyond inhumanity, in which the same group of theodical questions must be dealt with by an atheism that is best described as protest atheism.

Can there be no understanding of the harsh clash of misery and the drive



to overcome it, no insight into exploitation and its progressive dialectics? And does not dialectical materialism itself need some justification for invoking such a dreary and repulsive process? Where does this realm of necessity come from, with all its long oppression? Why is the realm of freedom not suddenly there? Why must it work its way with so much bloodshed through necessity? Why the long delay? (AC: 121; WA14: 164–65)

What he decries are both the “unrealistic folly of optimism” and the “equally unhistorical nihilism” (AC: 121; WA14: 165) that is characteristic of so many forms of atheism. Rather, atheism protests not merely against a god who is responsible for these things, but also the condition of humanity in which they exist. For this reason the host of religious protestors and revolutionaries draw him in: the prophets, mystics, religious founders, particularly Moses, and Jesus, and the out and out theological revolutionaries like Müntzer. And so we require not merely an exodus out of Yahweh, for “there is always an exodus in the world, and exodus from the particular *status quo*. And there is always a hope, which is connected with rebellion—a hope founded in the concrete given possibilities for a new beginning” (AC: 121–22; WA14: 165).

There is, however, another dimension to Bloch’s protest atheism that looks for its first moment within the Bible itself. To be sure, protest atheism still allows god a place in the person of the paradoxical “rebel who has trust in God, without believing in him” (AC: 122; WA14: 165). That is, the possibility of atheism cannot be found within the Bible, although Bloch argues that it pushes in such a direction. And the strains he identifies must conclude, beyond the Bible itself, in atheism, in an atheistic religion in which revolutionary hopes are borne. In fact, the messianic drive can only be realised within atheism, and specifically Marxism:

The existence of God, indeed God at all as a special being is superstition; belief is solely that in a messianic kingdom of God—without God. Atheism is therefore so far from being the enemy of religious utopia that it constitutes its precondition: without atheism messianism has no place. . . .

And the end of religion is thus, in this knowledge, as comprehended hope in totality, not simply no religion but—in the convolutions of



Marxism—the inheriting of it, meta-religious knowledge-conscience of the final Where To, What For problem: ens perfectissimum. (PH: 1200–1201; WA5: 1413; see also HT: 369–72; WA4: 405–9)

In other words, Marxism inherits, indeed fulfils, religion itself. Thus, the sections of *The Principle of Hope* that follow the section on “Religious Mystery,” the last two sections of the whole work, concern Karl Marx as the culmination of the whole process. The seeds of this “anthropologization” (or, as Moylan calls it “dehypostatization”)<sup>24</sup> of religion lie in the Bible—Bloch quotes Romans 5:5; 8:18; 1 Corinthians 2:9 and Ephesians 4:13—and are then realised in the work of Feuerbach: only through anthropologisation is the hope of Christianity realised, since here is found the anticipation that human beings will be created anew. In the end, the thread of hope that Bloch recovers through Moses, Jesus, mysticism, and Feuerbach, is fully realised in atheism, the realm of Freedom, that most recent of religious developments which is in itself the final logic of religion, specifically that of the Bible.

Atheism is the presupposition of any concrete Utopia, but concrete Utopia is also the remorseless consequence of atheism. Atheism-with-concrete-Utopia is at one and the same time the annihilation of religion and the realization of its heretical hope, now set on human feet. (AC: 240; WA14: 317)

Thus, not only is there a logic or teleology of atheism within the Bible that realises itself finally with Marxism, but the type of atheism that Bloch identifies is a protest atheism that must squarely face the problems of theodicy rather than attempting the false solution of the God hypothesis. Yet, as many have argued, there is an over-riding teleology in Bloch's argument that recurs time and again.

## Teleology

Drawn directly from the Bible, whether that is the notion of Exodus out of God and humanity, the prophetic longing for the *Novum*,

<sup>24</sup> Moylan, “Bloch against Bloch,” 105.



the impatient apocalypticism of Jesus or the author of the Apocalypse at the end of the New Testament, the teleological desire is not merely a feature of Bloch's utopianism. More importantly, it is one more theological category that Bloch seeks to transvalue into historical materialism. He rests heavily on the distinction between creation and exodus to argue, like Benjamin, for a historical dimension to the Bible. As we saw earlier, this argument is heavily indebted to late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century biblical scholarship which argued for the difference of the Bible, especially the Hebrew Bible, from its cultural and religious environment in terms of a move from cyclical myth to linear historical time. Although he should not be blamed entirely for this—the distinction between cyclical and linear is highly problematic,—his call for a discernment of myths should have enabled him to be wary about such a move. To his credit, he does argue for both within the Bible, but in his push to establish a utopian opening that is historical he moves a little too quickly.

In a massive rush, Bloch draws in the Neo-Platonists and Gnostics, with their distinction between emanation and evolution as the expectation of a not-yet complete and perfect world, the opposition between creation and salvation in the Bible, the earliest documents of the Bible that concerned the Exodus rather than creation, Pentecost and its transformation into the third and final age of the Spirit in Origen and his much beloved Joachim of Fiore, as well as Schelling, Hegel, Augustine, and the Apocalypse of John. This movement is also integral to the organisation of some of his major works, such as *The Spirit of Utopia*, *Atheism in Christianity* and *The Principle of Hope*: a grand move from creation to eschaton that replicates the move from Genesis to the Apocalypse in the Christian Bible.

Teleology is also the most commented upon feature of his whole philosophy, specifically in terms of a chiliastic or messianic Marxism that unashamedly takes a theological category and materialises it. For Moylan, it also shows up a distinct tension between a rigid Marxist teleology and a more fragmentary and disruptive pattern of utopian expectation. Moylan heavily favours the latter, which suffers under the other, teleological element of Bloch's work.<sup>25</sup> I am not so sure that it is as easy as all that to

<sup>25</sup> Moylan, "Bloch against Bloch," 112–13. Moylan problematically turns this critique



make the distinction, since utopia is for Bloch a temporal and historical concept. If anything, what is called for here is a dialectical treatment drawn from Bloch himself that would see both as mutually necessary. Yet, it seems to me that Bloch's debt is less to Stalinist orthodoxy, as Moylan suggests, than the systematising temptations of theological categories over the more variegated biblical material.

The whole idea of teleology, or chiliasm, is much more theological than biblical, and Bloch in the end makes little distinction between the two, assuming a massive continuity that constitutes a profound problem. On the one hand, it is not possible to ignore the theological content of the Bible, for it is a document that speaks of theological matters; and yet, the assumption that the Bible is one part of a larger, particularly Christian, theological discourse ignores the rifts and breaks between the Bible and theology, the appropriation of a literary text by a religious tradition that did not produce it. Beneath all of this is not only the argument that it should be possible—no, that it is necessary—to develop a non-theological biblical criticism, but also the assumption that theology as a necessary context for biblical interpretation is more problematic than beneficial, for it closes down more possibilities for interpretation than the opportunities it creates. In other words, Bloch's value is that he raises the theological issues in of biblical interpretation, although it seems to me that his Marxist reading of the Bible is ultimately limited by the unexamined theological assumptions with which he reads it.

### Transcendence

Throughout his reading of the Bible, Bloch argues that the theological category of transcendence speaks less of God than it does of human beings. Or rather, that the transcendence of God functions as a code for the transcendence of human beings: *deus absconditus* is but a cipher for *homo absconditus*. He even extends this point into considerations of a materialist notion of the soul, which expresses the potential of human beings themselves. In the end, he says unabashedly that only when human beings banish God

into one that valorises liberal plurality over against communist totality.



from existence can they achieve the same status, that is, they can finally realise their full potential. By now this should not be an unfamiliar theme, for it recurs time and again in Bloch's texts, but in the last stages of *Atheism in Christianity* it reappears with renewed vigour and is applied beyond human beings to matter and nature.

For instance, nature and the raw material of matter also have a utopian dimension in certain moments of Western philosophy: the *dynamai on*, "being-in-possibility" that Aristotle postulated and was taken up by the so-called left-wing Aristotelians, the Arabians, Avicenna, and Averroës, with the notion of *eductio formarum ex materia*, namely "the eduction of forms from a nature that is no longer passive and unqualitative" (AC: 231; WA14: 305); the "spiritual matter" of Plotinus; the "earthly spirits" of Avicenna; and the Stoa's crypto-materialist *logos spermatikos*. If all this may be understood as a self-transcendence that emerges from matter, then the Bible presents an alternative approach, a descent of the eschaton into this world. The new heaven and new earth of the biblical Apocalypse also, he points out, descend to earth, belonging to the realm of nature and thereby opening up a dialectic between transcendence and immanence: "nowhere is the Omega of Christian utopianism so untranscendent and at the same time so all-transcending, as in the 'New Jerusalem' of Revelation 21:23" (AC: 229; WA14: 303; translation corrected). The new sense of transcendence that he develops here is that of a thoroughly transformed world in which utopia may emerge. Bloch prefers the Latin verbal infinitive *transcendere* to the substantive transcendence, for whereas the latter indicates a state, the former speaks of a forward-looking process (see AC: 237–39; WA14: 315–17), a paradoxical *transcendere* without transcendence.

Bloch obviously attempts to extend Marx's critique of mechanical materialism beyond the places Marx was prepared to go, ever digging out the utopian glimpse in the strangest of places. However, is not the effort to reload key theological terms like "transcendence" and even "God" not caught up in the difficulties of secularised theology? This will become a central question for Adorno, and I want bring his profound suspicions





to Bloch's arguments. Such theological terms are not so easily divested of their semantic associations, for their content is not like milk in a bottle which one can merely pour out and replace, say, with wine. No matter how unrelenting the effort to remove any former content, a residue remains that clings to the terms themselves. While some theologians may rejoice at this situation, Adorno's point is that one must not relax in the task of ideological suspicion, something that Bloch, for all his extended exercise of precisely that task, seems to relax all too often.

This problem brings me to two related points. The first is theological: the elevation of "man" in God's place, or matter in place of spirit, has all the potential for totalitarian and oppressive politics that can now be justified by such an ideology, for this "man" can behave as though he were god, that is, omnipotent, omniscient, capricious, arbitrary and so on. As Moylan points out in a different context (teleological utopia versus fragmentary utopia), Bloch has a tendency to revert to the hypostatisation he elsewhere criticises so well.<sup>26</sup> Such hypostatisation happens when Bloch moves from the discernment of myths in the Bible to more overtly theological categories. However, one response is to argue that only a full theological system, with God in place, can avoid such idolatry, but this is hardly the step to take. Second, therefore, we need to ask not only whether the terms from theology, however secularised, do not replicate precisely those patterns of ideological justification of power and authority that theology itself provided for those in power. But we also need to keep in mind the fact that theology is in fact the ideology par excellence of precisely such an oppressive system. And here I can use Bloch against himself, for it is his suspicion of those myths that produce servile obedience, justifying the acts of earthly lords, that must be brought to bear on his attempt at a secularised theology, at the elevation of the *homo absconditus*.

### Faith, Hope, Sin, and Death

Bloch continues to roll one theological category out after another, of which the most intriguing are faith, hope, sin, and death. Since his

<sup>26</sup> Moylan, "Bloch against Bloch," 115–16.



reflections on death are among the most honest I have encountered by an atheist, I will pick them up again in my discussion of materialist theology in the close to this book. But let us begin with faith: it becomes not, as the liberal theologians were fond of arguing, an openness to God. Rather, faith is an openness to an undecided future and distance in which there is no room for a ready-made faith with a set solution. Bloch develops a notion of faith that is determined to stay the course, in open ferment, looking forward to an indeterminate future. And only in this context is hope possible, a discontented hope in which faith is placed.

Almost in answer to my objections, mentioned a little earlier, to Bloch's enthusiastic search for human transcendence, he insists on the importance of notions of evil and the "Satanic" within any Marxist program, although they are yet again transformed. Any program of enlightenment, including the Marxist one, in which the banishment of ghosts and demons is a requisite feature, also threatens to lose a sense of evil in the world. Obviously, it is not a case of returning to such superstitions, however often people may feel the need when an unexplainable evil occurs. The problem is that Marxism diminishes the notion of evil, making it small and weak, only at its peril, or Marxism provides a psychological or economic explanation which is equally inadequate: "even these farther-reaching ideas are fundamentally inadequate in the face of a phenomenon like Auschwitz" (AC: 242; WA14: 319). If the customarily up-beat Bloch sounds a little more like the sombre Adorno, the reason is that he needs to face up to the problem that the fading of God also means the fading of his antagonist. With Satan fading from sight, evil ceases to have a name, becoming unidentifiable and unidentified. The real danger, then, is not that human beings may realise their potential and become like the gods they constructed, but that human beings may take on the trappings of that figure at the other end of the scale and seek to dominate and oppress. In order to point the way to an adequate theory of evil, Bloch reverts to his other great literary love, *Faust*, and in doing so makes the theological point that the success of evil lies in its self-diminution, from whence it can be all the more effective. Contrary, to a Nietzschean denial



of evil as part of atheism, Bloch sees a pressing need for a doctrine of evil within atheism, especially a Marxist rebellious atheism, that would provide significant metaphysical depth to the very possibility of utopia. In other words, in order to give some real sense to the struggle for the Kingdom of Freedom, Bloch calls for a notion of evil that recognises how large the obstacles are, how trenchant the opposition may be, to any proper form of socialism.

The references to the Bible have become despairingly thin as the full theological agenda takes over, of which the last category is death, “a highly inadequate end, generally breaking, only very rarely rounding off, the human life” (AC: 249; WA14: 329; see also the discussion in SU: 255–66; WA3: 318–31). One of the catches of atheism is that its answer to the questions of what happens before and after life is a flat “nothing”; here religions such as Christianity can offer some hope beyond death, however illusory that may be. For the untidy finality of death threatens to sap the energy of anyone who sets out to change the world: “death depicts the hardest anti-utopia” (UFAL: 9; GEB: 66). In the fascinating discussion between Bloch and Adorno, “Something’s Missing,” Adorno also argues that one of the key questions for a utopian consciousness is the possibility that people no longer have to die (UFAL : 8; GEB: 66). On this question, a number of moves open to Bloch, of which the most common is to resort to a collective life of which the individual is but one small part. However, he prefers to distinguish between the act of dying, which is itself part of life, and death as the resultant state. While various fears and apprehensions are connected with dying, the ontological status of death engenders sheer horror. Images of sleep at the end of a long day’s work, after the evening meal and in the cool of the night (a biblical image) work only for a few, and so Bloch seeks a possible source of courage neither in the notion of resurrection that refuses to take death as true (he stresses the cry of abandonment by Jesus in the Gospel passion narratives, for it runs against the fix-all of the resurrection and protests against the God of death),<sup>27</sup> nor in the retrospective look that imman-

<sup>27</sup> Although note the contrast with his more positive assessment of the resurrection



ent death produces, but in the look forward to the *Novum*. That is, death ought to be viewed as a departure, not to some pre-fabricated place, but as an open question. Interested in neither “positive dogmatism” nor “dogmatic negativity,” Bloch comes out as an agnostic regarding death: the journey is simply an unknown and anyone who attempts to tell us what actually takes place has another agenda. Atheism, therefore, does not preclude the possibility of something beyond death, for “the *status viae* lies far beyond death, which hardly represents an inflexibly formative *status termini*” (SU: 265; WA3: 330).

And yet, Bloch wants to do more than this, invoking notions of “life force” (*Lebensmuts*) and hunger, the former an irrepressible push out of dullness, oppression, and any effort to close it down, the latter a desire for that which is better, a craving for the Not-Yet. But what is this life-force but the innate desire within each human being for a better world? Part of a wider agenda, life-force is that within human life with a potential beyond itself, a capability for a fuller realisation that is only partially fulfilled in an individual life. And what are its sources and signs? The ability to stand up straight, a moral independence, finality, understood as “the courage to break free from this devil’s guesthouse, this world” (AC: 252; WA14: 332); and hope, especially the hope that does not disappear, that holds in the worst of circumstances.

For Bloch, human beings can only come close to the realisation of their potential to which the life force points in a utopian, that is, a properly socialist environment, where the as yet unimagined social and economic conditions will enable a transformation of human beings themselves. This point runs close to Marx’s notion of species essence and the transformation of that essence in communism, although of course the conditions for such change were established by human beings themselves. I would suggest that Bloch is offering yet one more translation of a theological concept—this time resurrection—into an atheistic category. Thus, the notion of eternal life may be understood not so much as an answer to death as the “deep presence

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and the transcendental miracle that rescues believers from death as deeply utopian (see UFAL: 10; GEB: 68).



of something that has not yet appeared” (AC: 252; WA14: 332), waiting to realise a true, essential being.

The weaker version of this necessary but astonishing effort to deal with the question of death would be that human beings contain within them a utopian desire that still awaits realisation. The value of religions such as Christianity is that they have tapped into this, no matter how problematic the answers may be. However, I suspect that Bloch is pushing towards a stronger version, in which a collective socialist transformation that has not yet arrived will provide the context for the full realisation of such a life force, a society that was itself brought about as the result of that life-force. Of course, a mountain of questions soon arise—will people still long for a greater transformation? is such a life-force itself not generated by the religions in question? and so on—but what interests me is the effort to transform a theological category into a viable notion for historical materialism.

Most commentators have been nonplussed by what they feel is a double-take or dialectical sleight-of-hand in the discussion of death. Geoghegan feels that Bloch shuffles about too much, while Roberts suspects that Bloch must rely on some form of religious mystery to sustain hope.<sup>28</sup> As I have argued above, Bloch's arresting move is to argue that atheism does not necessarily mean that death is final and, conversely, that religion does not have a monopoly on death. He is in the end agnostic on the question of the fate of the individual after death.

What we have, then, especially in the final two chapters of *Atheism in Christianity*, is an effort comparable to the earlier chapters on the Bible—a brief systematic theology that seeks, as Bloch writes with regard to hope, “to inherit those features of religion which do not perish with the death of God” (AC: 266; WA14: 347). Yet what Bloch calls for in the end is not the abolition of Christianity within Marxism, but a mutually transforming alliance in some apocalyptic and utopian future. An “alliance between revolution and Christianity,” between socialism and the Church, the “table of labour” and the “table of the Lord”

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<sup>28</sup> Richard Roberts, “Review Article: An Introductory Reading of Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*,” *Literature and Theology* 1, no. 1 (1987): 89–112, especially, 108.



(SU: 246; WA3: 307 see also NLHD: 276–80; WA6: 310–14), on the model of the Peasant Revolution under Müntzer, would enable a Christianity free from alienation, in touch with its origins in religious freedom (NLHD: 158–59; WA6: 181–82) and a Marxism in touch with its depths. If this was not possible politically when Bloch wrote and even if some theologians have been too quick to appropriate Bloch, he pre-empts such an alliance in the style of writing: in *The Spirit of Utopia* the final eschatological section (SU: 267–78; WA3: 332–46) inseparably mingles Marxist and Christian theological motifs.

## Conclusion

But enough of this religious imagery (AC: 263; WA14: 344).

I must admit that I am in two minds about Bloch, caught for a while in his materialist enthusiasm and then suspicious of how he fails to live up to his own method, particularly his key category of the discernment of myth. It seems to me that this is by far the most fruitful of Bloch's categories for a materialist philosophy of religion, to which I will turn in more detail in the conclusion to this book. Not merely the acumen required to differentiate between those elements of myth that have an underlying subversive force and those that serve the interests of the ruling classes, it is more the dialectical insight that the myths of subversion and insurrection appear precisely in the myths of domination.

My criticism of Bloch is that he does not always stay true to such a strategy, so much so that some of his own arguments are subject to doubt on this score. I think in particular of his efforts at a secular theology, particularly the elevation of human beings to the place of God, which will be subject to all of the strictures of Adorno's criticism of idolatry (see the chapter on Adorno). Further, my argument is that the discernment of myth emerges in his analysis of biblical material, but that it falls away when he reverts to theology. In fact, a major problem is that he takes the Bible and theology and two parts of the same endeavour, with the result that theological categories begin to dominate his biblical interpretation. At this point Bloch loses his nerve with regard to the discernment of myth.



By way of closing, let me tease this argument out a little further. Bloch's biblical criticism is stronger than his efforts at transforming theological material. That theological discussion is too mystical to be cast as a secularised theology and he is more than a mere religious atheist who sees value in religion while denying its truth claims. Further, Jameson's strategy, in his reading of Bloch, of arguing that religions themselves are analogous with Marxism rather than vice versa only gets us so far, as does the argument for a common historical mission of Christianity and Marxism.<sup>29</sup> And commentators, following Bloch himself, have too readily conflated the theological and biblical materials.<sup>30</sup> Bloch is a little more ingenious, it seems to me, since for him the deeper tendency of Christianity comes from the Bible itself, namely, a rebellious or protest atheism that realises the inner logic of the Bible.

We should not lose from Bloch the ability to read for a utopian moment in the most intractable material; for me that is systematic theology. My instinctual reflex is to criticise and shake off theology, so Bloch is a valuable warning about the function of that reflex. And yet, although I find his comments on death, transcendence, and the Satanic not without their worth, and while the argument for the atheistic logic of the Bible and Christianity is interesting and open to development, what troubles me is the effort at a secularised theology, which I mentioned above, as well as the smooth interlocking of theology and the Bible.

In fact, Adorno's comment to Bloch may be applied to his whole utopian project: "We have come strangely close to the ontological proof of God" (UFAL: 16). This comes in response to Bloch's use of Brecht's "something's missing" from *Mahagonny* to speak of utopia—"one should not be allowed to eliminate it as if it really did not exist" (UFAL: 15). All of Bloch's categories, such as the anticipatory illumination (*Vor-*

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<sup>29</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, 117–18.

<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, Gérard Raulet, "Subversive Hermeneutik des Atheismus im Christentum," in *Seminar: Zur Philosophie Ernst Blochs*, ed. Burghart Schmidt (Frankfurt am Main: 1983), who argues that the properly subversive nature of his work lies in the humanistic or fully secularising rather than religious direction of his exegesis.



*Schein*),<sup>31</sup> “not-yet consciousness,” “life-force,” yearning for a better life, and the criticism of imperfection and incompleteness that presupposes a possible perfection, become various dimensions of a secularised version of Anselm’s “that than which a greater cannot be thought.” It is not for nothing that “God” becomes, in the words of *The Spirit of Utopia*, “the problem of the radically new, absolutely redemptive, as the phenomenal of our freedom, of our true meaning” (SU: 201; WA3: 254), a shadowy utopian occurrence rather than any distinct entity.

Some distinct problems emerge with such a secularised theological basis, for which Adorno will have strong words later in this book, not least of which is the danger of idolatry, the transference of divine attributes to human beings, which is itself enabled by the focus on redeemer figures such as Moses and Jesus. And it also raises problems for a Marxist critique of religion, which must eschew any notion of redeemer figures, however secular they might be. But let me come at the question by means of my other question, the relation between theology and biblical criticism. The structure of both *The Principle of Hope* and *Atheism in Christianity* runs through from the Bible to more full scale theological reflection, all the while locating the two in the vast theological schema that runs from creation to eschaton. Thus, in the last two chapters of *Atheism in Christianity* Bloch waxes increasingly theological and the biblical references fade away, serving nothing more than as proof texts for the theological points (a standard theological practice). While Bloch has a particular agenda in appropriating large slabs of Christian theology for a Marxism, and while in some cases the points he makes in the theological sections are thought-provoking, not least because Christianity and Marxism are the two great systems, as Jameson reminds us, that have been state ideologies, I want to suggest that Bloch’s program would have been served better if he had made a sharper distinction between theology and the Bible and opted more for the latter.

The implication of such a seamless connection between the Bible and theology is that Bloch grants a crucial point before the debate has

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<sup>31</sup> See Zipes, “The Messianic Power of Fantasy in the Bible,” 10–14.





begun, namely that the proper home for the Bible is the Church, that the Bible, in other words, is but a branch of theology (understanding theology as the central ideological structure of the institution of the Church). Such a move must be regarded, like his deal with the Stalinist devil, as a strategic concession in order to make other gains, since it is not as though Bloch is unaware of the distinction, noting that the Bible has always been the Church's bad conscience, that it was on the basis of the Bible that the peasants under Müntzer opposed the Church, and that the Church itself has too often been the dangerously hypocritical heavenly state that reinforces the earthly (NLHD: 277–79; WA6: 311–14). All of this makes the concession of the Bible as the Church's text problematic on other counts as well, including the shared heritage of the Hebrew Bible between Jews, Moslems, and Christians, as well as the gesture of granting the Bible to an ideology that has been part of oppressive ruling state regimes for many a century in Europe. However much he may find protest against such regimes in the Bible, this compromise sits ill with his espousal of Müntzer and other Christian revolutionaries.

The most significant aspect of Bloch's work is the way his development of a politicised biblical criticism raises profound questions for his rereadings of theology. I think in particular of the importance of the discernment of myths in which, as I discussed, Bloch urges the need for making distinctions between myths on class lines, between those that speak of and encourage servility and subservience and those that enable human beings to stand up, protest and oppose the powers that oppress. Is not this kind of discernment necessary in his readings of theology? He does it best with certain biblical materials—my examples above were the rebellion of Korah in Numbers 16 and the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4—although some of his arguments are impaired by a too ready reliance on the origin-assumptions of historical-critical studies of the Bible. But I would have expected a greater caution regarding theology, especially since the key doctrines of theology are as mythical as the materials in the Bible, especially since Bloch develops his argument about the discernment of myths in debate with theologians such as Karl Barth and



Rudolf Bultmann. Bloch would respond that his treatment of theology does in fact make such discrimination between myths, seeking out the elements of protest in questions relating to teleology, transcendence, sin, and death. Yet, it seems to me that not only may the utopian elements Bloch identifies be used by reactionary or fascist agendas in search of their own utopias—although Bloch would say that the act of thinking about such a possibility is a glimpse of utopia, no matter how reprehensible the content may be—but the very structure of theological thought makes it inevitably part of a system that oppresses.

Ultimately, the muffling of biblical texts by official ideologies cannot but be effected by the dominance of theology over the Bible. The biblical texts are eventually drawn in, domesticated in a pattern that has been well honed over two millennia, so that the possibility of any truly subversive voice is broken down. And so it is that theological colleges or seminaries even today will stipulate that their teaching and research staff undertake research that is “of benefit” to the Church.<sup>32</sup> It seems to me that Bloch concedes far too much when he allows for a substantial continuity between the Bible and theology, for here he loses the sharpness of his discernment of myth.

He has no excuse for not being aware that the subversive voice of the Bible is hobbled in the context of theology and the institution of the Church, for he locates precisely such a pattern in the Bible itself—and this is where his own arguments about the Bible raise questions about his treatment of theology. For in the Bible it is hard enough for a subversive voice to be heard, particularly in a document that is itself the product of a scribal elite working in a profoundly patriarchal society and culture. Bloch is more enthusiastic than I am in finding such voices, but he is determined to locate what it is that fed the burning revolutionary spirits of Müntzer and company. Should one object that the truly subversive voices have not been entirely effaced from the text, Bloch would reply that such effacement is never complete, that traces are always left behind, but above all that there

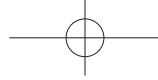
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<sup>32</sup> Such a phrase was in fact inserted into the job description at a former theological college in which I worked in response to my own research on the Hebrew Bible.



is more there when you know how and where to look, especially in those myths that have later been papered over with more acceptable ideological positions.

These debates might continue, but in the end Bloch drops his guard of ideological suspicion too often, especially in regard to theology, and it is precisely here that it is needed most consistently. For the discernment of myths, along with the politicised criticism of sacred texts and notion of class, are crucial categories for any materialist philosophy of religion, let alone a materialist theology.





## Chapter Two

# Benjamin's Perpetuation of Biblical Myth

The question thus becomes that of interpreting how “theological concepts,” whether direct or indirect, function in the writings of Benjamin.<sup>1</sup>

After the millenarian enthusiasm of Bloch's engagement with the Bible, arguing as he does for an eschatological logic of the Bible and Christianity that leads to the elevation and transcendence of human beings and the necessary banishment of an oppressor God, Benjamin emerges as a wary and cautious interlocutor. I shall argue that the Bible, albeit interpreted with a heavy theological hand, is crucial for Benjamin's thought. Put succinctly, he seeks to use the Bible and the methods of biblical studies, especially that of allegory, in order to find a way to break out of the myths that he saw everywhere around him in the increasing technological interlacings of capitalism. However, his failure to see the way his theological reading of the Bible perpetuates the very myth he wishes provides us a dialectical insight despite Benjamin himself; namely, another way of dealing with the question of myth within a materialist theory of religion.

Like Bloch, Walter Benjamin is something of an enigma for Marxist criticism. While appropriating the central terms of historical materialism, he continually uses a full panoply of terms that can be only be described as theological: God, redemption, revelation, transcendence, immanence, angels, judgement, free will, evil, Satan, messiah, allegory and repeatedly

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel M Weber, “Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth and Allegory in Benjamin's *Origin of the German Mourning Play*,” *MLN* 106 (1991): 467.



the word “theology” itself. It is hardly necessary to rehearse the arguments for the theological dimensions of Benjamin’s writings. Although less so than Bloch, he also interprets biblical texts in order to develop some of his well-known philosophical arguments. A commonplace of Benjamin criticism is that the great creative tension of his work is the contradiction between metaphysics and materialism, theology and Marxism, mysticism and communism. It is also a commonplace to position oneself, however briefly, by delineating the various strands of that criticism, all of the possibilities of which have been set by Benjamin’s disparate work.<sup>2</sup> Apart from efforts to appropriate Benjamin into various disciplines or sub-disciplines—cultural studies and art history take the “Mechanical Reproduction” essay, literary criticism “The Task of the Translator,” cultural criticism and biographical criticism his “Berlin Chronicle” or “Moscow Diary,” philosophers the essay “On Language” and Konvolut N of the *Arcades Project*, and so on—this tension translates into criticism in various ways. As is well known, some Marxists have been a little too keen to dismiss the theological and mystical dimensions of his writing,<sup>3</sup> while others have argued that Benjamin was unwilling to concede his theological assumptions for the sake of historical materialism,<sup>4</sup> or that his theology is both the realisation of the inner logic of Marxism and its breakdown.<sup>5</sup> Those with an anti-Marxist agenda have stressed precisely that which the Marxists resist, arguing that Benjamin’s Marxism is a superficial addition

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis of the reception of Benjamin’s work, see John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 10–21.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent example, see Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overcoming Conformity* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 173: “Religious motifs are one part of a versatile montage strategy, rather than evidence of ardent religious commitment. It is more significant to try to identify what theology as figure or image might represent.” One of the first English efforts in this line can be found in Terry Eagleton’s *Walter Benjamin* (WB).

<sup>4</sup> Most notably Jürgen Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin,” *New German Critique* 17 (1979): 30–59.

<sup>5</sup> See Jacques Rancière, “The Archaeomodern Turn,” in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. Michael P. Steinberg (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 38.



to a transcendent theological or biblical approach,<sup>6</sup> or that Benjamin's interest for us lies elsewhere, as a deconstructionist, or cultural critic or philosopher.<sup>7</sup>

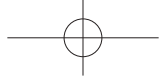
Both sides are given to marking two or three shifts in Benjamin's thought: the early, theological Benjamin influenced by Scholem and the later Marxist of the 1920s and afterwards when he was deeply affected by Brecht. With the Arcades Project, or *Passagenarbeit* (so Jameson, over against the more common *Passagenwerk*), and the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," some suggest either a resigned awareness of the futility of Marxism and a return to theology (so Scholem), or an effort at a synthesis between both theology and Marxism, a deep mutual transformation of theology through Marxism and vice versa that risks losing both,<sup>8</sup> or as

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<sup>6</sup> So Brian Britt, *Walter Benjamin and the Bible* (New York: Continuum, 1996). Britt argues for the central role of "sacred text" or the "scriptural function" of texts that renders them sacred in Benjamin's work.

<sup>7</sup> As an example see the collection by Rainer Nägele, ed., *Benjamin's Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), as well as that by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborn, eds., *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000). Paul de Man's reading is yet another variation: as Marxism and theology are on the same terrain, he seeks a reading that is neither (see "Conclusions": Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator: Messenger Lecture, Cornell University, March 4, 1983," *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985): 25–46). For Rainer Rochlitz (*The Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Guildford, 1996), 5) Benjamin's use of 'theology' is self-reflexive, claiming "the unconditional truth of his assertions."

<sup>8</sup> So Rolf Tiedemann, "Historical Materialism or Political Messianism? An Interpretation of the 'Theses on the Concept of History,'" in *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetics of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Michael Rumpf, *Aporien und Apologie: Zur Kritik an Walter Benjamin und Seiner Rezeption* (Cuxhaven: Junghans, 1991); Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989). In the end, Buck-Morss cautions that we should "put the dwarf of theology out of sight" (252). Even Scholem, for all his criticism of Benjamin's Marxism, admits that this "interlocking of two elements that by nature are incapable of balance lends precisely to those of Benjamin's works that derive from this attitude their significant effect and that profound brilliance that distinguishes them so impressively from most products of materialistic thought and literary criticism, noted for their uncommon dullness" (Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), 124) Scholem notes that in his last few years, Benjamin's close friend was Fritz Lieb, a theologian trained by Karl Barth and a socialist (206–7).



a way of thinking the relationship between politics and time and thereby “freeing theology for God,”<sup>9</sup> or the indistinguishability,<sup>10</sup> or asymmetrical opposition, of the profane and the messianic.<sup>11</sup> At least these approaches have the advantage of avoiding the pitfalls of a reading that seeks a key to his thought in his biography, down to the obligatory use of his image to adorn critical editions of his works. I do not want to enter into the debate as such in this chapter, although the presence of both theological and materialist elements in Benjamin’s work is an assumption any discussion of Benjamin cannot do without.<sup>12</sup> For it seems to me that what is noticeable about the opposition between theology and Marxism is that the terseness of the interchange, like a separated couple, speaks more of the common ground between the two—institutional, legal and political patronage, money, children and so on—at the same time that it highlights their differences.

These differences and tensions interest me here. But even before we begin to explore them, there are some questions concerning the very term theology. Two are crucial: the tendency for Benjamin and his critics to subsume biblical studies under the label of theology; and the lack of any distinction between Jewish and Christian thought, labelling them both theology.

As far as the second problem is concerned, most Benjamin criticism works with the assumption that Benjamin drew largely from Jewish theology, without recognising that this is an oxymoron. Theology is indelibly stamped, in its method and content, with the various Christian

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew Benjamin, “Time and Task: Benjamin and Heidegger Showing the Present,” in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), 231.

<sup>10</sup> Irving Wohlfarth, “On the Messianic Structure of Benjamin’s Last Reflection,” *Glyph* 3 (1978): 168–85.

<sup>11</sup> Christine von Buelow, “Troping toward Truth: Recontextualizing the Metaphors of Science and History in Benjamin’s Kafka Fragment,” *New German Critique* 48 (1989): 127.

<sup>12</sup> I have a knack of resisting the more usual moves made in various forms of criticism, and here it would take some form of reference to the puppet and wizened dwarf of the first thesis on the philosophy of history in order to characterise the relationship between historical materialism and history.





traditions. In this respect, Jewish thought does not develop a theology, or theologies, for this is to carry on the Christian appropriation of Jewish thought. Rather, Jewish reflection takes the form of *halakhah*—elaboration on the law—and *haggadah*—development of the narratives of the Hebrew Bible for relevance in new situations. Over against this unexamined position, which owes its continued currency to the influence of Gershom Scholem on the reception of Benjamin, one of the implications of my discussion is that Benjamin's use of theology is a distinctly Christian one and that his interest in Jewish thought comes out of this context.<sup>13</sup>

As is well known, Scholem mounted a wholesale argument for the inherent Jewishness of his thought—Benjamin's long discussions with him over Zionism, the Talmud, Kabbalism, Hebrew language, and the Hebrew Bible.<sup>14</sup> A whole stream of scholars have sought to back up Scholem's arguments,<sup>15</sup> most notably Susan Buck-Morss, who has drawn on Scholem's work on Jewish mysticism to argue on the basis of the slenderest of suggestions by Benjamin that his philosophical method and theory of history depended on Kabbalism, a distinct theological alternative to Christianity, embedded in the *Trauerspiel* book and explicit in the *Passagenarbeit*.<sup>16</sup> Yet, it seems to me that Scholem and Buck-Morss work

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<sup>13</sup> It is not that I wish to appropriate a Jewish thinker under Christendom, much like the Hebrew Bible into Christianity; rather, it seems to me that Benjamin is an uneasy Jewish thinker. In fact, my later argument concerning the return of mythology via Benjamin's theological biblical criticism does not depend on his use of Christian theology: he may well have arrived at the same point via Kabbalism.

<sup>14</sup> Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 10–11, 14–15, 28–30. See also Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin und Sein Engel: Vierzehn Aufsätze und kleine Beiträge*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983).

<sup>15</sup> So, for instance, Anson Rabinbach, "Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism," *New German Critique* 34 (1985): 78–124; Wolfgang Ullmann, "Walter Benjamin und die jüdische Theologie," in *Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her: Texte zu Walter Benjamin*, ed. Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla (Leipzig: Reclam-Verlag, 1992); John Pizer, "Reconstituting the Shards of the Text: On Walter Benjamin's German/Jewish Memory?" *German Studies Review* 18 (1995): 275–90; Irving Wohlfarth, "Sur Quelques Motifs Juifs Chez Benjamin," *Revue d'Esthétique* 1 (1981): 141–62.

<sup>16</sup> See Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 229–40. Her argument is guilty of some howlers: redemption is for Christianity private and spiritual, whereas in Judaism it is public and



a little too hard to claim Benjamin as a Jewish thinker, for his modes of theological thinking have a distinctly Christian air about them. Apart from the anachronism of this argument that I noted earlier, Benjamin's interest in Jewish, especially mystical, patterns of biblical interpretation are more of the nature of a thinker more comfortable with Christian theology, an assimilated Jew perhaps, recovering old ways of exegesis that breathe new life into thinking itself. Irving Wohlfarth is a little more cautious, preferring the theme of German-Jewish secrecy rather than the Kabbalah, arguing that Benjamin's use of theology is by no means necessarily Jewish, drawing attention to various Christian motifs throughout his works.<sup>17</sup>

Let me draw up a list of my own, restricting myself to the *Trauerspiel* for a moment. The most obvious sign is the discussion of the figure of Christ, as a model for the theme of undeserved and misunderstood suffering in the German mourning play (O: 72–73; GS1: 251–53), whose life functioned as an allegory of the movement from history to nature that Benjamin finds central to allegory (O: 182–85; GS1: 358–61). Further, Christ was a crucial item in medieval allegorical exegesis which took the figure of Christ in the New Testament, as well as the doctrine of the two natures of Christ—fully human and fully divine—as the allegorical key for biblical interpretation. The content of the *Trauerspiel* itself was often overtly biblical, with Herod as the model tyrant, either as himself in a whole series of plays, or as the model for a plethora of other tyrants. Often this was drawn from Josephus, specifically the story of Herod and Mariamne (see also SW1: 363–86; GS2: 246–76, an essay on “Calderon and Hebbel” that provides much earlier material for the *Trauerspiel* book, specifically in reference to the Spanish Calderon who acts as a foil for the *Trauerspiel*), but it is the status of Herod as the

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historical (this from Scholem); Marxism's universal coherence was more attractive than the sectarian differences in Christianity or Judaism.

<sup>17</sup> Irving Wohlfarth, “Walter Benjamin and the German-Jewish Parnassus,” *New German Critique* 70 (1997): 3–86. Compare this to his earlier essay Wohlfarth, “Sur Quelques Motifs Juifs Chez Benjamin.”



potential murderer of Christ, a forerunner of those who did murder him in the end, that made Herod a fascinating type (O: 70–72; GS1: 250–51). Apart from this, there is the sheer delight of delving into the historical situation of the *Trauerspiel*, which he traces from the medieval Passion Play to baroque drama and religious drama in the context of Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe (see O: 76–80; GS1: 255–59): a product of the latter, the *Trauerspiel* could appear only after the Renaissance and the profoundly Lutheran emotion of melancholy, generated out of a radical stress on faith over against good works (O: 138–39; GS1: 317–18).

Further, the doxa of Benjamin criticism that he drew deeply upon Jewish mysticism, especially the Kabbalah, is, as John McCole has convincingly argued, based on an anachronism.<sup>18</sup> Scholem himself was almost single-handedly responsible for the recovery of Jewish mysticism and the study of the Kabbalah in the twentieth century, but he did this only after his move to Palestine in 1923. Not only was Benjamin extremely cagey about his references to Jewish mysticism, having available only limited nineteenth-century sources, but McCole also suggests it may well have been Benjamin who set Scholem on the path to the recovery of Jewish mysticism itself.

The first problem I noted above relates more directly to my argument, which is that while Benjamin identifies a major problem within Marxism—how to envisage the possibility and nature of a change out of capitalism—his attempted solution is fraught with difficulties. In one respect, his effort was doomed to fail in the context within which he worked; yet there are other possibilities within the very solution he offers. Benjamin sought to use biblical arguments and categories as a philosophical and literary method without the institutional basis normally assumed for such work and without taking on board any of the truth claims of these arguments. Initially, he used biblical categories as a

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<sup>18</sup> McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, 65–66. See also Michael William Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 94–96.



way of dealing with some of the major problems of German philosophy and literary theory, especially in the *Trauerspiel* book. With his turn to Marxism, these biblical categories have a similar function, now brought to bear on what he felt were problems within Marxist thought and expectation. Thus, in the *Passagenarbeit*, this “inveterate adversary of myth”<sup>19</sup> seeks a mode of breaking out of the myth and dream-work of capitalism by means of the dialectical image, the caesura of the explosion out of history, waking from a dream. Yet, the effort to break out of such a myth can only be mythical in Benjamin’s formulation; the problem begins with his elision of the Bible and theology. His various appropriations of the Bible are nearly always theological, drawing out schemas of history, modes of interpretation, theories of language; that is, he assumes that biblical interpretation is inevitably theological. In doing so, he neglects the fact that biblical studies and theology have been uneasy partners and that biblical studies also has a long tradition of non-theological commentary, a demystifying and demythologising mode of criticism that critiques the mythical structures of the biblical material itself. This problem runs deeply in his work, for he takes biblical commentary, specifically allegory, as a model for criticism, following its theological direction rather than as a method of demystification. For this reason, the mythical nature of the biblical texts—precisely those that are favoured by theology—generates a mythical solution to the problems with which he sought to deal. In other words, in the effort to develop a notion of “redemption” that would work for Marxism, Benjamin falls prey to the inherent mythologisation of a theological appropriation of the Bible.

One of the major signals of such a mythical reading is the well-known tendency for Benjamin to revert to sexual language, particularly in terms of women and maternal functions. Such an appropriation is a key characteristic of biblical myth: where Bible and myth appear in Benjamin’s thought, his texts overflow with the language of sexuality, the gendered text, women as mythical other and the incessant repetition of birthing metaphors. I shall argue that the biblical myths upon which

<sup>19</sup> Wohlfarth, “Walter Benjamin and the ‘German-Jewish Parnassus,’” 167.



he draws, especially those of Genesis and the eschaton, cannot avoid, in fact rely upon, precisely such language and images. In the end, although Benjamin attempts to find a language that will provide a shard or image of a very different future, his option for a theological reading of the Bible to provide such a language is too problematic.

I work closely with two texts, one at the beginning and the other at the end of Benjamin's writing life: *The Origin of the German Mourning Play* (*Trauerspiel* book) and *The Arcades Project* (*Passagenarbeit*), with a focus on questions of allegory, history, and myth. As with my discussion of Bloch, I will read these and some other texts closely. Although some of them have been traversed endlessly by Benjamin critics, my argument does not follow the well-worn paths of such criticism. Instead, my argument begins with a discussion of commentary and method, moving to allegory and then the relation between history and myth. With all the shifts that took place in Benjamin's work, a profound continuity between the two works emerges in my discussion. Thus, he refers back to the *Trauerspiel* book, written when he first encountered Marxism via Ernst Bloch and Asja Lacin on Capri in 1924, when discussing crucial issues, such as that of Baudelaire's allegory, or the theory of history.<sup>20</sup> But we also find distinct methodological comments as well, particularly in the most philosophically reflective Konvolut N of the *Passagenarbeit*: "The book on the Baroque exposed the seventeenth century to the light of the present day. Here, something analogous must be done for the nineteenth century, but with greater distinctness" (AP: 459; GS5: 573).

## Commentary and Method

As I have already argued with regard to Bloch, the Bible, and theology are by no means comrades, but I have no desire to rehearse those arguments here. Benjamin plays a double game: on the one hand, he assumes a

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<sup>20</sup> Much debate has tried to sort out whether the *Trauerspiel* book shows any signs of Marxism. It is less the overt signs, which seem to be absent (a point championed by Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 122–23), than the initial signs of a recasting of thought that appear in the book.



close connection between the Bible and theology; on the other, he estranges theology from Church and Synagogue. As his criticism of the later Goethe indicates (SW2: 161–93), Benjamin was hardly interested in the conventional assumptions concerning theology, especially those that connect such thought with the commitment of religious institutions. For Goethe had appropriated precisely those doctrines he despised so much at an earlier age: the sufferings of Christ, the figure of Moses on whom he planned to write and the appearance of the Roman Catholic heaven at the close of Act 5 of *Faust*, Part II. According to Benjamin, the value of these theological items was enhanced by their role in ensuring the reactionary vision of society that exercised Goethe: his “utopia” is one of bourgeois technology and work practices combined with a hierarchical and patriarchal medieval social and political order (SW2: 184–86; GS2: 735–38).

Benjamin’s concern was the tradition of biblical commentary as a branch of theology, for this becomes a model for philosophy itself. The lifelong interest in allegory and the development of a full-scale allegorical method that he employs in the *Passagenarbeit* is the most obvious indication of such a debt. Thus, if the *Trauerspiel* book is more of an inquiry into the history of allegory,<sup>21</sup> then the *Passagenarbeit* uses the method itself in order to develop a criticism of nineteenth century capitalism.

But let me stay with the question of commentary for a few moments. In “Goethe’s Elective Affinities” (SW1: 297–360; GS1: 125–302), Benjamin distinguishes between criticism and commentary: “Critique seeks the truth content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) of a work of art; commentary, its material content (*Sachgehalt*)” (SW1: 297; GS1: 125). Whereas he seems to prefer criticism, in the following sentence the difference breaks down: “The relation of one to the other determines the fundamental law of writing, the more significant the truth content of a work, the less

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<sup>21</sup> My study stands in contrast to many others, including those who read the interest in allegory and theology through the single coherent lens of Benjamin’s response to Kant; see Nina Zimmik, “Allegorie und Subjektivität in Walter Benjamins Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels,” *The Germanic Review* 72 (1997): 285–302.



apparent and more internal the bond to its objective content” (SW1: 297; GS1: 125). For this requires a far greater effort to understand the work (commentary) before moving to criticism: the two are always bound to each other.<sup>22</sup> And in his work as a whole the two run together: later in the *Passagenarbeit* he transfers the difference between critique and commentary to different forms of commentary: “Bear in mind that commentary on a reality (for it is a question here of commentary, of interpretation in detail) calls for a method completely different from that required by commentary on a text. In the one case, the scientific mainstay is theology; in the other case, philology” (AP: 460; GS5: 574). Here he seems to distinguish between theology and philology, commentary on reality and commentary on a text, but in his work the two perpetually slide together, for his textual commentary, especially that of the Bible, ends up being theological through and through.

The desire for commentary also draws upon the Romantic theory that a work of art is complete only in interpretation, that only through interpretation may a work of art become what it should be. So also with Benjamin’s theological mode of commentary, for the commentator is the one responsible for drawing the theological truths out of a text, for realising the theological points that the text struggles to express. Not only is this a teleological method, one that seeks the expected end within the work itself, but it also cannot avoid a pattern of thinking that seeks to replicate the pattern of birth. Commentary becomes a midwife, the text a womb and the interpretation itself the child that emerges from the text by means of commentary.

Benjamin follows a similar pattern in his theories of translation and language (see below), but here I want to pick up his discussion of the form of both the *Trauerspiel* book and the *Passagenarbeit*. In order to do so I plunge into the detailed workings of his text, for it seems to me that only through such a reading does the theological underlay slowly make

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<sup>22</sup> See David S. Ferris, “‘Truth Is the Death of Intention’: Benjamin’s Esoteric History of Romanticism,” *Studies in Romanticism* 31 (1992): 456.



its way to the surface.<sup>23</sup> Let us begin with the prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book. Here, Benjamin designates the style of the work as a “treatise,” but the underlying model for this is commentary itself. However, in order to get to that point I must begin a little earlier with the question of representation. For my interest in the first section of the prologue is not so much the attack on the entire tradition of the philosophy of consciousness from Kant to Husserl by touching the nerve of intentionality, but rather the argument that philosophy’s task is representation. The first section of the prologue is crucial:

It is characteristic of philosophical writing that it must continually confront the question of representation (*Darstellung*). In its finished form philosophy will, it is true, assume the quality of doctrine (*Lehre*), but it does not lie within the power of mere thought to confer such a form. Philosophical doctrine is based on historical codification. It cannot therefore be evoked *more geometrico*. (Benjamin O: 27; GS1:207)

In these first few lines, Benjamin boldly places before the reader two unpopular terms—representation and doctrine. The first is precisely what has been rejected by mathematical sciences and the tendency for philosophy to mathematical formulation (not only analytic philosophy but also Kant’s liking for such). But note the move Benjamin makes in the very next sentence following the quotation: “The more clearly mathematics demonstrate that the total elimination of the problem of representation—which is boasted by every proper didactic system—is the sign of genuine knowledge, the more conclusively does it reveal its renunciation of that area of truth towards which language is directed” (O: 27; GS1:207). Representation is, after all, a question of language, specifically of writing, as the first line of the book indicates. These questions will return—those of language, writing, and the linguistic nature of truth—but by this stage two other terms have also appeared: doctrine (*Lehre*) and truth (*Wahrheit*). The latter becomes crucial in

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<sup>23</sup> At these points, the reader would be advised to have open a copy of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* in much the same way you would keep open a copy of the Bible while reading a commentary.





Adorno's own work as "truth content" and Benjamin himself fills it out in the same way not long afterwards (O: 29; GS1: 209). But if truth bears a theological load, doctrine is weighed down even further, especially as something that cannot be generated by "mere thought." In order to get to the theological content of "truth," Benjamin will go via Plato's forms, but doctrine reaches back to the medieval tradition of scholastic theology, a connection Benjamin will also make with the mosaic, the treatise and then later allegory.

Let us stay with "doctrine": moving via the question of method, which will return soon, Benjamin asserts that philosophical projects "possess a certain esoteric quality which they are unable to discard, forbidden to deny, and which they vaunt at their own peril" (O: 27–28; GS1: 207). "Esoteric," with its hint of the mythical and covert, then folds out into the relation between doctrine and the "esoteric essay" (*esoterischen Essay*), both alternative philosophical forms to the nineteenth century's concern with "system." Not unexpectedly, commentators have seized on the essay as Benjamin's breakthrough to the fragment, the micrological—what will later become ruins and the montage of the *Passagenarbeit*—along with a focus on written representation, on the totality of idealist philosophical systems and of positivism.

Over against system—syncretistic, weblike, universalising—Benjamin gathers the whole range of terms he has already mentioned: the authority of doctrine, the representation of truth and its appropriate form, the essay, or as he now calls it, the treatise (*Traktat*). If, argues Benjamin, one follows this line of thought embodied in the cluster of terms on which he has touched only briefly, then the formal implications lead elsewhere: "This exercise [of the form of the representation of truth as the law of philosophy's own form] has imposed itself upon all those epochs which have recognised the uncircumscribable essentiality of truth in the form of a propaedeutic, which can be designated by the scholastic term treatise because this term refers, albeit implicitly, to those objects of theology without which truth is inconceivable" (O: 28; GS1: 208). Here we explicitly come to the theological associations that the various terms



have had thus far: the theological treatise becomes the ideal philosophical literary form since its method is representation. In this way truth may emerge, but—and here is a characteristic twist—not like the doctrine he has set over against the philosophy he leaves behind: “Treatises may be didactic in tone, but essentially they lack the conclusiveness of an instruction which could be asserted, like doctrine, by virtue of its own authority” (O: 28; GS1: 208). Indeed, earlier on he distinguished between two ignored philosophical forms—doctrine and the esoteric essay. Here he sets doctrine aside, although it will return, to focus on the essay-come-treatise.

By this time, Benjamin lays out the literary form of the *Trauerspiel* book itself:

In the canonic form of the treatise the only element of an intention—and it is an educative rather than a didactic intention—is the authoritative quotation. Its method is essentially representation. Method is a digression. Representation as digression—such is the methodological nature of the treatise. The absence of an uninterrupted purposeful structure is its primary characteristic. Tirelessly the process of thinking makes new beginnings, returning in a roundabout way to its original object. The continual pausing for breath is the mode most proper to the process of contemplation. For by pursuing different levels of meaning in its examination of one single object it receives both the incentive to begin again and the justification for its irregular rhythm. Just as mosaics preserve their majesty despite their fragmentation into capricious particles, so philosophical contemplation is not lacking in momentum. Both are made up of the distinct and the disparate; and nothing could bear more powerful testimony to the transcendent force of the sacred image and the truth itself. The value of fragments of thought is all the greater the less direct their relationship to the underlying idea, and the brilliance of the representation depends as much on this value as the brilliance of the mosaic does on the quality of the glass plate. The relationship between the minute precision of the work and the proportions of the sculptural or intellectual whole demonstrates that truth-content is only to be grasped



through immersion in the most minute details of subject-matter. In their supreme, western, form the mosaic and treatise are products of the Middle Ages; it is their very real affinity which makes their comparison possible. (O: 28–29; GS1: 208–9)

It seems to me that this should be read as the justification for the style not only of the *Trauerspiel* book but also of the later *Passagenarbeit*: the authoritative quotation, representation, digression, absence of an uninterrupted structure, pausing for breath, different levels of meaning, irregular rhythm, and the mosaic. The absence, by name only, that permeates this passage is commentary, for biblical commentary proceeds by following the biblical text itself, foregoing any structure but the text. It begins with the authoritative quotation of a phrase or sentence, followed by the engagement with the specifics of the quotation. Commentaries seek to represent the text, perpetually digress into particular points, return again to the same problem a verse or two later. Yet the crucial comment here is that of the levels of meaning: “For by pursuing different levels of meaning in its examination of one single object. . .” (O: 28; GS1: 208). This comment marks a particular type of biblical exegesis: medieval allegory with its four official levels of meaning (literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogic), although further levels flourished from time to time. I would suggest that this is the form of exegesis to which all of the elements in the passage above relate: new beginnings, irregular rhythm, digression, and so on.

With the analogy of the mosaic, medieval allegory appears most completely.<sup>24</sup> Out of a range of possibilities for the mosaic, Benjamin selects the stained-glass window characteristic of medieval churches—“nothing could bear more powerful testimony to the transcendent force of the sacred image and the truth itself.” The mosaic of the stained-glass window, in its fragmentary and disparate construction, is but the visual form

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<sup>24</sup> Hans Jost-Frey is but one of a whole series of commentators who completely miss the biblical dimensions of this early stretch of the “Prologue.” See Hans Jost-Frey, “On Presentation in Benjamin,” in *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions*, ed. David S. Ferris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).



of allegorical biblical commentary. On one level, the relation between the mosaic and its underlying glass plate alludes to the relation between allegorical interpretation and the biblical text upon which it is based. So also the attention to the minutest detail as a way to grasp the truth-content is a mark of commentary that pays attention to the smallest of grammatical and syntactical questions. If Benjamin states that both the mosaic and the treatise are products of the Middle Ages, then the missing item from the list that enables the argument to work is that of medieval allegorical commentary. Not only is the mosaic itself a form of commentary, but also the treatise is ultimately modelled on biblical commentary.

Yet Benjamin does more with this passage, for the analogy of the mosaic also provides a description of Benjamin's notion of the dialectic, for which allegory was the model: in the same way that the brilliance of the mosaic relies upon the underlying glass plate to which it is only indirectly related, so also do the values of fragments of thought relate to their underlying idea. The analogy cannot of course be pushed too far, although Benjamin uses it to get to his methodological point: the more one focuses on minute details, piecemeal items, flotsam, and jetsam, the more one touches the "truth-content" of the work in question. A philosophically astute Adorno will take up such suggestions and turn them into a rigorous dialectical method.

The option for the treatise is a mark of the nature of biblical commentary to which Benjamin was drawn. The treatise is primarily a literary form of theological argument, no matter how much it may be modelled on biblical commentary. In other words, the treatise is part of the tradition in which the material of the Bible comprises a basis for theological reflection. Benjamin's preference for the treatise signals his own dependence on this tradition, for in his exegetical stretches he speaks of the Bible as Holy Writ, as revelation, as the source of a number of theological ideas—including a theological notion of history to which I will turn later—that were drawn from the disparate biblical material. In doing so, Benjamin neglects other traditions of commentary, such as the mystical in which theology becomes a hindrance for interpretation, or where commentary becomes a way of



demystifying the biblical text itself. Indeed, this latter form would much more readily have provided a connection with the Marxism that drew him later on. Yet Benjamin takes up a line of commentary that reverberates throughout his work, not least with his efforts to provide a way forward within Marxism.

Although the discussion of the treatise appears in the *Trauerspiel* book, I would suggest that the *Passagenarbeit* draws closer to such a description, even in its fragmentary and unfinished state, than the former work, which sought to meet the expectations of a *Habilitationsschrift*. Thus, “the only element of an intention . . . is the authoritative quotation” (O: 28; GS1: 208): already to the fore in the *Trauerspiel* book (and, for that matter, in Adorno’s Kierkegaard study), it is now structurally integral to the work itself, which would fall to pieces without the dominating quotations of myriad sources. Method itself becomes a digression, for Benjamin sought to represent nineteenth century Paris by means of an extraordinarily detailed commentary. Allegorical in its approach, the *Passagenarbeit* cross-references, starts again, covers the same subjects from a different angle. Above all, it operates on the basis of a massive collection of quotations for which commentary is then supplied.

The *Passagenarbeit* juxtaposes lengthy quotation with exposition and interpretive statements, all of them ordered in loose thematic “Konvoluts.” At first the reader is somewhat bewildered by the endless quotations and less than helpful stretches of Benjamin’s own prose, until the force of the quotations themselves begins to take effect. For, as suggested by the prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book, the “authoritative quotation” begins to take over the whole *Passagenarbeit*, ranging over a great number of sources. It is a massive overflow of quotations from a vast range of sources—novels, history, poetry, utopian literature, art criticism, and so on—that raises commentary to new level. The practice itself has left commentators and editors perplexed. Adorno changed his position, from arguing at first that the manuscript formed the research for a study in its own right<sup>25</sup> and then later that the *Passagenarbeit* is complete, a radical montage of quotations that

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<sup>25</sup> So also Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*.



sought to allow the theory to appear in the juxtaposition. In favour of the earlier position, one may point to Benjamin's earlier work for which he was in the habit of gathering extensive quotations as the basis for the work itself. Others, such as Eiland and McLaughlin, the translators into English, follow Adorno's later position, arguing that the text as we have it is close to what Benjamin had planned, especially in light of the fact that he had organised and copied the quotations, along with commentary into the *Konvoluts*. The sheer break with academic convention creates the suspicion that Benjamin was at a median stage with his research.

Although montage played a crucial role in Benjamin's methodological considerations of the *Passagenarbeit* (see AP: 458; GS5: 572), it is more of a commentary that inverts the form itself: rather than commenting on a designated canonical text, it generates its own canon through the process of commentary. But it also produces a curious effect on critics. I have already followed a pattern of commentary in discussing Benjamin, commenting closely on a stretch of text from *Trauerspiel* book. It seems that those who write on Benjamin, at least those who write most persuasively, provide commentaries on particular elements, selected essays, and works, thereby replicating Benjamin's own mode of criticism and writing.

## Allegory

I have already suggested that Benjamin's appropriation of biblical commentary finds its fullest expression in his treatment and then use of allegory as a method. I also want to argue that the absence or exclusion that enables allegory to operate is medieval biblical allegory.<sup>26</sup> Apart from the occasional allusion, such as the one I noted above regarding the different

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<sup>26</sup> Although very different, my argument here was triggered by Fredric Jameson's reading of Benjamin's work in light of the four levels (see Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, 60–83). Jameson's curious inversion of the second and third levels—he transposes the second (allegorical) and third (moral) levels—is important for the development of his own theory of three levels of interpretation in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981). See further my *Jameson and Jeroboam* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996).



levels of interpretation from the *Trauerspiel* book, he has no sustained discussion of medieval biblical allegory. One of the burdens of my discussion of Benjamin's allegory will be to trace the nature of this absence, for it will lead on to his own philosophy of history, especially the attempt to produce a theory of history as vast in its sweep as the final or anagogic level of allegory itself.

### *Trauerspiel*

Perhaps one of the most celebrated sections of the *Trauerspiel* book is the final chapter on allegory. I hardly need to argue for the importance of the work, not only within the range of Benjamin's writings, but also for subsequent philosophy and literary theory. If the prologue has puzzled many and the "Trauerspiel and Tragedy" chapter is of interest for the question of drama criticism—although material arises from it that is of relevance outside its narrow concern—then the chapter on allegory has taken on something of a life of its own. It serves as both a survey of a maligned literary method and an argument for the possibility of allegory itself.

Let me begin my commentary at the chapter's third and final section (O: 215–35; GS1: 390–409), for here, after dealing with the need to recover the value of allegory over against the symbol,<sup>27</sup> as well as the various allegorical dimensions of the *Trauerspiel* itself, Benjamin moves to the heart of the nature of allegory—theology: "For a critical understanding of the *Trauerspiel*, in its extreme, allegorical form, is possible only from the higher domain of theology; so long as the approach is an aesthetic one, paradox must have the last word" (O: 216; GS1: 390). Not theology as such, but specifically the theology of history: "Such a resolution, like the resolution

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<sup>27</sup> In his earlier (O: 159–67; GS1: 336–44) critique of the valorisation of the symbol over allegory, he also criticizes the infatuation with the classicistic symbol over against the genuine—theological—one, which 'could never have shed that sentimental twilight over the philosophy of beauty which has become more and more impenetrable since the end of early romanticism' (O: 160; GS1: 336). Baroque allegory also attacks the incorruptible classicism of German thought (O: 175; GS1: 351).



of anything profane into the sacred, can only be accomplished historically, in terms of a theology of history, and only dynamically, not statically in the sense of a guaranteed economics of salvation” (O: 216; GS1: 390). I will keep a close watch on both Benjamin’s notion of the theology of history (*Geschichtstheologie*) and economics of salvation (*Heilsökonomik*), for they will emerge as crucial features of this extraordinarily influential final chapter of the *Trauerspiel* book.

If Benjamin then seems to slide away for a few pages (O: 216–20; GS1: 390–93) from the promise of the first few lines of this final section, ruminating on the function of the corpse in Baroque drama, then we miss the deep theological current of an argument that only with death, as corpses, can the characters of the *Trauerspiel* “enter into the homeland of allegory” (O: 217; GS1: 391). This is heavily Christological, although indirectly as always, for behind it lies the death and resurrection of Christ and the simultaneous absence (the empty tomb) and presence (in the Eucharist) of the body of Christ. Play and caprice are not the explanation for this initial move, nor even a certain looking awry, for the figure of Christ was the allegorical key in medieval biblical exegesis, the moment in the second or allegorical level in which interpretation proper kicked into gear.

So he looks back from the Baroque fascination with the allegorical corpse:

It is not antiquarian interest which enjoins us to follow the tracks which lead from here, more clearly than from anywhere else, back into the Middle Ages. For it is not possible to overestimate the importance for the Baroque of the knowledge of the Christian origin of the allegorical outlook (O: 220; GS1: 393–94).

Yet the possibility of Baroque allegory arises from a conjunction of Christian and pagan traditions: the distinctly Christian forms of medieval allegory met various elements from Egyptian and Greek antiquity (see O: 171–72; GS1: 347–48). Benjamin’s immediate aim is to show how the Baroque dramatists who wrote the *Trauerspiele* were well aware of this heritage, but his way of dealing with this relationship interests me here.





Instead of working directly with the patterns of medieval biblical exegesis, he assumes them as an indispensable background: “But it will be unmistakably apparent, especially to anyone who is familiar with allegorical textual exegesis . . . (O: 175; GS1: 350–51). Benjamin seeks for the nature of Baroque allegory around and beneath this tradition. In the process, medieval allegorical exegesis becomes the absent centre of his writing on allegory.

Allegory has a tradition in biblical criticism that runs back to the earliest interpretation of the Bible, used by Origen for instance, who himself adapted a strategy used by the rationalist Hellenists who found the myths of ancient Greece a little too crude for comfort and so interpreted them allegorically—as emotions, or the faculties of human activity, or as the forces of nature and so on. For Benjamin this Greek heritage is pre-allegorical, since only with Christianity does allegory emerge as a full method. Yet, the irony of allegory is that although it formed the basis of biblical interpretation for a millennium and a half, it is still in some disrepute in biblical studies, having to carry on a half-life in its various offshoots such as literary theory and cultural studies. The problem for biblical studies is that allegory is part of that whole world of interpretation dispensed with in the rise of “modern” methods of interpretation that stressed the scientific and rational dimensions of the history of the Bible’s emergence and of its literature.

Yet, allegory is indispensably a method of reading literature that has the Bible as its centre. The four levels of medieval exegesis, constructed over long years in order to contain the greater flights of fancy, have an extraordinary appeal about them. The very names of the four levels—literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogic—conjure up the richness of a vast history of interpretation that it is absolute folly to consign to the garbage bin. The allegorical level takes a first step by using the figure of Christ as the means to render the meaning of the Hebrew Bible in Christian terms. Once this individual move is made, in which the Hebrew Bible refers in so many ways to Christ himself, it is possible to move to the life of the believer, the moral level, in which the various narratives and poems of the Hebrew Bible as well as the life and death of Christ have a direct



reference to the individual life of faith. Finally, the anagogic level returns to the collective, although now in terms of the history of the people of God from the beginning of the world until its close. While one does not want always to use every level in interpretation—a local reading, a particular allegorical move, will often be the spark that is needed—the point I want to make here is that allegory is saturated with the Bible upon which it developed the subtlest shades of interpretation. Further, it is precisely this schema and the extraordinary range of readings that it generated through attention to the finest detail of the biblical text that is the quiet partner to Benjamin's discussion. In the end, Benjamin's own theory of history shows more than a passing association with the final, anagogic, level of allegorical interpretation, but I will return to this question a little later.

### Demons, Allegory and Flesh (Allegorical Level)

As far as the explicit discussion within the *Trauerspiel* book itself is concerned, three closely connected motifs carry through from the Middle Ages to the Baroque: “The struggle against the pagan gods, the triumph of allegory, the torment of the flesh” (O: 220; GS1: 394). But Benjamin takes this a step further, suggesting that only in the light of these three terms can the origin of allegory itself be understood.

Over against the assumption that allegory was first developed by Hellenistic writers in an effort to deal with the gods in older texts such as those of Homer, Benjamin tacks, not unexpectedly, a little differently. This classical activity functions as an “intensive preparation” (O: 223; GS1: 397) for allegory proper. By contrast, the opposition to and rewriting of the ancient gods by Christianity gave rise to allegory; thus, the reemergence of allegory in the seventeenth century becomes a response to humanism's revival of the pagan gods of Greece and Rome, coupled with renewed forms of gnosticism in occultism and spiritualism. The problem that allegory faced was how to deal with these pagan “gods”: they were transposed, as it were, from heaven to hell, becoming demons instead of gods. Is this not exactly the same way in which the foreign and “pagan” gods of the Hebrew Bible were incorporated into Christianity via the New



Testament in medieval allegory? Thus the various divine figures of the Hebrew Bible—*Yahweh*, *El*, *Elohim*, *Baal*, *Adonai*—are read as the names of the *Theos* of the New Testament, with their multiplicity being reduced to the demands of monotheism. What happens then is that such a singular deity is read back into the Hebrew Bible in the process of appropriating this text into Christianity.<sup>28</sup>

Let us return to Benjamin: in a characteristic dialectical move, he argues that this transformation of the gods into demons, magical creatures with demonic associations, relies upon the ground established by Hellenistic and late Roman writers, that is, on both the “deadness of the figures and the abstraction of the concepts” (O: 226; GS1: 399); the passing of the “reality” of these gods and their transposition into abstractions sets up the allegorical possibility of representing them as demonic creatures: “Allegory corresponds to the ancient gods in the deadness of its concrete tangibility” (O: 226; GS1: 400). However, we also find a dialectical obverse to preserving the faded deities: while allegory preserves the gods that threatened to disappear in the medieval world, it also arose precisely because it was not possible to banish them so easily. Since these ancient divinities had held power for so long some method of acknowledging and transforming such a situation was required.

The final item in this group of three (the pagan gods, the triumph of allegory, and the torment of the flesh) is the body itself, which, as naked, becomes demonic. How does Benjamin get to this point? Allegory becomes the means of dealing with nakedness: the Greek and other ancient gods were, appropriately, naked. However, since the flesh is the realm of evil and since through allegory these gods survive as demons, their nakedness becomes demonic. But there is another dimension to the body as flesh: “allegorical exegesis tended above all in

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<sup>28</sup> If allegory enables the preservation of the pagan gods in an environment that both wished to banish them and realised their abiding power, might not the same be applied to Christianity itself? I think here of the process whereby the sayings, life and death of Jesus of Nazareth are layered over with transcendent references, to God, belief, salvation, until Jesus himself becomes the victim of such a process. In other words, Jesus becomes the focus of an extraordinary allegorical process, culminating in the theological debates over the nature of Christ and his place in the Trinity that ensures the survival of the Christian gods as well. Allegory thereby becomes a process for dealing with and establishing Christian belief.



two directions: it was designed to establish, from a Christian point of view, the true, demonic nature of the ancient gods, and it also served the pious mortification of the flesh” (O: 222; GS1: 396).

By now it should be clear that Benjamin does not argue that allegory enabled the vaporisation of the gods, their reinterpretation as human emotions and so on, nor was it the ability to speak of such human features using the names of the gods, as happened in the Hellenistic era. Benjamin is much more dialectical than this: over against seeing allegory as a way of reading the gods out of existence, he argues that it is a means of preserving these gods and their world in an environment in which they would have died out: “For an appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory” (O: 223; GS1: 397). In other words, allegory deals in both transience and eternity, for in the effort at preserving what is passing, one seeks the eternal: “Allegory established itself most permanently where transitoriness and eternity confronted each other most closely” (O: 224; GS1: 397)—particularly at moments when the eternal most obviously underwent change, such as legal norms or religious beliefs.

At this point we pass into Benjamin’s broader theory of allegory, a method that works to preserve what is passing away. The very possibility of allegory is predicated on this desire and for the Middle Ages classical antiquity was the prime instance of a world that had passed, that everything, all worlds and eras, were in the end impermanent and transient, locked into “stations of its decline” (O: 166; GS1: 343). As he had already intimated earlier in the chapter, “in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape” (O: 166; GS1: 343).

For a transient world that is running down in a spiral of decay and decline, ruins and fragments—the echo of the biblical “remnant” should not be missed here<sup>29</sup>—become a feature of allegory:

In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this

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<sup>29</sup> So Bainard Cowan, “Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Allegory,” *New German Critique* 22 (1981): 117.



guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things. (O: 177–78; see also 188; GS1: 353–54 and 364)

In order to deal with such a world, the very language of the Baroque writers becomes allegorical, fragmented, and broken—“anagrams, the onomatopoeic phrases, and many other examples of linguistic virtuosity, word, syllable, and sound” (O: 207; GS1: 381)—so that, with the connection to traditional meaning broken, such language itself has an allegorical function. Here Benjamin draws near to medieval biblical allegory, for the function of the second stage—the allegorical itself—was to unlock the restrictions of the literal meaning, specifically through a concern with breaks and hitches, fragments of word and sentence, so that interpretation might get underway. And just as the medieval allegorists, the purpose of the Baroque artists was miraculous and redemptive, piling up fragments in the hope of enacting precisely such a result. That is, both Baroque and medieval allegory are interested in the fragment of a text that does not compute, the anomaly that provides the allegorical trigger. These fragments, the bits and pieces that don't seem to fit, develop their own connections through the mediation of the allegorist.

### Fall and Eschaton (Moral and Anagogic Levels)

Whereas the initial phases of Benjamin's discussion relate to the literal and allegorical phases of medieval exegesis and commentary—much of his analysis concerns the allegorical stage proper—in the last pages of the chapter on allegory he touches on the moral and anagogic levels. The fourth and final level, the anagogic, begins with the Fall and closes with the eschaton; within these parameters comes history itself. At the third, by contrast, we have the individual life of the believer, for whom the Fall and the eschaton become the daily battles with sin and the promise of personal salvation and eternal life.

How then does the Fall appear? Through guilt, for guilt is the realm of idols and the flesh. In fact, a certain familiarity with Benjamin's



moves will already anticipate the Fall as the crucial biblical and theological moment for guilt, a guilt that attaches in allegory to both the interpreter and the object interpreted, that is, to human beings and nature which both suffer as a result of the Fall. Here the profoundly Christian nature of allegory appears, for not only is allegory the result of the Fall, a post-lapsarian condition of language, working by means of ruins in order to locate in such transient items a moment of eternity, but allegory was also, precisely because of this process, the only possible means of salvation for guilt-laden nature and antiquity. Yet, the possibility of reading the Fall in terms of a Christian notion of guilt relies upon allegory in the first place, for the biblical narrative of the Fall in Genesis 2–3 can only be read as a “fall” at all, as a narrative of sin and guilt, via an allegorical use of the New Testament. In other words, the moral (individual) and anagogic (collective) narrative of fall and redemption is possible only with the allegorical moment of the New Testament. The second level enables the third and fourth to make their way forward.

Personalised, this narrative becomes the contest between Satan and Christ. In the single theological figure of Satan all of the pagan powers were concentrated, and so he becomes, by means of the unambiguous connection between evil and matter that he enables, the ultimate allegorical figure. Tyrants, tricksters, intriguers, rogues of all sorts—whether in the *Trauerspiele* or Shakespeare—become allegories for Satan: “But scorning all emblematic disguise, the undisguised visage of the devil can raise itself up from out of the depths of the earth into the view of the allegorist, in triumphant vitality and nakedness” (O: 227; GS1: 401). The figure of Satan is yet again an allegorical reading of certain materials in the Hebrew Bible in terms of the New Testament life of Christ, but it also points to its own theory of history. Not only does Satan become identified with the serpent in the Garden of Eden, but he also is directly responsible for the Fall in a Christian reading. Yet the Fall itself, particularly in Christian theology, becomes the prerequisite for redemption—at this point Benjamin makes a move that may well have come straight out of the work of Adorno.



In the very moment of Satanic dominance, of the perpetual spiral into hell, salvation and redemption appear. And the model for this is none other than the death of Christ:

The bleak confusion of Golgotha, which can be recognized as the schema underlying the allegorical figures in hundreds of engravings and descriptions of the period, is not just a symbol of the desolation of human existence. In it transitoriness is not signified or allegorically represented, so much as, in its own significance, displayed as allegory. As the allegory of resurrection. (O: 232; GS1: 406)

That Christ should appear eventually is hardly a surprise, given his centrality in medieval commentary as a necessary item of the allegorical method. Nevertheless, Benjamin is not accustomed to closing with merely a few twists, for the “resurrection” of which he speaks turns in upon allegory itself: deprived of its necessary subject matter, “the secret, privileged knowledge, the arbitrary rule in the realm of the dead objects, the supposed infinity of a world without hope,” allegory undergoes a reflexive redemption, internally transformed despite itself. For “the intention does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones, but faithlessly leaps forward to the idea of resurrection” (O: 233; GS1: 406).<sup>30</sup> Through the ruins of this profane world, allegory seeks a restoration of meaning, a “parable of redeemed life.”<sup>31</sup>

The final twist is that evil and vice, the enduring subject matter of allegory, can only be allegorical, non-existent. And to make this point, Benjamin reverts to Genesis 1–3. Concerning the knowledge of good and

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<sup>30</sup> “In a like manner [to Kierkegaard’s critique of dialectics], Benjamin charged that the operation of allegory triggered meaning in the emblem, through a dialectical trick (*Kunstgriff*), as through a spring. At the deepest point of its fall or immersion (*Versenkung*) into nothingness, allegory in fact turned into a redemptive figure of itself.” Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin’s Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 100.

<sup>31</sup> Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 72. Also: “By virtue of the universal inversion of meanings which characterizes allegorical emblematics, the more graphically mere knowledge portrays the hollowness of natural life, the more emphatically it calls to mind its allegorical referent, the sphere of redeemed life” (*Ibid.*, 74).



evil engendered by the tree, he notes that, since God saw that everything he had made was good, the knowledge of evil can have no object. If any available object in the world is good, then nothing remains for evil. It arises subjectively, within the person—a profoundly Protestant viewpoint of the question of theodicy. Thus, evil can only be the knowledge of evil, that is, guilt, which is the origin of allegory.

I am less interested in Satan and Christ than in Benjamin's treatment of the Fall, for it will be a recurring feature in my later discussion and criticism of Benjamin. The Fall will turn out to be a central piece in what I want to call Benjamin's anagogic theory of history. The context in which the *Trauerspiel* flourished—the Baroque—was already a fallen world, one overripe for allegory in all its decadent glory. No less, for Benjamin, than Weimar and Nazi Germany, except that those who lived during the Baroque were aware that their own period was a lesser one to what had come before. However, it is precisely the theological content of allegory that enables Benjamin to avoid a recurring romanticism in German thought, from which Marxism was not excluded. In other words, the notion of the Fall is not so much a longing for a lost paradise, nor even an effort to explain the human condition (a somewhat prosaic reading of myths of origin): rather, the Fall is ultimately oriented to the future rather than the past. Again, it is not, as Bloch argues, that a primordial "paradise" is but another form of a deep utopian drive. Built into the specifically Christian notion of the Fall is a pattern of redemption; the Fall, in other words, has a salvific function. Further, the Fall was clearly not a matter of free choice, an option that the human beings took (for good or bad): the necessity of the Fall is part of the construction of paradise itself. One thinks here of the two trees, the one of the knowledge of good and evil and the other of life. If it is paradise, a Golden Age, why is there a means for its demise or escape? Surely, paradise would have been fine without the trees, unless one argues that no myth of paradise can operate without such a flaw in the crystal. But the core theological point of such a flaw is that if there is a means for the paradise to break down, then a means will be found for its recovery—hence the history of salvation, *Heilsgeschichte*. That is, if paradise is hermetically sealed, then not only is there no means of escape





but no way of redemption exists either. In the end, we would have no narrative or history, for the Fall enables history to begin. This is the theological logic behind Benjamin's fascination with the Fall, making it a central element in his discussions of allegory and language.

The problem with allegory is that it is an inescapably theological mode of biblical commentary, for it reads the biblical text as though it were a theological document, thereby producing a redemption that cannot help but be mythical. Benjamin argues that Baroque allegory arose in the conjunction of pagan and Christian lines of thought; he understands it ultimately as a Christian mode of interpretation. Allegory was primarily a method for theological and institutional appropriation of foreign materials, whether pagan or Hebrew gods or the Hebrew Bible itself. By following a somewhat different route in order to explain the history of allegory, he serves to show all the more clearly the theological nature of allegory. In other words, the model of biblical commentary that informs his work appears irresolutely theological, as his analysis of Baroque allegory clearly shows. However, Benjamin took allegory as a mode of passing beyond myth, since, as was common in German scholarship at the time, the Bible is for him primarily historical rather than mythical: allegory thereby becomes the method for appropriating pagan material into Christianity by overcoming its mythical nature.

I have followed the later part of Benjamin's chapter of the *Trauerspiel* book through in some detail, since the argument shows how theological—in terms of the Fall, sin, guilt, Satan, Christ, redemption, and resurrection—allegory is as a method. Too often Benjamin's theory of allegory is gutted of its theological content,<sup>32</sup> various critics appropriating his emphases on ramifications of the theological argument, such as transience, fragments, ruins, and melancholy. This appropriation is fraught with difficulties if Benjamin's own work with theology is sidestepped. And yet, for Benjamin the referentiality of theology operates in a way that negates its truth claims.

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<sup>32</sup> Although Buck-Morss argues that "Benjamin's stated purpose in the *Trauerspiel* study is not so much to evaluate this Christian resolution as to demonstrate that in Baroque allegory, such theological thinking is primary" (Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 174).



What, then, does theology represent? With that question we are back at the beginning of the *Trauerspiel* book, which took its first step on precisely this question, namely, the task of philosophical writing as representation. But if there is no divine reference on which representation may fix, what then of theology?

Hanssen argues that there is an ironic and illusory register in Benjamin's recovery of allegory and the use of the notion of resurrection. For her, it is none other than a dialectical trick: Benjamin retains the salvific function of allegory in an ironic register: while it operates out of the fragments and transience of life, the salvation promised is illusory. Here she follows Adorno, especially in his essay "The Idea of Natural History,"<sup>33</sup> where he suggests that the more vivid the appearance of reconciliation, the more illusory it really is. So Hanssen:

It is ultimately in this sense, I believe, that one must read Benjamin's treatment of allegory in the *Trauerspiel* study. For, through allegory, Benjamin essentially meditated on the possibility of reconciliation no less than on its illusory nature. Only from this perspective does it become understandable why allegory at once could figure the transience of natural history yet retain the fleeting promise of imminent reconciliation.<sup>34</sup>

Allegory's turn to resurrection, the leap from earth to heaven, is but a faithless option. For Buck-Morss, while Benjamin praises the theological drift of the Baroque allegorists, his criticism is directed at the type of theology in operation, at the illusory redemption of the Baroque allegorists themselves: evil becomes merely self-delusion, devalued nature and the ruins of history become, through an allegorical reading, the very means of redemption through such devaluation and ruin. Redemption, attempted through such a reversal by means of Christ's resurrection, becomes treacherous and empty-handed; all that can be claimed for allegory is the redemption of allegory itself. An idealist solution, it is emptied of any political force.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History," *Telos* 60 (1984): 111–24.

<sup>34</sup>Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History*, 102.

<sup>35</sup>Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 174–75.



The arguments of Hanssen and Buck-Morss are only a beginning, it seems to me, since, through his criticism of Baroque allegory, Benjamin attempts an almost impossible task, developing a method based on theological commentary or allegory that does away with the theological content of the method in order to supply an alternative content. Is Benjamin able to manage such a curious and volatile combination? Adorno, as I will discuss in the last chapter of this book, is not so sure, although he was perpetually fascinated by Benjamin's effort. While Adorno remains suspicious of any effort to base a position on theological categories, he also wants to take theology to its dialectical conclusion, which leads, he feels, beyond theology. In some respects, Benjamin carries on a long tradition within the Church, for I have always suspected (based on dwelling for many years in that institution) that one of the criteria for becoming a religious professional is a realisation that the ostensible content of Christianity is claptrap, a pious myth, but that there is a deeper truth—the institution itself—to which theological method points, well outside the stale dogmas of the Church. Yet, in the same way that such professionals remained within the institution, Benjamin's own program will fail, as he must have anticipated, since he remains within the logic of theology. It would be of little comfort to know that a more demystifying form of biblical commentary would have made the task so much easier. I will come back to this point later, for it remains to trace the shift of allegory from a subject for analysis to a method in the *Passagenarbeit*, where the mythical logic of theology will not allow Benjamin out of its grasp.

### *Passagenarbeit*

As I pass on to the *Passagenarbeit*, let me summarise what is necessarily a detailed argument. Benjamin's underlying assumption, if I may so characterise it, is that capitalism, represented in its most advanced and decayed form in the Paris of the nineteenth century, marks a reversion to myth, an archaicising that is constitutive of modernity.<sup>36</sup> In suggesting that

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<sup>36</sup> As a general introduction to the Arcades Project, nothing surpasses that by Rolf



capitalism was caught in the dream world or phantasmagoria of myth, Benjamin sought to extend Marx's analysis of capitalism, particularly his famous notion of the fetishism of commodities. In order to break out of such myth, Benjamin develops a number of categories such as waking from the dream, a violent blasting out of history and the dialectical image. Allegory becomes the method of doing so, now very much part of the method rather than an object of study. As Buck-Morss argues, Benjamin tried to avoid "not only the 'betrayal of nature' involved in the spiritual transcendence of the Baroque Christian allegorists, but also that political resignation of Baudelaire and his contemporaries which ultimately ontologises the emptiness of the historical experience of the commodity, the new as always-the-same."<sup>37</sup> However, as I have argued, allegory is a method that Benjamin develops out of biblical commentary, particularly as a theological form of commentary. Although he identifies and astutely develops the key problem of the future within Marxism, his way of dealing with the problem has profound implications for his suggested solution. The *Passagenarbeit* then identifies capitalism as a mythic hell before turning to the final area of history and myth.

### Method: Collector as Allegorist

First, however, I need to argue for the deeply theological nature of his discussion, if I may call it that, of the arcades. The methodological personification in the *Passagenarbeit* appears in Konvolut H on "The Collector" (see also the first sketch of 1927–30; AP: 857–58; GS5: 1027–28),<sup>38</sup> which I will foreground over against the rag-picking flaneur of Konvolut M, who has been so central to Benjamin study but in which

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Tiedemann in the Collected Works. See Tiedemann, "Dialectics at a Standstill: Approaches to the *Passagen-Werk*," in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1991).

<sup>37</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 201.

<sup>38</sup> On the collector, see Michael P. Steinberg, "The Collector as Allegorist: Goods, Gods and the Objects of History," in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. Michael P. Steinberg (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).



there is no mention of allegory. In *Konvolut H* the presentation and analysis of the collector folds back to Benjamin's own task in the book: "Here, the Paris arcades are examined as though they were properties in the hand of a collector" (AP: 205; GS5: 272). The collection becomes a purposive historical system into which the irrational and haphazard items are integrated: "for the true collector, every single thing in this system becomes an encyclopedia of all knowledge of the epoch, the landscape, the industry, the owner from which it comes" (AP: 205; GS5: 271).

The collector is above all an allegorist with a theological twist. He has an "unequalled view of the object" that takes in more "than that of the profane owner" (AP: 207; GS5: 274; see also 857; GS5: 1027). Likened to a physiognomist and the dictionary, Benjamin suggests that the ordering of the world through the collector's objects has "a surprising and, for the profane understanding, incomprehensible connection" (AP: 207; GS5: 274). In the past of the object, its origin, history, details such as owners, price, current value, "come together, for the true collector, in every single one of his possessions, to form a whole magic encyclopedia, a world order, whose outline is the *fate* of his object" (AP: 207; GS5: 274, italics in text). Yet the theological aspect is muted here, for—as with the image of the inspiration of the collector as augur—the shift is more towards myth.

"The collector as allegorist" (AP: 206; GS5: 273) writes Benjamin (after quoting Baudelaire on the recovery of legitimate allegory by an intoxicated mind). However, what intrigued Benjamin is the way his earlier work on Baroque allegory relates to collecting. Despite their differences—the collector seeks to bring things together in order to locate their affinities, whereas the allegorist has given up on this, preferring to interpret the dispersal itself—both allegorist and collector struggle against the confusion and scatter of things.

As far as the collector is concerned, his collection is never complete; for let him discover just a single piece missing, and everything he's collected remains a patchwork, which is what things are for allegory from the beginning. On the other hand, the allegorist—for whom objects represent only keywords in a secret dictionary, which will make known their meanings to the initiated—precisely the allegorist can never have enough of things.



With him, one thing is so little capable of taking the place of another that no possible reflection suffices to foresee what meaning his profundity might lay claim to for each one of them (AP: 211; GS5: 279–80).

I have quoted at length, since this brings the *Trauerspiel* book and the *Passagenarbeit* into the same methodological territory. One step remains: allegory now draws upon the leitmotiv of the fetishism of commodities from Marx's *Capital*. I will explore what I call the double register of Benjamin's allegory below—that allegory is not merely a mode of theological biblical commentary but also a Marxist method—but here the image of the collector as one who simultaneously “detaches the object from its functional relations” and elevates “the commodity to the status of allegory” (AP: 207; GS5: 274) indicates the point at which Benjamin sought to enhance Marxist analysis by means of the muted theological method of allegory. If Benjamin takes the commodity as allegorical form,<sup>39</sup> then this allows a Marxist analysis to appear in an integrated fashion, as the quotations from Marx that pepper the close of Konvolut H indicate (AP: 209–10; GS5: 277–78). Indeed, the collector as allegorist seems to have a remarkable resemblance to Marx himself, whom Benjamin evokes somewhat later as a methodological justification.

Marx, in the afterword to the second edition of *Das Kapital*: “Research has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyze its various forms of development, to trace out their inner connection. Only after this work is done can the actual movement be presented in corresponding fashion. If this is done successfully, if the life of the material is reflected back as ideal, then it may appear as if we had before us an a priori construction.” Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, vol 1, ed. Korsch (Berlin <1932>), p. 45 (AP: 465; GS5: 581).

## Passages

As far as the work as a whole is concerned, the “passages” provide

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<sup>39</sup> So Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 228. However, Cohen's argument that the phantasmagoria of myth forms the key to Benjamin's use of allegory misses the point that allegory is the means by which Benjamin hoped that myth might be overcome.



not merely a map of Paris—streets, arcades, metro, catacombs, sewers (C and L), barricades in the new Haussmann boulevardes (E), architecture (F), railways (F), the bourgeois interior (I), the running together of domestic interior, or dream house, and arcades (L), the streets of the flaneur that become one with the residences (M), the streets themselves (P), their modes of lighting (I), and so on—but the very spatial arrangement of Paris is also an allegory, a way of reading the city. Thus, after the first *Konvolut* in which the extraordinary dimensions of the arcades begin to take shape, the second moves on to fashion, an element of capitalism that itself arose at the time of the arcades, where women were first enabled to go out, to promenade, escorted of course, to see and be seen in the latest fashion. By the third *Konvolut*, this allegory moves to the catacombs and underground passages of ancient Paris; here allegory takes flight, with perpetual references to myth and the gods. But the complexity builds, for even the underground has its own temporal and spatial intersections, the newer Metro crossing lines with ancient vaults, limestone quarries, grottoes, and catacombs (AP: 85; GS5: 137). Paris itself becomes a model for allegory, a method within itself. For the topography, “its arcades and its gateways, its cemeteries and bordellos, its railroad stations and its . . .” speak of “more secret, more deeply embedded figures of the city: murders and rebellions, the bloody knots in the network of the streets, lairs of love, and conflagrations” (AP 83; GS5: 134–35). And then Benjamin returns, time and again but from different angles, to the various layers of an allegorical Paris and the modes by which it multiplies and represents itself in new technologies and practices: the arcades, railways and architecture in light of iron construction (F), railways themselves (U), exhibitions and world expos (G), dream houses and interiors (I), prostitution and gambling (O), panoramas (Q), mirrors (R), painting (S), photography (Y), and lithography (t).

It is not so much the banal point that Paris is a “text,” nor even that the city may be interpreted according to a particular method. For Benjamin, it seems, the city, explored in its various levels begins to read itself. Not only does the physical and spatial arrangement of the city



function allegorically, but it also provides a reverse key for the less than tangible elements in the *Passagenarbeit*. Thus, the discussion of the catacombs and underground of Paris is followed by the cultural and theological analysis of boredom and the eternal return in Konvolut D.

Most symptomatically, we may detect a shift in the function of allegory from the *Trauerspiel* book to the *Passagenarbeit*. Allegory does not merely enter the fabric of the latter work, where Benjamin's own text becomes a thoroughly allegorical exercise, where allegory becomes a practice more than a topic open for analysis, but it also gains a double register that seeks to connect historical materialism and theology. In regard to the former, Benjamin dispenses with the vague references to "bourgeois" culture or language that characterised his earlier work in favour of more specific connections to political economics. Time and again an identifiable economic register relates culture directly to political economics

The most obvious presence of political economics appears in the whole Konvoluts devoted to such topics as the "Haussmannization" of Paris—the clearing of large tracts of the city by Baron von Haussmann under Napoleon III and the construction of massive boulevards. Again, Benjamin's interest is in the passages of Paris, but here he focuses both on the economic dimensions of the process—land speculation, government debt, and so on—and on the political. The new wide boulevards were supposed to negate the possibility of constructing barricades by insurrectionists; of course, they provided the means for the largest of barricades, some up to two stories high. Or, in Konvolut F on iron construction, the materialist register is in full force. Konvoluts on the panoramas (Q), technology (S), modes of lighting (I), railroads (U), photography (Y), doll and automaton (Z), the stock exchange and economic history (g), reproduction technology and lithography (i), continue in a similar vein, but the largest dose comes close to the end, on Marx (X). Here a significant range of Marx's concepts appear, although some of them come through secondary sources, especially that of Korsch, and are contrasted with the critique of Marx offered by Simmel. But the key issues of the labour theory of value (use value, exchange value, surplus value), the division of labour, and, not unexpectedly,





the fetishism of commodities comprise the bulk of the quotations and comments. The hard materialism in these sections is the most strikingly new element in the *Passagenarbeit*, for Benjamin was attempting a revision of crude Marxist determinism: “It is not the economic origins of culture that will be presented, but the expression of the economy in its culture” (AP: 460; GS5: 573–74).

### The Double Allegory of Marxism and Theology

Apart from the allegorical method, the *Passagenarbeit* does not dispense with specific theological references. Yet, Benjamin seeks not so much to explain religious ideas in terms of Marxist categories; rather, the items that interest him—unexpected and peripheral though they might be—are read in two directions, or what I want to call a double allegory. I do not mean that Benjamin’s allegory now relies on both theology and Marxism, but that the method itself has undergone a fundamental shift. The allegorical moment of interpretation enables Benjamin to read the various texts and cultural products in terms of political economics and/or theology. The ultimate aim is still a form of “redemption,” although now out of capitalism. Initially, this appears to be a pattern into which Benjamin will settle, except that another level emerges after Konvolut N, namely the relationship between technology and myth. This level in fact functions as the conclusion to the earlier double register, for the propensity of technology to generate myth then becomes the assessment of capitalism as a whole.

Although the impetus came from Benjamin’s own explicit adoption of Marxism, conjoined with the desire to maintain his earlier theological concerns, he found in Marx—especially the first part of *Capital* that was a minimal set reading for Marxist literary critics—the justification for such a dual register. Symptomatic is the repetition of an oft-quoted sentence from Marx: “A commodity appears, at first sight, to be a trivial and easily understood thing. Our analysis shows that, in reality, it is a vexed and complicated thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (AP: 181; GS5: 245).<sup>40</sup> Taking on a life of its own in the market, it becomes a “material

<sup>40</sup> A slightly different translation appears at AP: 196–97; GS5: 260: “A commodity appears,



immaterial” (*sinnlich übersinnlich*) thing, an idol full of the breath of life. For Benjamin, Grandville embodies Marx’s fetishism of commodities, for his “subtleties . . . aptly express what Marx calls the ‘theological niceties’ of the commodity” (AP: 182; GS5: 246). “If the commodity was a fetish, then Grandville was the tribal sorcerer” (AP: 186; GS5: 249). Yet, apart from the juxtaposition of Marx with other quotations, what interests me here are the historical materialist and theological dimensions of the quotation from Marx. Inseparable in Marx’s work, they take on for Benjamin a less rigorous association that appears time and again throughout the *Passagenarbeit*.

Within the text itself, the ultimate model for Benjamin’s connections between allegory, theology, and economics comes in the endless Konvolut on Baudelaire (J), although the note in a first sketch marks out his interest: “Baudelaire on allegory (very important!), *Paradis artificiels*, p. 73” (AP: 841; GS5: 1009). What seems to intrigue Benjamin about Baudelaire is the way he not only provides a remarkable sense, a master key, of nineteenth century Paris (and this point is by no means new), but also how his poetry is riddled with both theological and biblical themes, turned on their heads, and allegory. Unable to believe in an “exterior visible being” that is concerned with his fate (AP: 312; GS5: 394), Benjamin notes, via Ernest Raynaud, that Baudelaire’s poetry speaks endlessly of Christ, Jehovah, Mary, Mary Magdalene, the angels, and their “phalanxes.” However, Baudelaire noticed only later the absence of Satan in this panoply. His subsequent work, especially *Les Fleurs du Mal*, marks the effort to make good on this omission, in order “to sustain a non-conformist position for any length of time” (CB: 23). But all of this forms part of the allegorical maze of his work, in which Baudelaire rivals Adam in naming all that which was not named—hopes, fears, regrets, curiosities, and so on. These function in a distinctly allegorical register, as “souvenirs” of human beings, as experiences

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at first sight, to be a trivial thing and easily understood. Our analysis shows that in reality it is a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.” The first quotation used by Benjamin (in my main text) comes from Otto Rühle’s *Karl Marx: Leben und Werk* (Dresden: Avalun Verlag, 1928), whereas this second quotation is drawn from Franz Mehring’s, “Karl Marx und das Gleichnis,” in *Karl Marx als Denker, Mensch, und Revolutionär*, ed. David Rjazanov (Berlin: Dietz, 1928), 52.



now past—of remorse, repentance, virtue, hope, and anguish (theological categories)—that can become allegorical only in their passing, much like the medieval souvenirs of the gods.

The most sustained effort to read Baudelaire as an allegorist comes in a stretch of the *Passagenarbeit* where Benjamin invokes many of the categories from the *Trauerspiel* book such as melancholy, brooding, fragments, the corpse, Golgotha, and so on. As the “armature of his poetry” (AP: 324; GS5: 408), Baudelaire was fascinated by the beginnings of allegory in late Latin poetry, where the names of gods appear as allegorical marks of something else. But then Benjamin quotes his own text from the *Trauerspiel*—the first of a number of occasions—to make the point that the appearance of allegory in the high Middle Ages was the result of the confluence of Antiquity and Christianity, of the nature of the gods and guilt-laden *physis*. Yet, rather than appearing late, for Baudelaire, the “allegorical experience was primary for him; one can say that he appropriated from the antique world, as from the Christian, no more than he needed to set going in his poetry that primordial experience” (AP: 324–25; GS5: 409, see also 366–67; GS5: 463–64).

What of the various features of allegory that Benjamin so carefully discussed in the *Trauerspiel* book? He provides a list of items: “Art, Love, *Pleasure*, *Repentance*, *Ennui*, Destruction, the Now, Time, Death, *Fear*, *Sorrow*, Evil, Truth, *Hope*, Vengeance, Hate, Respect, Jealousy, Thoughts” (AP: 328; GS5: 413). The list is ingenious, for Benjamin follows a different path, picking up the corpse, melancholy, brooding, Satan, fragmentation, and ruin with only a touch on violence and destruction. Let us, then, follow him on that path for a moment.

The concern with the corpse, especially the skull, recurs in the quotation that I have already made above: “The bleak confusion of Golgotha, which can be recognised as the schema underlying the allegorical figures in hundreds of engravings and descriptions of the period” (AP: 326; GS5: 410; see O: 232; GS1: 406). Except that here it stands alone, with no explicit connection made to Baudelaire apart from its placement and the brief comment about “the image of petrified unrest” that Benjamin traced



in the *Trauerspiel*. But it is “petrified unrest,” which becomes the motif for both Baudelaire’s poetry and his life. Melancholic, arguing that smiling or laughing were fundamentally Satanic, embodying a violence that could destroy the false harmony of the world, homeless, estranged, and alienated from everything that might have been familiar, Baudelaire’s allegory is for Benjamin based on the fragmentation and ruins that he first considered in the *Trauerspiel* book.

However, now a change of tone from the *Trauerspiel* book appears, a change that relates directly to the presence of Marx in Benjamin’s explicit thought. In the extended discussion of Baudelaire, Marx appears on the issue of brooding. Benjamin returns a number of times to the suggestion that “only as a brooder was he incomparable” (AP: 328; GS5: 413), for it is Baudelaire’s brooding that lands him in the midst of allegories, his only proper home where he can avoid disturbance and “put the image at the beck and call of his thought” (AP: 328; GS5: 413; see also 367; GS5: 465). Through brooding, the piecemeal memory and “indiscriminate mass of dead lore” (AP: 368; GS5: 466), the brooder is also an allegorist, “cut from the same cloth” (AP: 367; GS5: 465): “Through the disorderly fund which his knowledge places at his disposal, the allegorist rummages here and there for a particular piece, holds it next to some other piece, and tests to see if they fit together—that meaning with this image or this image with that meaning” (AP: 368; GS5: 466). Here Marx slides into play,<sup>41</sup> for more than once does Benjamin connect, via Baudelaire, allegory with commodities, since the commodification of experience that comes with capitalism finds its proper mode in allegory (see AP: 328, 346; GS5: 413, 436). More specifically, Benjamin argues that price is the crucial marker of allegory: invoking yet again the “metaphysical niceties” of which he was fond, he argues that the unforeseen and unpredictable nature of price is “exactly the same with the object in its allegorical existence” (AP: 369; GS5: 466). Here the vagaries and fluctuations of allegorical meanings become one with the vagaries and fluctuations of commodity prices.

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<sup>41</sup> See also the heavy dose of quotations from Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire* in AP: 357–59, 368; GS5: 451–55, 465.



Marx also provides Benjamin with the opportunity to speculate on the medieval origin of allegory, specifically through his comments on the use of machinery in manufacture in *Capital*. For Benjamin, the fragmentation of allegory finds its source in the production process in which the various parts become the focus rather than the whole. The half-finished products—an aesthetic moment enabled by the suspension of production in the Thirty Years War—that form the basis of Baroque allegory become emblems of destruction, turning against the whole process of production itself. Even the key motif of the death's head represents the way “man himself” (AP: 366; GS5: 463) becomes part of the productive and allegorical process.

Yet what interests me is not merely the effort to use Marx to understand the history of allegory, nor even the rewriting of allegory as characteristic of capitalism, but rather the sheer elision of commodity, price tag, and allegorical meaning. This brings all the criticism of Adorno to bear—that Benjamin's method cries out for at least some mediation rather than mere juxtaposition. As others have pointed out, Adorno was not quite fair to Benjamin, whose throwing together of items—the embodiment of the allegorist as collector—sought to generate meaning from such a process. But Adorno's criticism works very well at another level: Benjamin does place allegory, a fundamentally theological mode of biblical commentary, cheek by jowl with the Marxist critique of commodities and price. Does this transform allegory into a great modernist enterprise, as Benjamin himself now suggests, finding its fulfillment in capitalism?

If so, it throws into question his earlier careful study of the history and development of allegory. Benjamin revises his thesis of the *Trauerspiel* by suggesting that in the Baroque age the condition for allegory—the fetish character of the commodity—constitutes only a beginning. Thus the style of allegory differs from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, the Baroque and Baudelaire forming strange companions through their focus on decrepitude (see CB: 82–83). Hence his profound interest in Baudelaire (twenty percent of the *Passagenarbeit* is given over to him). Yet, Baudelaire's own project fails (AP: 347; GS5: 438–39), giving into despair and profound resignation before the onslaught of capitalism. Baudelaire's



method is on the right track for Benjamin, but his politics are not. It is not so much that Baudelaire sought anachronistically to enact a seventeenth century allegorical style two centuries later: rather, having come into its own, a politicised or “aggressive” allegory can provide signals of the way out of capitalism.<sup>42</sup>

Let me consider a little more closely the theological moves, which become overt in Konvoluts C and N, the one more of an example, the other a theoretical reflection. The theory first: with a few passing brushes, Benjamin suggests that theology is as much part of the *Passagenarbeit* as the *Trauerspielbuch*, although now in a more enigmatic vein: “My thinking is related to theology as blotting pad is related to ink. It is saturated with it. Were one to go by the blotter, however, nothing of what is written would remain” (AP: 471; GS5: 588). Saturation and diffusion mark the relation: Benjamin’s thinking takes up theology only to see it spread and blend, so that what is written is no longer legible as theology. Is this a refusal of the truth content of theology that I considered earlier? Benjamin does suggest so explicitly. Rather, theology, or at least a method that makes use of theology, can only operate indirectly:

... history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance. What science has “determined” (*festgestellt*), remembrance (*Eingedenken*) can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and complete (suffering) into something complete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted to us to write it with immediately theological concepts (AP: 471; GS5: 589).

According to this passage, theology has, not unexpectedly, a profoundly melancholic note about it: as remembrance, not only may it bring happiness to an end but it can also reopen suffering that was once past. But this remembrance, if we work backwards through the quoted text, is also history, a “form of remembrance.” As remembrance, history is then

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<sup>42</sup> So Peter Madsen, “Ruin and Rebus—History on the Arcades Project,” *Orbis Litterarum* 48 (1993): 68–82.



inescapably theological, and yet such a theological history must be written indirectly. Neither atheological nor immediately theological—that is the dilemma Benjamin attempts to face in the *Passagenarbeit*. His use of theology, *as a method*, has then become indirect, mediated (through Marxism). But is it not also the case that the appropriation of theology as a method means that the possibility of the concepts themselves having some viable space becomes highly problematic?

My emphasis on theology as a method is not without reason, for Benjamin himself offers a snippet in this direction: “Bear in mind that commentary on a reality (for it is a question here of commentary, of interpretation in detail) calls for a method completely different from that required by commentary on a text. In the case of one, the scientific mainstay is theology; in the other case, philology” (AP: 460; GS5: 574; see also AP: 858; GS5: 1028). I quoted this text earlier in order to make the connection with his essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, but what are the implications for the *Passagenarbeit*? Here he does both, commenting on reality and on texts, but this methodological observation is strange at first. For is not philology, the working with texts, a method that arises from biblical criticism, or more specifically textual criticism—the close attention to manuscripts and versions in order to interpret the text? What has happened here is that is that “commentary on a text” has not so much been sent into exile as subsumed within “commentary on reality,” the preferred mode of working in the *Passagenarbeit*. And yet, Benjamin’s primary mode of analyzing the “reality” of nineteenth century Paris is by working with texts: in other words, he uses philology, textual commentary, in order to generate a theological commentary on reality. If it is implicit in his other comments on theology, it becomes explicit at this point, namely when theology thoroughly subsumes textual, and thereby biblical, commentary. Yet, in the very demarcation of theology and philology before effacing the latter, Benjamin recognises the difference between them. That he did not explore such a difference further, preferring the dominance of theology, is the source of the major problems with his analysis in the *Passagenarbeit*.

Given that theology now dominates, what happens when there is an



explicit use of theology in his analysis? As soon as Benjamin moves from the arcades and fashion to the subterranean Paris of *Konvolut C*, the theological references teem through the text as though invoking a religious past that lies half-forgotten beneath the city. Indeed, the schema with which he works is an interrelation between the surface of Paris and the underworld; the daytime world of the arcades and houses become the nightly dream of the underworld (see AP: 875; GS5: 993). Like Pausanias, who produced a topography of Greece in A.D. 200, “at a time when the cult sites and many other monuments had begun to fall into ruin” (AP: 82; GS5: 133), Benjamin’s own topography traces the ruins of Paris’s own cultic origins and past (see also AP: 861; GS5: 1031). Whether it is the “muses” of the Surrealists (AP: 82; GS5: 133), the mythical topographies of Balzac (AP: 83; GS5: 134) or Hugo (AP: 92-5; GS5: 145-9), the function of gates as both border markers and triumphal arches (AP: 86–87; GS5: 139), the penates, or household gods, at the entrances to arcade, skating rink, pub, or tennis court (AP: 88; GS5: 141), the role of thresholds in general (AP: 88–89; GS5: 141–42), or the various entries into the “underworld,” the Metro, each has its mythical referents. In the case of the latter, the underground names become sewer gods, catacomb fairies, the passages a labyrinth with “a dozen blind raging bulls” and the signs themselves mark not the “linguistic network of the city” but hell itself (AP: 84; GS5: 136). So much so that guides offer tours to see the Devil (AP: 85; GS5: 137).

Benjamin’s theological commentary reads the myriad dimensions of Paris as an allegory of hell, to which he then brings all of the mythical material associated with such an abode. At this point he sublates his earlier argument on Baroque allegory in which the pagan gods both survive and are contained by becoming demons in a Christian world, all of who are then concentrated on the figure of Satan<sup>43</sup> in the satanic hell of nineteenth century capitalism. But this is also the insight that he drew from the sustained work on Baudelaire: the allegorical focus on Satan in his work

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<sup>43</sup> “Parallelism between this work and the *Trauerspiel* book. Common to both, the theme: theology of hell. Allegory, advertisement, types: martyr, tyrant—whore, speculator” (AP: 854; GS5: 1022–23).





makes Baudelaire the preferred guide for capitalism. And a major reason for this is that Baudelaire gives a “radical-theological form to his radical rejection of those in power” (CB: 24). Here Benjamin focuses on allegory as a mode of appropriating pagan myths, except that those myths gain a new life rather than being subsumed into history. Further, the primary referents for such myths are to ancient Greece and Rome, which he feels were replicated in a profound archaïcising that lay at the heart of modern capitalism.

The recurrence of myth via allegory is not an isolated move. In *Konvolut D* the comments on boredom as a new aesthetic category of the bourgeois world in the nineteenth century flow into those on the infinite parallel worlds of Blanqui's *L'Eternite par les astres* (where one's life is endlessly multiplied and therefore eternal) and the eternal return of Nietzsche: “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything immeasurably small or great in your life must return to you” (AP: 118; GS5: 177).<sup>44</sup> Benjamin notes that Nietzsche's “mythic fatality” has its most formidable development in the notion of eternal damnation, “substituting an eternity of torments for the eternity of a cycle” (AP: 119; GS5: 178). The theology of hell is wide open for Benjamin's observations on myth—he revisits a hell replete with ancient Greek characters (Tantalus, Sisyphus, and the Danaïdes), Satan and the prime metaphors of capitalism who give themselves over to fate, the prostitute and the gambler. The mythical dimensions of nineteenth century capitalism render it pure hell, a critique that also had the myths of blood, soil and the Blond Beast of fascism in mind.<sup>45</sup> At this point, a whole collection of other materials comes into play, such as the eternal hell of novelty to which I will turn a little later, the systematic process of dream-like forgetting of

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin quotes the words of the demon in Nietzsche's *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, although he takes the quotation as cited in Karl Löwith, *Nietzsches Philosophie: Der ewigen Wiederkehr des Gleichen* (Berlin: 1935), 57–58.

<sup>45</sup> See Rolf-Peter Janz, “Mythos und Moderne bei Walter Benjamin,” in *Mythos und Moderne: Begriff und Bild einer Rekonstruktion*, ed. Karl Heinz Bohrer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983): 363–81, especially 64.



the historical origins of the bourgeoisie, the idea of nineteenth century Paris as a nightmarish dream, the new aesthetic response of boredom, and the belief in progress, the ‘infinite perfectibility understood as an infinite ethical task’, as another form of the myth of eternal return.

## Myth and History

I have already passed into the question of myth, since it forms a central element in Benjamin’s analysis of nineteenth century capitalism: “What would the nineteenth century,” he writes in one of the first sketches, “be to us if we were bound to it by tradition? How would it look as religion or mythology? We have no tactile <taktisch> relation to it” (AP: 831; GS5: 998). As a hell of the eternal return of the same, a Satanic realm that comes out so clearly in Baudelaire’s allegory, in the very architecture of the arcades,<sup>46</sup> as the world of the fetishised commodity that Benjamin saw expressed no better than in Grandville’s work, Benjamin sought both to deepen Marx’s analysis of capitalism and provide a way of conceptualising the break from it and the appearance of communism. In this respect, the emergence from myth becomes a historical problem; indeed, the inter-relation between myth and history is my focus in this penultimate section. Despite his brilliant analysis of capitalism, my argument is that Benjamin’s attempted solution to the question of the end of capitalism and the possibility of a different future fails, caught in the trap of another mythology. His attempt may be read as a homeopathic solution, an effort to push myth to its logical conclusion, but the problem lies elsewhere, namely in his use of theological commentary.

To begin with, I will explore the break Benjamin so desperately sought and suggested, after which I will interrogate a little more closely the background to such a solution in the theory of history he developed earlier, particularly its intense concern with origin and eschaton. That this history is as mythical as capitalism itself may well indicate more of a problem with imagining any future than with Benjamin’s project as such.

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<sup>46</sup> “Architecture as the most important testimony to latent ‘mythology.’ And the most important architecture of the nineteenth century is the arcade” (AP: 834; GS5: 1002).



It is symptomatic that Benjamin's most sustained discussion of the break from the dream-like myth of capitalism emerges from a quoted double-take: he quotes Adorno quoting Kierkegaard and then himself text from the *Trauerspiel* book:

A Kierkegaard citation in *Wiesengrund*, with commentary following: "One may arrive at a similar consideration of the mythical by beginning with the imagistic. When, in an age of reflection, one sees the imagistic protrude ever so slightly and unobserved in a reflective representation and, like an antediluvian fossil, suggest another species of existence which washed away doubt, one will perhaps be amazed that the image could ever have played such an important role." Kierkegaard wards off the "amazement" with what follows. Yet this amazement heralds the deepest insight into the interrelation of dialectic, myth, and image. For it is not as the continuously living and present that nature prevails in the dialectic. Dialectic comes to a stop in the image, and, in the context of recent history, it cites the mythical as what is long gone: nature as primal history. For this reason, the images—which, like those of the *intérieur*, bring dialectic and myth to the point of indifferenciation—are truly "antediluvian fossils." They may be called dialectical images, to use Benjamin's expression, whose compelling definition of "allegory" also holds true for Kierkegaard's allegorical intention taken as a figure of historical dialectic and mythical nature. According to this definition, "in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history, a petrified primordial landscape." (AP: 461; GS5: 575–76; see Adorno K: 54; GS2: 80; Benjamin O: 166; GS1: 343).

Apart from the convoluted dialectic of the quotation itself—Adorno's Kierkegaard book was heavily dependent on Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book—Benjamin picks up the idea of the dialectical image, which Adorno himself developed from Benjamin.<sup>47</sup> Curiously, Benjamin quotes more than once from Adorno's book and occasionally from Kierkegaard himself. The question then is whether Benjamin, an early reviewer of Adorno's

<sup>47</sup> See Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertholt Brecht, and Georg Lukács, *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. and ed. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1977), 111–12.



book, took on board the latter's criticism of Kierkegaard, especially that concerning the perpetual turn to myth, the inability to escape it when operating with a theological system and method. Thus, in the passage here taken from Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony*, Adorno argues for the interrelation of myth, image, and dialectic, although he brings together in characteristic fashion nature and myth—the two belong together as I will argue, in terms of being without time and history, while the dialectic itself is historical. What of the image, that which fascinates Benjamin? The image in Kierkegaard brings, in the well-known phrase, the dialectic to a stop, resorting to the primal history of myth itself. Yet the point of Adorno's argument is that Kierkegaard's aesthetic cannot help but be archaic and primal, for he resorts despite himself to myth time and again. Of course, Adorno's book in argument and form is indebted in its turn to Benjamin's *Trauerspielbuch*, and he takes up the opposition between nature, as a spatialised and timeless category, and history. Yet, Adorno effects a twist even on the quotation from the *Trauerspielbuch*: "in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history, a petrified primordial landscape" (Benjamin O: 166; GS1: 343; Adorno K: 54; GS1: 80; AP: 461; GS5: 575). This landscape for Kierkegaard is that of myth, but it now turns on Benjamin himself, for Adorno's profound suspicion of theology (mixed in with a continuing fascination), washes over Benjamin's work. Does not his resort to a theological method face the same problem as Kierkegaard?

Does Benjamin miss Adorno's point here and elsewhere in the Kierkegaard book, or does Benjamin boldly take up the question of myth itself as a solution? He uses theology, or rather, a theological appropriation of biblical commentary, to break the hold of myth within capitalism. Yet, in the end theology cannot avoid falling back on myth: the internal tensions of theology can be resolved only through myth. As I will argue in the final chapter of this book, Adorno finds this both a fascinating feature of theology, since myth cannot but open out dialectically into history, and problematic, for it shows the inherent instability of any system based on theology.



It is worth seeing what Benjamin does with the passage in some further detail. He takes it in two directions, the one in terms of the dialectical image and the other, closely related, of the blasting out of history. As for the dialectical image, he begins by suggesting the connection “between the world of modern technology and the archaic symbol-world of mythology” (AP: 461; GS5: 576). Using the terminology of childhood, he argues that interest in and curiosity for technology relates such technology to the “old worlds of symbols” (AP: 461; GS5: 576). In other words, he takes Adorno’s observation and pushes it in another direction, via a Jungian argument for archaic symbols that belong to all, an archetypal mythology that he refused to reject. So, technology, as that which breaks up the perceptual worlds (*Merkwelten*) much more rapidly than before, brings myth to the surface in an unexpectedly rapid fashion. This is the dialectical point of the rapid sophistication of technology within capitalism: the primal history of myth, no longer obfuscated by church or tradition, now stares us in the face.

With Konvolut N the double register of theology and political economics, which I have been following through the *Passagenarbeit*, has now become much more focused in the relation between technology and myth. It is as though Konvolut N sets the agenda for those that follow, especially on Saint-Simon (O), Fourier (W) and the history of sects (p). These konvoluts are interspersed with those concerning various forms of technology: panoramas (Q), technology (S), modes of lighting (I), railroads (U), photography (Y), dolls and automaton (Z), reproduction technology, and lithography (i), apart from those that appeared earlier. In the first draft of 1927–30 the connections are made explicit: “Traffic at the stage of myth. Industry at the stage of myth. (Railroad stations and early factories)” (AP: 861; GS5: 1031). Already in the material on *Jugendstil* (Konvolut S) he argues that this particular form of art and architecture demonstrates the mysticism that came as a response to the (bourgeois) technological control over nature (AP: 559; GS5: 694), that both *Jugendstil* and realism constitute efforts on the part of art to come to terms with technology. A particular form of such mysticism that



perpetually draws Benjamin's attention (see earlier) is the myth of eternal return, where a blend of Nietzsche, Blanqui and *Jugendstil* produces the eternal hell of novelty (AP: 557, 548, 544, 842–43; GS5: 691, 680, 676, 1010–11).

But what Benjamin wants to do with this is attempt to produce a new dialectic that will break the hold of myth—a dialectic of the image rather than argumentation, dialectics at a standstill, “the quintessence of the method” (AP: 865; GS5: 1035): “image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation” (AP: 462; GS5: 576). Like the flash, or “posthumous shock” (CB: 132; see also 145–48) of a camera, such a dialectical image seeks to overcome a purely temporal relation between past and present. The image is therefore not historical progression, but “suddenly emergent,” a flash that is found, enigmatically, in language. Is this not a homeopathic solution? Benjamin wishes to take the conjunction of the archaic and modern that capitalism generates in the interplay between technology and myth—the more technology develops the more myth returns—and push it to its logical extreme. We find continual formulations of this relationship, such as the conjunction of what has been and the now, the “fore- and after-history” (AP: 470; GS5: 587), a “force field” or location for the linking of the histories where, in the ever-present sexual language of Benjamin's text, “the present instant interpenetrates it” (AP: 470; GS5: 587), but the key is to take what is already happening within capitalism and exacerbate it through the very technology of capitalism in order to find a moment in which capitalism begins to disintegrate. In a unique way, Benjamin has developed Marx's argument that the collapse of capitalism will happen through its own contradictions, although he is very much indebted to a violent and abrupt caesura, the explosion that rips open the homogenous or ‘continuous exposition of history’ (AP: 470; GS5: 588).

As we pass through to consider the second notion of the blast out of history, it is worth noting an alternative image that Benjamin draws from Surrealism (whose influence is much stronger on the earlier drafts and is reflected in his habit of recording his own dreams). For the



dream of the surrealists was another way of speaking about the myth of nineteenth century capitalism,<sup>48</sup> from which Benjamin sought a strategy of awakening (AP: 462–64; GS5: 577–80): “Accordingly, we present the new, the dialectical method of doing history: with the intensity of a dream, to pass through what has been, in order to experience the present as the waking world to which the dream refers!” (AP: 838; see also 845, 854–55, 863, 883; GS5: 1006, 1012, 1023, 1033, 1057–58).

## Appropriation of the Maternal Function

All of these items—dialectical image, force field, and awakening—draw near to the well-known theses “On the Philosophy of History,” except that in the *Passagenarbeit* Benjamin experiments with various forms of what will become the famous thesis that concerns us here. Wishing to develop his own aesthetic and philosophical category comparable to revolution, Benjamin uses the terminology of armed conflict—blast, explode, ruin (see also AP: 857, 862, 863; GS5: 1026–27, 1032, 1033). He does so in order to be rid of the epic, the homogenous in history. But the source of the blast is the monad, the unit that unexpectedly emerges, bursting forth to break open history and offer something new.

If the object of history is to be blasted out of the continuum of historical succession, that is because its monadological structure demands it. This structure first comes to light in the extracted object itself. And it does so in the form of the historical confrontation that makes up the interior (and, as it were, the bowels) of the historical object, and into which all the

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<sup>48</sup> “The nineteenth century—to borrow the Surrealists’ terms—is the set of noises that invades our dream, and which we interpret on awaking” (AP: 831; GS5: 998). See also Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overcoming Conformity*, 20–21; Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 253–86. Buck-Morss develops a fascinating Benjaminian reading of the end of the Cold War that relies heavily of Benjamin’s more Surrealistic side. See also Margaret Cohen, “The City as Dreamworld and Catastrophe,” *October* 73 (Summer 1995): 5–26. Indeed, for Cohen, now in her *Profane Illumination*, Surrealism itself provides the key, rather than being one element among many, to Benjamin’s fantastic and gothic Marxism. See also Max Pensky, “Tactics of Remembrance: Proust, Surrealism, and the Origin of the *Passagenwerk*,” in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. Michael P. Steinberg (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996): 164–89; and McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, 206–52.



forces and interests of history enter on a reduced scale. It is owing to this monadological structure that the historical object finds represented in its interior its own fore-history and after-history (AP: 475; GS5: 594).

It seems as though Benjamin has passed well beyond theology in his search for a new way of conceptualising the revolution out of capitalism, the method of historical materialism itself, but what is noticeable about the text I have quoted and others like it is the highly sexualised and maternal language when he begins to speak of the break out of capitalism. Compare the crucial thesis from “On the Philosophy of History:”

Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallises into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognises the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of a lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time cancelled; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history. The nourishing fruit of the historically understood contains time as a precious but tasteless seed (Ill: 254; GS1: 703).

In both quotations he conflates male insemination and female giving birth. Thus, when the “object of history” is blasted out both male ejaculation and the moment of the mother giving birth to a child are evoked; thoughts “flow” and “arrest,” stopping suddenly in a moment, a “shock” that miraculously produces the “monad.” Characteristic of such appropriations is the immediate production of an object, a child, without any recognition of the long process of gestation: the man ejaculates and lo! A child is born. While the second quotation turns around the blast and shock and its historical implications, the first obsesses about what may as well be called the womb of history, the “interior” and the “bowels” of the historical





object, “into which all the forces and interests of history enter on a reduced scale.”

From here the object of history is to be blasted out and extracted, the “violent expulsion from the continuum of historical process” (AP: 475; GS5: 594). But there is a curious doubling over in which inseminator, mother of history, and their progeny become one: the object of history is blasted out of its own womb. If this seems a little odd, then it is very much part of the way in which the maternal function is appropriated by those who cannot give birth: not only is there a conflation of insemination and birth, but the male body becomes a site of its own auto-generation: hence the final oral image of the “precious but tasteless seed,” for the only mode of auto-generation open to man is to come in his own mouth.

In the theses, the appropriation of the maternal body to speak of history becomes even more overt, both in the revision of the quotation I have cited above and in the first thesis of the wizened dwarf of theology, the little hunchback who is an expert chess player and sits inside and guides the puppet (Ill: 245; GS1: 693). Although the child appears old and in control, it still sits within the womb of history. I must admit that I am less interested in the immediate content of Benjamin's famous images—the first thesis has been used time and again to characterise the relation between theology and historical materialism in his thought—than in the repetitive and overlaid patterns such images follow. And one of those patterns is that of conception, pregnancy, giving birth, in short of the maternal body.

Rather than dismissing Benjamin's writing as part of a long tradition of such appropriation, it seems to me that it acts as a profound signal of theological commentary in Benjamin's writing, for the pattern of language and the images of birthing to which he resorts are central to the myths of creation and eschaton in the Jewish and Christian traditions, especially since the eschaton itself becomes a return to paradise; the two are part of the same mythical patterns. In other words, where the appropriated maternal body appears in Benjamin's reflections on the future (and also origin), we have theological reflection. More specifically,



it marks the presence of a form of biblical commentary that is explicitly theological—allegorical commentary—and it is this form of commentary that succumbs to the inescapably mythical nature of the biblical text itself. In the remainder of this chapter I will spin out this somewhat tight argument.

## Salvation History (*Heilsgeschichte*): The Return of Biblical Myth

In order to do so I flash back to Benjamin's earlier work on the *Trauerspiel*—so important for the *Passagenarbeit*—and the essays on language and translation. For one of the structuring elements of the *Passagenarbeit* is a distinct theory of history. Benjamin's take on the question of history, in the context of philosophical debates at the time, comes through in his notion of “historical time” (*Die Zeit der Geschichte, historischen Zeit*), or “fulfilled time” (*die erfüllten Zeit*). Buying into the secularisation thesis championed by Max Weber and Karl Löwith, Benjamin's interpretation idiosyncratically converted the thesis itself. Secularisation was the fall away from historical time into space and spatialisation, an inauthentic and excessive shift under the influence of the natural sciences.<sup>49</sup> Benjamin tracks this shift in the *Trauerspiel*, in which history was dehistoricised as “natural history.” And what marks natural history is a profound spatialisation in which classification, taxonomy and topology dominate. In the earlier essay, “*Trauerspiel and Tragedy*” (SW1: 55–57; GS2: 133–37), which eventually fed into the *Trauerspiel* book itself, Benjamin distinguished between the two genres of play, between *Trauerspiel* and tragedy, in terms of time. Here, the *Trauerspiel* is characterised by the emergence of what he calls mechanical time. The terminology varies but the argument is the same: mechanical (or natural) time is concerned with empirical events, with the measure that records the duration of mechanical change, changes that are spatial, con-

<sup>49</sup> Benjamin was to hold to his suspicion of secularisation, so I find Wolin's claim somewhat strange: “I would like to suggest that Benjamin's relevance for historical materialism is to be found in this late attempt [in the *Theses*] to secularize the notion of redemptive criticism” (Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 264).



cerned with magnitude and regularity. Further, natural history also refers to the return of natural law in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as well as the rise of anthropology.<sup>50</sup> The outcome of such a shift is that time becomes an endless, natural process, marked by chronology or its inversion. It also falls into both a pattern of endless repetition, the eternal return that will fascinate him in the *Passagenarbeit*, and the closely related schema of decline and restoration: natural history contains the two great processes of dissolution and resurrection. All these he found inauthentic, a mark of secularisation that is not just an inversion of the conventional thesis (the loss of transcendence). In his final work, “On the Philosophy of History,” the terminology shifts again: now, with his thoughts sharpened by historical materialism, he writes of “homogeneous, empty time” (I: 255; GS1: 702). But it is the same as natural or mechanical time: what we get is historicism and universal history, “the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary” (I: 255; GS1: 702),<sup>51</sup> and above all the faith in progress, as something boundless, irresistible and for all “mankind.”

Ironically, it is precisely this shift to natural history, to a spatialised, mechanical time, with its great concern over decline, restoration and the perpetual repetition of history, which provides the possibility for allegory. Thus, during the Baroque, and then in much fuller form in nineteenth century capitalism, allegory emerges from such a shift, appearing in the *Trauerspiele*, for here “history merges into the setting” (O: 92; GS1:271; see also O: 177; GS1: 353); there is a “comprehensive secularization of the historical in the state of creation” (O: 92; GS1:271); and “natural setting increasingly intrudes into the dramatic action” (O: 93; GS1:272). Later, Benjamin wants to carry this argument into the Arcades of the nineteenth century: “Pursue the question of whether a connection exists between the “secularisation” of time in space and the allegor-

<sup>50</sup> Three inauthentic temporalities were the result of the spatialisation of historical time into “natural history” in baroque drama: chronological time, its inversion or acme, and the eternal return of the same. See Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History*, 59–65.

<sup>51</sup> For a more detailed discussion of “historicism” and its connection with the universal history of the victors over against Benjamin's own kairological notion of history, see Harro Müller, “Walter Benjamin's Critique of Historicism: A Rereading,” *The Germanic Review* 71 (1996): 243–52.



ical mode of perception” (AP: 472; GS5: 590). By the *Passagenarbeit* he extends the analysis to argue that natural history was not only the form of history in capitalism but also enabled the connection with myth or ur-history.<sup>52</sup> Capitalism, therefore, does not merely draw upon ur-history in order to generate its own myths: capitalism, as the realm of natural history, is itself the realm of nature, of barbarism, myth, and ur-history, raised to a new height. This means that capitalism not so much creates its system out of whole cloth, but it takes up various elements from previous modes of production and raises them to new intensity and transparency.

In response to such natural history or mechanical time, Benjamin speaks of both “historical time” and “fulfilled time.” Historical time may be “infinite in every direction and unfulfilled at every moment” (SW1: 55; GS2: 134). Apparently endless, like natural history, it is distinguished from natural history through its non-empirical status. The key difference, however, is that historical time may become complete, fulfilled time, a “process that is perfect in historical terms” (SW1: 55; GS2: 134). Refusing concepts of both objective and subjective time, historical time is none other than theological, or more strictly biblical time: “The idea of fulfilled time is the dominant historical idea of the Bible: it is the idea of messianic time” (SW1: 55–56; GS2: 134). If the hint of a biblical reference has emerged with the description of fulfilled time as messianic time, then the full theological weight of his argument appears with the final distinction, between messianic and tragic, or individual, time. This final distinction in the “Trauerspiel and Tragedy” essay provides an initial indication of what Benjamin means by the messianic: “Tragic time is related to the latter [messianic time] in the same way that an individually fulfilled time is related to the divinely fulfilled one” (SW1: 56; GS2: 134). Analogy becomes an interpretative key, for tragic time, the time characteristic of the form of tragedy, indicates that messianic time is nothing other than divinely fulfilled time.

What then, is historical, messianic, and divinely fulfilled time? For

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<sup>52</sup> See Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 64.



Benjamin it is none other than a narrative of a beginning and an end to history, specifically understood in terms of the Fall and then the completion of history with the messiah: "At the centre of the *Trauerspiel* book . . . stood a postlapsarian narrative."<sup>53</sup> In other words, he embraces a biblical notion of history as historical or fulfilled time, a history of salvation—*Heilsgeschichte*—that had its own tradition in German theology and is much more extensive than a messianic theory of history, or even the simple notion of creation, Fall and redemption.<sup>54</sup> Rather, *Heilsgeschichte* is God's history, which touches worldly history only tangentially and at significant redemptive moments, running at cross-purposes to human history. Yet, this divine history is the truth that can be glimpsed only partially, awaiting the eschaton.<sup>55</sup> This is the notion of *Heilsgeschichte* upon which Benjamin draws, giving it his own twist.<sup>56</sup>

Let us track for a moment Benjamin's appropriation of *Heilsgeschichte*. The overwhelming weight is messianic, striving towards the eschaton in the shadow of the Fall. Thus, in the 'Theologico-Political Fragment' he distinguishes between profane/political and religious messi-

<sup>53</sup> Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History*, 99. See also Stéphane Mosès, "Benjamin's Metaphors of Origin: Names, Ideas, Stars," in *Jewish Writers, German Literature: The Uneasy Examples of Nelly Sachs and Walter Benjamin*, ed. Timothy Bahti and Marilyn Sibley Fries (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 139–54; Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (Malden: Polity, 2002), 60–62. I have favoured Hanssen's description over that of Helga Geyer-Ryan who emphasises fragmentation and montage over against continuity and progress. See Helga Geyer-Ryan, "Counterfactual Artefacts: Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History," in *Visions and Blueprints: Avante-Garde Culture and Radical Politics in Early Twentieth-Century Europe*, ed. Edward Timms and Peter Collier (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 66–79.

<sup>54</sup> On the Romanticist influence on Benjamin's thought, see McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, 160–10. Even Howard Caygill's argument—that Benjamin is more interested, following the image of the rainbow in the story of Noah, in the function of the new covenant after the storm of history—reinforces the eschatological tone of Benjamin's work, however much Caygill may lament the deleterious effect of the eschatological for Benjamin. See Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1998), 149–52.

<sup>55</sup> Buck-Morss unwittingly provides an excellent description of such a notion of salvation history in her discussion of the revolutionary break via the dialectical image that moves between empirical history and messianic time (Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 242–43).

<sup>56</sup> Unaccountably, the translation by Osborne elides Benjamin's usage of *Heilsgeschichte*, which Osborne glosses as the "story of the life of Christ" (O: 182; GS1: 358).



anism, the latter standing against the former and yet realising itself through profane history. Further, although Benjamin's thought is distinctly eschatological with its anticipation of redemption and judgement day, it does not bear the strong messianic teleology of Ernst Bloch: Benjamin's messiah is anything but a blunt revolutionary. More enigmatic and elusive, messianic time connects the past with redemption in a weak sense. As he states in the second thesis on history, our view of the past is "indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption" (I: 245; GS1: 693); in other words, past generations, the past itself, have a claim on us for redemption by means of a weak messianic power. I am less interested in arguing over the meaning of "weak messianic power"—dispersed from an individual messiah to a group of people, anti-triumphalist, no longer a theological notion—than in the continued function of redemptive messianic time. For, according to Benjamin, such a notion of messianic time is central to historical materialism and its understanding of history. The messiah appears time and again in the Theses, wresting historical materialism away from the trap of homogeneous, empty time. Not only does this eschatological tone involve the messianic moment of the break from history—here Benjamin piles up a series of images familiar from the *Passagenwerk* such as the flashing image or memory, the presence of the *Jetztzeit*, the leap into the open air of history, revolution, exploding or blasting open the continuum of history and the reckoning of judgement day—but it also invokes the continually repressed awareness of the victims of history, the oppressed classes as the site of historical knowledge, the sheer barbarism and continued disaster of history in which "even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins" (I: 247; GS1: 695). And all of this maintains its connections with biblical thought: the Jews are forbidden to speculate on the future, to imbue it with any magic, anticipating the messiah at any moment through the straight gate.

I have engaged in a close analysis of Benjamin's *Passagenarbeit* not merely for the pure delight of textual commentary, for I seek a deeper pattern, a pattern hinted at by the biblical allusions. For instance, from the July Revolution in Paris there is the "eye-witness" report of firing on the clocks. It is, suggests Benjamin, nothing other than a contemporary mani-



festation of Joshua's prayer to Yahweh to halt the sun so that he might have more time to defeat the Amorites. In the same way that the Hebrew of Joshua 10:12 is in verse, so also is Benjamin's allusion: "Sun, stand still over Gibeon; Moon, stop over Aijalon valley"; "Qui le croirait! Qu'irrités contre l'heure / De nouveaux Josués au pied de chaque tour, / Tiraient sur les cardrans pour arrêter le jour—Who would have believed it! As though irritated by time, we are told that new Joshuas at the foot of every tower fired at the dials in order to stop the day" (I: 253; GS1: 702). And then there is the inversion of Jesus' saying (Matthew 6:33; Luke 12:31) in the epigraph from Hegel: "Seek for food and clothing first, then the Kingdom of God shall be added unto you" (I: 246; GS1: 694).

Along with messianic time and *Heilsgeschichte*, these hints point to an underlying biblical schema of history. Yet, as soon as we have identified that schema a problem emerges, for Benjamin's apparently biblical history is in fact a theological appropriation from a variety of biblical materials. The notion of a salvation history, particularly in the context of German Lutheran scholarship, extrapolates from a text in which various creation stories may be found; notions of an eschaton sit side by side with those that see none; tensions between an individual and collective afterlife and none at all; and patterns of eternal return. In Benjamin's writing, theology dominates the biblical, selecting material from the Bible in order to create a coherent notion of history itself.

However, even on the level of theology, Benjamin's appropriation of *Heilsgeschichte* is anything but conventional. Evil, which emerges in the myth of the Fall, is a Satanic and fatal desire for knowledge and meaning (see O: 230; GS1:403–4). For Benjamin, this not a myth of the origin of sin, or original sin itself and the expulsion from paradise as such, but rather an allegory for the secularisation that he found in the *Trauerspiel*: the secularised spirit of the bourgeois world manifested itself in autonomy, individuality and empty infinitude. This is Benjamin's postlapsarian narrative and he used it as a key for both the *Trauerspiel* book and the *Passagenarbeit*. This "fall into the abyss of subjectivity" meant the rise of knowledge, reflection, contemplation, and abstraction. As we shall see a little later, the prelapsarian world—although precisely



what that means is open to question—was one of the divine name, the logos and of the language of Adamic naming. But the Fall itself also brought on the necessity of eschatology, of the messianic moment that would bring an end to the fallen state of humanity and of history itself. In the fallen state of humanity arose the law, logical proposition, and allegory.

The question remains as to why Benjamin would make such a move in the first place. He is not an apologist for theology, although one could argue that he seeks to bring philosophy and theology closer together once again. Rather, I would suggest that his recourse to a theological schema of history attempts to deal with developments in historiography that could only be seen, from his perspective, as detrimental to the discipline itself: the effects of the natural sciences, natural law, anthropology on what is an undertaking in the humanities. Hence his polemic against what he calls natural or mechanical history. But there is another dimension to all of this, which operates with an opposition between nature and history: the sciences mark a return to the dominance of nature, the real of pagan thought, which stands over against the distinctly historical nature of Jewish and Christian thought. Here he takes up a dominant feature of German biblical scholarship, assuming that the Hebrew Bible marks a break from such pagan patterns of thought, the emergence of history from myth.<sup>57</sup> Finally, through his use of the Hebrew Bible and theological material, Benjamin sought to reconstruct another history of thought itself, an alternative intellectual genealogy that broke with the line that ran from classical Greece, through Rome and early Christianity into medieval and then modern Europe. Although heavily theological, it is a theology that favours the Hebrew Bible, a document that troubles the classicist genealogy and its inherent anti-Semitism.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> See the representative collection edited by Bernhard W. Anderson, *Creation in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1984). Thus, in an earlier draft of the prologue, Benjamin attempts a redemption of a historic, mythic nature by a Jewish history of revelation: “For what returned in the singular, transient historical process was not mythic nature but revelation; and what was repeated as the seal of origin (*Ursprungssiegel*) or authenticity in every singular artwork was not representative of a deductive genre principle but nothing less than the imprint of the divine Origin” (quoted by Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin’s Other History*, 44–45).

<sup>58</sup> Benjamin’s development of a theory of history that involves a theological schematisation of





If in his earlier work Benjamin made use of such material to counter problems that he perceived in German and European thought, in his later material he attempts to rescue Marxism from similar difficulties. Thus, in the most theoretical section of the *Passagenarbeit*, Konvolut N, he attempts to rescue historical materialism from the temptation of thinking about history in terms of progress and decline, “two sides of one and the same thing” (AP: 460; GS5: 575). He is uneasy with the imposition of a vast schema of historical necessity, which vitiates the “perceptibility of history” (AP: 461; GS5: 575). His solution: to bring in his method of montage—producing a ‘heightened graphicness [*Anschaulichkeit*]’ (AP: 461; GS5: 575)—into the Marxist discipline of history. The method is montage, commentary, in order “to break with vulgar historical naturalism” (AP: 461; GS5: 575). In other words, Marxism too falls prey to natural history, specifically in its form as progress and decline, or decay and restoration. For Benjamin, however, a fully developed allegorical method that is itself intimately connected with his philosophy of history becomes the way to deal with such a problem.

## Genesis

In order to understand how this schema of history works in his texts and underlies the *Passagenarbeit*, I shall dwell for a while in both paradise and the eschaton—the two outer limits of his philosophy of history—by means of a discussion of the *Trauerspiel* book. I begin with Genesis, itself a word with myriad overlays, for Benjamin returns time and again to the first chapters of the biblical text, drawing from this extended myth of creation—itsself part of a longer political myth—inter-related theories of history and language.

I take as a particular example what is also a centre pole of the prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book—the question of *Ursprung*, origin. Here I require a somewhat closer exegesis, but the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” itself urges such an exegesis, not only for my argument in this chapter but also because

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biblical material—in other words a historiography drawn from theology—must be distinguished from the history of religion itself. In a number of quotations in Konvolut N of the *Passagenwerk* he cites the comments of Engels and Marx regarding the impossibility of religion, law, politics, science, art and so on having an independent history (see AP: 466–69; GS5: 583–86).



of the oft-noted difficulty of the text itself and its theological and biblical formulations.

The prologue initiates a comprehensive criticism of the prevailing tradition of the philosophy of history in Germany, as well as art history and literary history, particularly those elements working from subject philosophy, and it does so through the terms “origin” (*Ursprung*) and “natural history” (*natürliche Geschichte und Naturgeschichte*).<sup>59</sup> Benjamin had two particular elements in the philosophy of history in mind: historicism, specifically the inductivism of empiricist forms of historicism in the humanities as that was found in art history and literary studies; and the neo-Kantian distinction between the historical and natural sciences as part of a transcendental philosophy. The prologue itself falls into three sections: an answer to epistemology and transcendental philosophy by means of an interpretation of Platonic Forms and of the biblical notion of the divine Word (O: 27–38; GS1: 207–18); a response to art and literary history and the philosophy of history itself in terms of “origin” (O: 38–48; GS1: 218–28); and a focus on the history of the *Trauerspiel* itself, as well as Baroque, whose precursor is the medieval mystery play, while its successor is expressionism (O: 48–56; GS1:228–37).

Although accused at the time of being a neo-Platonic tractate, Benjamin sought in the prologue not merely to pick up a distinctly unfashionable philosophical moment and use it in his critique, but also to effect a transformation of the tradition upon which he drew. Thus, he attempts to mediate and overcome the contradiction between historical contingency or transience and the transcendental realm of Plato’s Ideas or Forms. For the prologue also contains, as I have already suggested, a distinctly theological argument, and this, along with Plato’s appearance enables Benjamin to get his critique under way. Here there is less of an apologetic drive than the use of an alternative and highly complex mode of philosophical language and argument—one that had been endlessly worked over for more than two millennia. So, what does Benjamin do? He reworks Plato’s Forms not in light of contemporary philosophy, but in biblical terms, as the word of God itself, the *eidos* becomes the divine *dabar*.

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<sup>59</sup> See Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin’s Other History*, 25.



Yet, the question remains as to how such a move can in any way deal with the contradiction between historical contingency and permanence, or the tension between subjectivism and transcendentalism in the German debates.<sup>60</sup> For Benjamin, the Platonic Forms constitute the ideal representation of permanence and transcendence: so, by bringing forth the biblical concept of origin as a divine act, he also invokes what he sees as the philosophy of history inherent in the notion of origin. Here transcendence and contingency come together, for the history in question is none other than the historical or sacred time I discussed above, a time with a distinct moment of origin in the act of creation and with an eschatological point in which the history comes to an end and the prelapsarian world is restored or redeemed.

### From Plato to Adam

In order to arrive at the discussion of origin, Benjamin takes a path that runs through Plato and his theory of the Forms to Adam, for in Benjamin's argument origin cannot be thought without the biblical text of Genesis. In tracing the connection between ideas and truth, he suggests that the power of the Ideas is linguistic: "Truth is not an intent which realises itself in empirical reality. The state of being, beyond all phenomenality, to which alone this power belongs, is that of the name" (O: 36; GS1: 216). The words themselves, not burdened with meaning, appear as names, which have their own nobility. In suggesting that the Ideas themselves are "deified words" and "verbal concepts" (quoting Hermann Guntert), it is but a small step to one of Benjamin's favorite biblical texts, the first chapters of Genesis. For is not Adam's role as a linguist that of name-giver (see Genesis 2:20; 3:20)?

However, before naming Adam himself, Benjamin's linguistic theory, already articulated in the youthful "On Language as Such and the Language of Man," appears. Distinguishing between the hidden symbolic and the

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<sup>60</sup> Hanssen (*Walter Benjamin's Other History*, 26) suggests that in arguing for an objective model, obtained via the theological moves he made, Benjamin was able to reject the model of reflective consciousness with an argument for the linguistic nature of truth. This new way of seeing history should be matched by a new model that was neither intuitional (Croce) or operated through *Einfühlung* (Dilthey and R. M. Meyer) but was receptive to what he called the objective interpretation of phenomena.



more obvious profane, he argues that the philosopher's task is to restore "the primacy of the symbolic character of the word" (O: 36; GS1: 216). Already the theological reading of the biblical material begins to appear, although with a distinct philosophical agenda. Since the philosopher cannot speak in the terms of revelation, like the theologian, recourse must be made to remembering. Of course, this echoes Plato's anamnesis, the process of recalling the Forms that had been forgotten at the moment of birth. But for Benjamin, who is now teasing his readers with such Platonic terms, memory is the memory of Adam, through whom the Idea or Form regains "its name-giving rights" (O: 37; GS1: 217).

Ultimately, however, this is not the attitude of Plato, but the attitude of Adam, the father of the human race and the father of philosophy. Adam's action of naming things is so far removed from play or caprice that it actually confirms the state of paradise as a state in which there is as yet no need to struggle with the communicative significance of words. Ideas are displayed, without intention in the act of naming, and they have to be renewed in philosophical contemplation. In this renewal the primordial mode of apprehending words is restored. (O: 37; GS1: 217)

Again, key biblical terms and motifs appear in Benjamin's text—Adam's naming of things (although it is in fact the animals and then the woman he names), his role as father of the human race and the state of paradise. Unless one assumes an uncharacteristically naive understanding of the Genesis myth, Benjamin turns the myth to a curious end. Let us begin with what, according to Benjamin, Adam does not do: his action is neither play nor caprice; the words-as-names do not provide a struggle for communicative significance; intention has no part in Adam's naming. This is hardly a conventional theological interpretation. For the language that is playful, capricious, communicative and intentional—an opposition that appears in the "On Language" essay as well—is the language of the "Fall."

Before I consider this a little closer, the marks of a systematic displacement begin to appear in Benjamin's work with the mythic material of Genesis, specifically with his isolation of Adam. For here we find that when Benjamin writes about the biblical material of Genesis he cannot



avoid replicating the appropriation and displacement of the maternal body that is a fundamental feature of the biblical text itself. In Genesis are there not also Eve and the serpent? God makes his way through into Benjamin's thinking, but not the others. Some would argue that it is in fact the serpent, the only one who speaks truthfully in the story, who is the first philosopher, and that his interlocutor is none other than Eve. But Benjamin displaces Eve in the *Trauerspiel* book so that she appears as the mother of Ideas: "Just as a mother is seen to begin to live in the fullness of her power only when the circle of her children, inspired by the feeling of her proximity, closes around her, so do ideas come to life only when extremes are assembled around them. Ideas—or, to use Goethe's term, ideals—are the Faustian "mothers" (O: 35; GS1: 215).<sup>61</sup> In this respect, the biblical text is peculiarly suited to Benjamin's use of it, for the exclusion of Eve is not so much a misreading of the text as an unconsciously astute one: the ability to give birth, to produce ideas and philosophy, let alone the creation of the world and language, functions as an appropriation of the maternal body by both God and Adam in the creation myth of Genesis. The way in which the woman, Eve, may appear is as a mother who can live only with her (male) children, which is itself a simile for the Ideas. The appropriation strengthens with the Faustian "mothers": drawn from Goethe's *Faust*, it designates the ultimate mysteries for which one strives.

Although Adam appears belatedly in Benjamin's text, he does turn up at a crucial point, for he waits until the closing of the first, distinctly philosophical, section of the prologue. Thereby he becomes less a stop on the wayside than the culmination of the argument over Plato. This means that the section is framed by theological and then biblical arguments: the opening lines set up the theological concerns of this section—questions of doctrine, truth, treatise, and mosaic—only to show that the logic of Plato's Forms leads to the linguistic nature of

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<sup>61</sup> See also AP: 87; GS5: 139. On the allusion to the "Mothers" in *Goethe's Faust*, see Helga Geyer-Ryan, "Effects of Abjection in the Texts of Walter Benjamin," *MLN* 107 (1992): 499–520.



truth, the Ideas as names in the mouth of Adam. By this time a whole theory of the nature of language has entered the text, in the context of which truth takes on a linguistic form and the task of philosophy is the remembrance and renewal of the primordial, that is, Adamic nature of language.

Yet, Benjamin's theory of language appears only in the barest outline here, as bare as his commentary on Genesis, but he alludes to another work that forms the larger backdrop to this one, bustling on as it does to another point. And that other work is the early essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (SW1: 62–74; GS2: 140–57), that has, along with the translation essay, become central for Benjamin criticism. My interest is distinctly biblical, for here he lays out a little more fully a linguistic theory that features Adam, names and the Fall, in short, a sustained exegesis of the first chapters of Genesis.

### Language and Translation

Apart from the moves Benjamin makes in order to get to a linguistic theory of divine naming, what interests me here is what he does with what is nothing other than a political myth. He sets up his theory of language over against a series of others. In the text they are the ideological opponents that enable Benjamin to construct his response, collectively appearing under the empty and invalid "bourgeois conception of language" (SW1: 65; GS2: 144), according to which language functions to communicate factual subject matter: "It holds that the means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being" (SW1: 65; GS2: 144). Further, bourgeois linguistic theory argues that there is an accidental relation between word and object, agreed to by some explicit or implied convention. Language is nothing other than a system of "*mere* signs" (SW1: 69; GS2: 150). Yet, Benjamin does not respond to such a position with another; he prefers to account for it within the alternative theory that he proposes.

At this point we move into biblical interpretation, specifically of Genesis 1–3 and then Genesis 11. Rather than allowing the narrative



sequence in these chapters of Genesis, or even the logic of Benjamin's argument that follows a similar trail, to influence my own reading, I begin with the Fall, a crucial marker that I have already noted in Benjamin's work. Reading the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11) as a consequence of the Fall—although he does note that in the biblical myth it comes somewhat later (SW1: 70; GS2: 151–52)—Benjamin sees its consequences as multiplicity, of human languages and thereby of translations, and of human knowledge. Further, the prelapsarian nature of language, in which the word is the name, gives way to the human word, “in which name no longer lives intact and which has stepped out of name-language.” But what is most interesting is the nature of that new human word: “The word must communicate *something* (other than itself). In that fact lies the true Fall of the spirit of language” (SW1: 71; GS2: 153; italics in text). This is none other than the bourgeois conception of language through which we passed a few lines ago, in which language communicates factual subject matter.

Benjamin moves on to connect this “externally communicating word” with the knowledge of Good and Evil—a promise delivered by the serpent. This knowledge is “prattle” (*Geschwätz*), a term Benjamin borrows from Kierkegaard (where it designates the word itself outside judgement and decision, not merely idle and useless chatter),<sup>62</sup> which in turn leads to the judgement of expulsion from the Garden. But “judgement” also bears with it an eschatological note, which looms over the last paragraphs of the essay. However, I wish to stay for a moment with this word “prattle,” for it recurs at other points. A few lines later he aligns “the abyss of prattle” with “the empty word,” “the word as means,” “the abyss of the mediate-ness of all communication” (SW1: 72; GS2: 154). Not only does he thereby characterise the language and function of law—as the prattle that emerged after eating from the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil, as an irony marking the mythic origins of the law—but this “prattle” makes its way back to that same bourgeois language that has already appeared, especially the

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<sup>62</sup> See Peter Fenves, “The Genesis of Judgment,” in *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions*, ed. David S. Ferris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 91.



word as both empty and as a means of communication. Finally, the decline of language into prattle relates directly to confusion—a consequence of the mediateness and multiplicity of language. The steps here are subtle: it is not that language is confused, but that signs are confused because of the entanglement of things. This is in direct contrast to the contemplation of things that marks the purity of the name. In other words, over against the essential Edenic connection between the name and a thing, the relation between sign and thing goes awry. This is, for Benjamin, a way to account for the linguistic assumption that names have an entirely arbitrary relation to things—a linguistic assumption he once again describes as “bourgeois.” While such a criticism has only hints of the Marxist analyses that would follow, in his essay on Karl Kraus (SW2: 433–58; GS2: 334–67), he explicitly argues that capitalism is the postlapsarian world in which Kraus resists the base “prattle” (*Geschwätz*) of journalism, relevance, and inauthentic language; Kraus is one who holds onto to the ideal language of creation, a latter day Adam for whom the language of naming is still an option in the time between creation and the eschaton: “If he ever turns his back on creation, if he breaks off in lamentation, it is only to file a complaint at the Last Judgement” (SW2: 443; GS2: 349).<sup>63</sup>

By now the mist of my argument should be clearing, but there is one further step, namely a summary of the three consequences of the Fall.

For the essential composition of language, the Fall has a threefold significance (in addition to its other meanings). In stepping outside the purer language of name, man makes language a means (that is, a knowledge inappropriate to him), and therefore also, in one part at any rate, a *mere* sign; and this later results in the plurality of languages. The second meaning is that from the Fall, in exchange for the immediacy of name that was damaged by it, a new immediacy arises: the magic of judgement, which no longer rests blissfully in itself. The third meaning that can perhaps be tentatively ventured is that of

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<sup>63</sup> Kraus’s “basic polemical procedure” (SW2: 453; GS2: 362), quotation, something Benjamin himself would develop much further, purifies and emancipates language, brings together origin and destruction as “mottoes in the book of Creation” (SW2: 454; GS2: 363).





the origin of abstraction, too, as a faculty of the spirit of language, is to be sought in the Fall. For good and evil, being unnameable and nameless, stand outside the language of names, which man leaves behind precisely in the abyss opened by this question (SW1: 71–72; GS2: 153–54).

In the Fall, then, the name becomes a mere sign, language a means, judgement an external magic, and abstraction itself emerges—marked by “good” and “evil.” Each of these features is part of the bourgeois linguistic theory that Benjamin attacks in this text. But what he attempts here is a way of dealing with the emergence of such a theory in the first place and his choice, strangely enough, is the biblical myth of the Fall.

What is this prelapsarian theory of language that is so important for Benjamin, underlying as it does the prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book, as also the translation essay? Benjamin argues that in opposition to the bourgeois theory of language such a pure language “knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication. It means: *in the name, the mental being of man communicates itself to God*” (SW1: 65; GS2: 144; italics in text). By this time, however, Benjamin has moved from the distinction between a mental entity and a linguistic entity in language, through the argument that the mental being communicates itself *in* and not *through* language (the latter being the bourgeois theory), the communication of linguistic being through language (that is, the capacity for communication is language itself), to the conclusion that naming is the linguistic being of “man.” The logic here is that if the communication of mental being takes place *in* language, then that communication takes place through naming. Yet that communication itself is directed not to other people—language thereby becomes a means of communication—but to God. Mental and linguistic being come together in the name, which is “the innermost nature of language itself” (SW1: 65; GS2: 144). This is nothing other than an extraordinary theory for the auto-generational purity of language itself: the fertility of language can only be retained when man and God communicate with each other in language. But it is, as Geulen points out,<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Eva Geulen, “Towards a Genealogy of Gender in Walter Benjamin’s Writing,” *The German Quarterly* 69 (1996): 171.



a fertility that can only be realised in the birth that is marked by the Fall, in which language leaves the realm of the name and is born into the world of production and instrumentalism.

Over against the multiplicity of languages that result from the Fall, specifically through the Babel story of Genesis 11, pure language is unitary, primordial and harmonious. Elsewhere, in the brief essay “Language and Logic” Benjamin writes: “If we interpret this in the spirit of the mystics as pointing to a revealed unity of a linguistic kind, it will mean not just that this primordial language is the one originally spoken, but that the harmony originally created by those spoken languages was of incomparably greater power than any of the individual languages would possibly possess” (SW1: 273; GS6: 24–25). This argument becomes a crucial dimension of his famous translation essay, to which I turn below.

Let us tarry with the “On Language” essay a little longer. Again, the mythic structure of Genesis permeates Benjamin’s exegesis, for here he has isolated Adam and God in pure communication. In other words, the focus on the productive word that then returns to God produces a father-son succession that is entirely self-sufficient, entirely excluding women from the narrative. This intensifies with the introduction of the Bible into the discussion. Already appearing in parentheses—“In terming man the speaker (which, however, according to the Bible, for example, clearly means the name giver: ‘As man should name all kinds of living creatures, so should they be *called*’), many languages imply this metaphysical truth” (SW1: 65; GS2: 145)—the Genesis text comes into its own as a comprehensive argument for the nature of language as naming, of man as name-giver, which is ultimately modelled on God as name-giver. Let me summarise Benjamin’s points before considering his use of the biblical text.

Both accounts of creation (Gen 1:1–2:3 and Gen 2:3–25) emphasise, according to Benjamin, a special relation between language and man through the act of creation. In the second account, man appears as a being created from earth and endowed with the gift of language, whereas in the first it is



the creative act of God that establishes a deep relation between “Let there be. . .,” “he made” and “he named.” For Benjamin, this process produces the theological point that only with God are word and name one: “God made things knowable in their names. Man, however, names them according to knowledge” (SW1: 68; GS2: 148). However, a third feature of Genesis appears with the creation of human beings in Genesis 1:26–31. In the shift of narrative order, the threefold “he created. . .” in Genesis 1:27 signals for Benjamin that language itself is set free in “man.” To be made in God’s image means to know in the same language as God. After linking the earlier comments in relation to mental and linguistic being, Benjamin moves onto a fourth point: the connection between human and divine languages is strongest with the name, firstly of animal names and then of human beings, specifically the woman who is created. The difference here is the proper name (Adam names her “woman” and then “Eve”): “The proper name is the communion of man with the *creative* word of God (Not the only one, however; man knows a further linguistic communion with God)” (SW1: 69; GS2: 150). For this reason is there an intrinsic relation between words and things.

Before asking what the implications of Benjamin’s biblical linguistics might be, I am intrigued by his use of the Bible itself. To begin with, Benjamin’s reading of Genesis 1 is problematic, showing all the signs of a systematising that is characteristic of theological exegesis. Although he promised on a number of occasions to Scholem that he would learn Hebrew, the lack of Hebrew shows forth here. He would like to find a threefold rhythm of “Let there be,” “he made (created)”<sup>65</sup> and “he named”—creation and naming are inextricably entwined—but the text refuses to support his argument, for it is a little more irregular than this. Out of the six days of creation, the pattern appears only in Genesis 1: 6–8 (the creation of the firmament named “heaven” on the second day). Benjamin does admit that in Genesis 1:3 and 1:11 only “let there be” appears, but even this point misses something, for in 1:11 it is “Let the earth make grass sprout.” In the end, he settles for the relation

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<sup>65</sup> Benjamin notes here the variation between “he created” (*br’* 1:1, 21, 27—three times) and “he made” (*sh* 1:7, 16, 25).



between “let there be” and “he named,” but this appears only in Genesis 1:3. Throughout Genesis 1 the pattern varies: let there be—God called (*qr*; Gen 1:3–5); let there be—God made—and it was so—God called (Gen 1:6–8); let the waters be gathered—and it was so—God called (Gen 1:9–10); let the earth make sprout—and it was so—the earth brought forth (Gen 1:11–13); let there be—and it was so—God made (Gen 1:14–19); let the sea swarm with—God created—God blessed them (Gen 1:20–23); let the earth bring forth—and it was so—God created (Gen 1:24–25); let us make—God created, he created, he created—God blessed them—and it was so (Gen 1:26–31). The weight of Benjamin’s argument falls on the first three days of creation, when God does name what he creates. After this moment, the naming ceases when the creative power is passed on to various elements of creation itself—the earth that sprouts vegetation (Gen 1:11), the waters that swarm (1:20), and the earth, again, that brings forth living creatures (1:24).<sup>66</sup> It is not that, as Benjamin argues, “God rested when he had left his creative power to itself in man” (SW1: 68), for this creative power has already been divested in the earth and the waters, which is the moment when the naming ceases, apart from the textual act of naming.

Another signal of Benjamin’s increasingly troubled reading is the conjunction of the Tower of Babel story (Gen 11:1–9) with the first three chapters of Genesis, since he neglects the intervening chapters, particularly the profound tension between Genesis 11 and its preceding chapter. In the full-scale genealogy of Genesis 10, we find a three-fold variation that distinguishes according to land, language, family and people: “in their lands, each with his own language, by their families, in their peoples” (Gen 10:5), “by their families, by their languages, in their lands, in their peoples” (Gen 10:20), “by their families, by their languages, in their lands, by their peoples” (Gen 10:31; translations mine). The first verse of Genesis 11—“Now the whole land had one language and few words” —sets up a tension with Genesis 10, not merely in narrative

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<sup>66</sup> Note here however that only in 1:12 does the earth itself take part. After the other two jussives relating to waters and earth (Gen 1:20 and 24), the text reverts to “God created/made” (1:21, 25).



sequence but for Benjamin's argument. In other words, he must excise Genesis 4–10 in order to bring Genesis 11 into contact with Genesis 1–3—a characteristic move of theologically motivated exegesis that selects certain texts and neglects others.

Benjamin's troubles continue. "Man" is indeed endowed with language and it is he who speaks with God (Gen 2:16, 9–19), but they are not the only ones, for the woman and the serpent converse in Genesis 3:1–5. The man is the one who names, first the animals (Gen 2:19–20) and then the "woman" (Gen 2:23) who is later "Eve" (Gen 3:20). Fascinated with the act of naming, Benjamin focuses on Adam, neglecting Eve and the Serpent, so much so that he slips up: "Of all beings, man is the only one who names his own kind, as he is the only one whom God did not name" (SW1: 69; GS2: 149). But, as I pointed out above, God names only day, night, heaven, earth and seas: the rest he does not name—vegetation, heavenly bodies, animals, sea creatures, and woman. In the Genesis 2 creation story this is reserved for the "man," or at least he names the cattle, birds and beasts (Gen 2:20), until, last in line, he names woman. In fact, the purpose of Adam's naming in Genesis 2 seems to be to find a "helper" and when she appears a name is forthcoming—"woman" (Gen 2:22–23). Benjamin replicates the misogynist current of the whole story quite well.

If his exegetical skills are not quite what they should be, Benjamin attempts to forestall possible objections at the beginning of his reading of Genesis 1–3:

If in what follows the nature of biblical language is considered on the basis of the first chapter of Genesis, the object is neither biblical interpretation nor subjection of the Bible to objective consideration as revealed truth (*offenbarte Wahrheit*), but the discovery of what emerges of itself from the biblical text with regard to the nature of language; and the Bible is only *initially* indispensable for this purpose, because the present argument broadly follows it in presupposing language as an ultimate reality, perceptible only in its manifestation, inexplicable and mystical. The Bible, in regarding itself as revelation, must necessarily evolve the fundamental linguistic facts (SW1: 67; GS2: 147).



Benjamin's reading is of course both theological and selective, interested as he is in the metaphysics of language,<sup>67</sup> particularly as an ultimate reality that connects God and man. However, a curious twist takes place in this passage from Benjamin. Although it begins with an effort to follow the Bible on the question of language, to mine it for linguistic insights, by the end a small inversion takes place. The Bible neither speaks *about* language, nor can one *follow* the Bible in order to construct a linguistic theory: the Bible itself is a language, the language of revelation. But note what happens: at the moment when Benjamin appears to dispense with the Bible—it is only “initially indispensable”—he turns again to claim its continuing relevance: “The Bible, in regarding itself as revelation (*Offenbarung*), must necessarily evolve the fundamental linguistic facts” (SW1: 67; GS2: 147). In other words, as a language, indeed the ultimate language, the Bible provides Benjamin with the linguistic—and ultimately the philosophical and literary—theory that he needs in order to develop a critique of contemporary schools of thought.

If most of the “On Language” essay is concerned with the creation of language, his theory has a distinctly eschatological note as well—language inevitably leads to history—for in the closing lines of the essay, Benjamin picks up the notion of the muteness of nature that, were it able to speak, it would lament and cry out for redemption. The prelapsarian language is but an image of language restored at the end of history, for the secret of redemption is encoded in language: “All higher language is a translation of lower ones, until in ultimate clarity the word of God unfolds, which is the unity of this movement made up of language” (SW1: 74; GS2: 157).

The mention of translation with an eschatological dimension directs us to the other end of Benjamin's philosophy of history, which comes out clearly in the essay that is always read alongside the “On Language” essay, namely “The Task of the Translator” (SW1: 253–63; GS4: 9–21). In this later essay (written in 1921, whereas the “On Language” essay was written in 1916), some of the same concerns appear, such as the polemic against language as a means of communication and

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<sup>67</sup> As Hent de Vries points out in “Anti-Babel: The ‘Mystical Postulate’ in Benjamin, De Certeau and Derrida,” *MLN* 107 (1992): 441–77.



the notion of pure language, which is now developed on the basis of the “On Language” essay.<sup>68</sup>

Although Benjamin begins with the Fall in the translation essay and looks for the eschatological restoration of Adamic language, I want to begin in reverse, with the last sentence: “The interlinear version of the Scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation” (SW1: 263; GS4: 21). In this light, all of the preceding discussion of translatability, the dialectical relation between literalness and free translation, the question of language(s), the relation between original and translation and the eschatological view of the task of translation take on a distinctly biblical sense. However, this evocation of the interlinear Bible is the point where critics cease to follow Benjamin. As far as translation itself is concerned, neither literal nor liberal translation techniques are anywhere near adequate as Benjamin seeks to supersede them both in a dialectical *Aufhebung*. His proposal follows Pannwitz: a translation that hugs the shoreline of the original, absorbing its syntax so as to show the original. Yet this produces a new language and a new work in which the original may live again. So far many critics and translators have been willing to go—for instance, Fredric Jameson in his Adorno book,<sup>69</sup> or Samuel Weber’s “Introduction” to the translation of Adorno’s *Prisms*<sup>70</sup>—but they fall away from the model that inspires Benjamin’s own theory of translation, the interlinear Bible. I remember first reading these lines of Benjamin with perplexity and embarrassment, for my Hebrew students used to use interlinear translations in the early stages of translation work, or perhaps if they ran short of time, were lazy or found Hebrew a perpetual battle. But the interlinear Bible, as old as translation work on the Bible itself, dating

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<sup>68</sup> Even though the direction of my argument is quite different, I still find Paul de Man’s reading (“Conclusions”) the most engaging and intriguing, precisely because of its careful misreading.

<sup>69</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), ix.

<sup>70</sup> Samuel M Weber, “Introduction: Translating the Untranslatable,” in *Prisms*, by Theodor W. Adorno (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1981), 11–15.



back at least to Origen's *Hexapla*, offers us the model of a translation in whose contours the original shows through, for the Hebrew unavoidably and radically shapes the language(s) that run(s) between the lines of Hebrew text. It is in the end a poor, or perhaps modest, translator who has recourse to an interlinear Bible.

Nonetheless, for Benjamin bad translators are the opposite, those who seek to communicate the meaning of the original in free or liberal translation, what has become known at least in biblical translation as “dynamic equivalence.” Even here Benjamin is not happy with the simple opposition between literal and liberal translation, arguing that only the translation that is as literal as possible enables freedom. For in the interlinear translation one word matches another, producing sentences that mirror the syntax of the ‘original’. The result is an almost unreadable translation, which therefore qualifies as free, language released—dialectically—from the bounds of its own syntax in subservience to the original. Yet what he means in this case is not the freedom of meaning, but the freedom to glimpse pure language: “Rather, freedom proves its worth in the interest of the pure language by its effect on its own language. It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work” (SW1: 261; GS4: 19).

But how might this pure language be understood? Both transcendently and historically, it seems to me. Rather than write of the pure language of naming that one finds in Genesis, he explores this language with respect both to the relationship between an original and its translation, and the relation between languages as such. As for the first, a range of mythical, sexualised and birthing metaphors appear that attempt to circumvent the notion of an original and its copy: the afterlife of a text, the creation of a new language, the translatability (fertility?) of the original, the play between fidelity and license—all of which are indebted to mythical biblical motifs. Yet what brings this home is that the task of translation enables pure language to emerge: the “problem of ripening the seed of pure language in a translation” (SW1: 259; GS4: 17). Fraught with difficulty, insoluble, threatening the very





possibility of translation, only the interlinear translation begins to do so when it abandons the communication of meaning.

However, when it appears that translation becomes impossible (Paul de Man's argument), Benjamin invokes at the last moment the Bible, which is "unconditionally translatable" (SW1: 262; GS4: 21). This point follows the penultimate example of the extraordinary literalness of Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles, in which meaning "threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language" (SW1: 262; GS4: 21). By contrast, the Bible is the point where meaning ceases to determine language, where, in a deeply theological assessment of the nature of the Bible, "the literal quality of the text takes part directly . . . in true language, in the Truth, or in doctrine" (SW1:262; GS4: 21). The argument is the same as that in the "On Language" essay, where pure language is that in which the communication of mental being takes place through naming. However, the purpose of the translation of the unconditionally translatable text is not the text, not meaning, but language and languages as such.

Note that Benjamin does not write that the Bible itself, specifically Hebrew, is the pure language per se, but rather that it provides the model for such a relationship. For pure language is beyond both original and translation, as he writes a little earlier: "A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully" (SW1: 260; GS4: 18). Again, Benjamin's own language is biblical and mythological, but my point here is that the relationship between languages, shown most clearly in translation, also gives a glimpse of pure language, for a true translation makes "both the original and the translation recognisable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel" (SW1: 260; GS4: 18).

Not only does he replicate the autogenerational argument of the "On Language" essay, in which God and man exist in a pure linguistic circle of creation and naming, but he also makes translation itself an eschatological device: "If, however, these languages continue to grow in this way until the messianic end of their history, it is translation that catches fire from the eternal life of the works and the perpetually renewed life of language; for it



is translation that keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test: How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation? How close can it be brought by the knowledge of this remoteness?" (SW1: 257; GS4: 14). This is where a sacred history underlies the translation essay: the "hallowed growth of languages" (SW1: 257; GS4: 14) contained in profane translations would last until the messianic end, until revelation. Until that moment translations measure the time until this end. But this means that pure language is not just a prelapsarian form of language, but ultimately geared towards the messianic future.<sup>71</sup>

It is not for nothing that the two essays are so closely linked, assuming each other—much like God and man in the act of naming—for creation and the eschaton, the outer limits of this theory of history, share the same mythical patterns. Is not the notion of pure language, at the beginning and end of history, a highly mythical motif, one indebted to the very myths of the biblical material concerning creation and eschaton and unavoidably constructed out of the language of sex, birth and succession? I cannot help but note that the mythical nature of this material is also overflowing with images of sex and birth at the same time that the fleeting presence of women in the text is systematically excised. I will return to this problem below.

How does all of this relate to the *Passagenarbeit*? I would suggest it provides a deeper justification for the massive effort at quotation in French and German, a transposed effort at translation. More importantly, it becomes an attempt to reach and touch a pure, utopian language in the vast project of an Adamic naming of Paris. Except that the eschatological moment of the *Passagenarbeit* now becomes one of the image, rather than the word.

### *Ursprung*

I have been tracing in some detail the way Benjamin's theories of

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<sup>71</sup> In the "Announcement of the Journal *Angelus Novus*" Benjamin makes a similar comment: "In the present instance, however, the translations of the journal wish to be understood not just as providing models to be emulated, as was the case in earlier times, but also as the strict and irreplaceable school of language-in-the-making" (SW1: 294; GS2: 243).



history, language and translation rely upon biblical myth, the way his reading of the Bible is systematising and theological, and I have hinted at the way the language of sex, birth and the maternal body invariably appears in his writing on the myth of creation and the eschaton. For the last part I return to the beginning, so to speak, to the prologue of the *Trauerspiel* book yet again and the question of origin, *Ursprung*. Readings of Benjamin's use of the term tend to locate it in the matrix of German philosophy and the Platonic tradition, but what is missing here is a theological appreciation of the term.<sup>72</sup> With the introduction of "origin" into the discussion, Benjamin focuses yet again on the first chapters of Genesis—a factor simply not noticed by critics. The question of origin ceases to be a profane, human activity, but must now be recast as divine origin. As I have already suggested, it is more than a coincidence that the discussion of origin should not only utilise the biblical material in Genesis, but also that Benjamin's language is saturated with images of birth and sex.

In the second section of the prologue, Benjamin turns to the philosophy of art and literature, but what interests me is the way this discussion draws to a close with the Genesis myth. His recourse to the concept of origin is the culmination of an effort to deal with the historical dimension of art. In itself, this was a critique operating at a number of levels: against inductive and empiricist literary history, against the deductive and classificatory principle of genre studies, and against the alternative notion of a "genetic and concrete classification," which, according to Croce's *Grundriss der Ästhetik*,<sup>73</sup> is not classification at all but History. Only with

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<sup>72</sup> Only Ebach notes in passing that Benjamin's interest in *Ursprung* relates to Genesis 1–11 (Jürgen Ebach, "Der Blick des Engels. Für eine 'benjaminische' Lectüre der hebräischen Bibel," in *Walter Benjamin: Profane Erleuchtung und rettende Kritik*, ed. Norbert W. Bolz and Richard Faber (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1982), 63). Ebach's essay, while a welcome consideration of Benjamin's treatment of the Hebrew Bible, goes too far in suggesting the influence of the book of Job, and he understands biblical criticism purely in terms of a now outmoded and very German historical-critical method.

<sup>73</sup> Benjamin (O: 45; GS1: 226) cites Croce, *Grundriss der Ästhetik: Vier Vorlesungen*. (Autorisierte deutsche Ausg. von Theodor Poppe, Leipzig: Wissen und Forschen, 1913), 43. Translated as *The Essence of the Aesthetic*, by Douglas Ainslie (London, 1921), 53–54.



“origin” can Croce’s ‘genetic classification’ be reconciled with an idealist theory of art forms. Now we encounter the famous passage:

Origin (*Ursprung*), although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis (*Entstehung*). The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance (*dem Werden und Vergehen Entspringendes*). Origin is an eddy (*Strudel*) in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and reestablishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete. There takes place in every original phenomenon a determination of the form in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world, until it is revealed fulfilled, in the totality of its history (O: 45–46; GS1: 30).

The steps by which Benjamin disconnects and reconnects the concept of origin here are quite bewildering. At first, he breaks the link between *Ursprung* and *Entstehung*, origin and genesis, all the while keeping origin as an historical category. Already at this point the biblical reference is obvious: does he want to disavow genesis, or does he argue for the prior status of origin? It appears to be the latter, for origin is part of the “process of becoming and disappearance” rather than coming into being—genesis. Is becoming-and-disappearance the historical process, although it evokes not so much life and death, beginning and end, as the perpetual process itself? Benjamin now turns to specify more closely what “emerges”: “an eddy (or maelstrom)<sup>74</sup> in the stream of becoming.” But he can only do so through the image of a liquid current, a river perhaps with its currents and rapids. Genesis now returns, although in a secondary capacity, its “material” swallowed by the stream of becoming in which origin is an eddy.

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<sup>74</sup> Weber (“Genealogy of Modernity,” 468) translates *Strudel* as “maelstrom” rather than “eddy.”



Apart from the inability of commentators to notice that this is a theological commentary on the creation myth of Genesis, the tendency of Benjamin to revert to sexual terminology and associations also passes by without notice,<sup>75</sup> although it is precisely the point where Christian theology and biblical exegesis merge, both obsessed with the questions of origin and eschaton. Terms and images, such as coming “into being,” “emergence,” the process of becoming and disappearance, nakedness, rhythm, duality, but above all the liquid metaphor—the wetness, fluids and ecstasy of sex, orgasm and birth—with its currents, eddies and swallowing are all charged with a sexual dimension, “saturated,” as are all his texts according to Eva Geulen, “with the imagery of gendered eroticism.”<sup>76</sup> Yet it is not merely sexual, for such a reading misses the appropriation of maternal birthing for the notion of origin, as well as genesis and creation. By now it should be obvious that Benjamin is immersed in the whole question of myths of biblical creation, to which this text becomes yet another contribution. Birth, creation, genesis and so on are of course the acts of women, which Benjamin, not unexpectedly, both fails to note and exacerbates in his commentary.

Elsewhere he is more explicit, as in the essay “The Life of Students”—one among a range of many early texts in which sexual and intellectual activity interact with each other<sup>77</sup>—where he argues for the recovery of the eros of creativity in male students. In a utopian manifesto that comes out of his involvement with the youth movement, he distinguishes between the different forms of creativity by men and women and how they might work together in a new community. He wants to transform the creativity of men—currently caught in the opposition between

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<sup>75</sup> So, for instance in Weber's (“Genealogy of Modernity”) detailed exegesis that itself smacks of biblical interpretation, or in Pizer's search for the origin of Benjamin's discussion of origin in Goethe (“Goethe's ‘Urphänomenon’ and Benjamin's ‘Ursprung’: A Reconsideration,” *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies* 25 (1989): 205–22). See also McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, 152–53.

<sup>76</sup> Geulen, “Towards a Genealogy of Gender,” 169.

<sup>77</sup> See Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space: Re-Reading Walter Benjamin* (London: Routledge, 1996), 86–87.



the autonomy of creative spirit and nature (prostitution)—to include women, “who are not productive in the masculine sense” (SW1: 44; GS2: 84), into a community of creative persons based on love, a revolution of the sexes, which is as he argues elsewhere, based on Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. But he remains trapped in a distinction between creativity and procreation, the one a distinct act and the other repetitive: “How could they [men] do justice to the image of mankind and at the same time share a community with women and children, whose productivity is of a different kind” (SW1: 44; GS2: 84). Careful as he is to avoid ranking such creativity or productivity, and however much this may be read in terms of enabling sexual difference to be a key to utopian society, it still assumes that the creativity of men is somehow *sui generis*, independent of women. The appropriation remains linguistic: “Through understanding, everyone will succeed in liberating the future from its deformed existence in the womb of the present” (SW1: 46; GS2: 87). In short, as Geulen notes, the most prominent erotic and gendered dimension of Benjamin’s work is sexual reproduction, including pregnancy, procreation, conception, birth, and childhood.<sup>78</sup>

The continued and vigorous feminist responses to Benjamin’s work often tend to criticise his various representations of women, their uses in the structures of his thought and so on, or Benjamin’s work is taken up as an insightful and political criticism of the uses of women within capitalism, art, philosophy, and so on,<sup>79</sup> a stimulus to contemporary feminism and politics.<sup>80</sup> In fact, what I have noted in Benjamin’s work in

<sup>78</sup> Geulen, “Towards a Genealogy of Gender,” 162, although she goes on to argue that the most eroticised figure is the child.

<sup>79</sup> Rey Chow, “Walter Benjamin’s Love Affair with Death,” *New German Critique* 48 (1989): 63–86; Margaret Mahony Stoljar, “Sirens of Gaslight and Odalisques of the Oil Lamp: The Language of Desire in the Arcades Project,” in *With the Sharpened Axe of Reason’: Approaches to Walter Benjamin*, ed. Gerhard Fischer (Oxford: Berg, 1996), 99–112; Janet Wolff, “The Invisible Flaneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity,” in *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1989), 141–56.

<sup>80</sup> So Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, 85–98; Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overcoming Conformity*, 106–14; Angelika Rauch, “The Trauerspiel of the Prostituted Body, or Woman as Allegory of Modernity,” *Cultural Critique* (1988): 77–88.



terms of creation and the maternal body is not new in itself, especially the appropriation of maternal creation for notions of male artistic creativity.<sup>81</sup> However, I want to pick up two elements from Eva Geulen's excellent essay on gender in Benjamin's writings:<sup>82</sup> the ambiguity of the question of gender in his work and the need to reconsider Benjamin's primary philosophical concerns in terms of gender—language, history, experience, and materiality. It is less a question of ambiguity, it seems to me, than Benjamin's curious knack of offering a criticism that simultaneously traps him within that which he criticises. Thus, his criticism concerning the appropriation of women is analogous to his criticism of myth: he sees the problems and yet cannot move beyond them no matter how hard he tries. For instance, even though he registers the profound reification and commodification of women in terms of the prostitute, woman-as-things that shows up the reality of "love" in capitalism, he is all the same lured by the prostitute, especially in his early work where she becomes a figure for knowledge itself. Or, his use of the traditional terminology of birth and creation in entirely foreign, anti-aesthetic, contexts, especially allegory and technology, must be seen alongside his usage of such terminology in the most conventional of places, the imagination of a new future beyond the present.<sup>83</sup>

It seems to me that such ambivalence is characteristic of Benjamin's treatment of myth as well: the resolute opponent of myth finds that he must use myth itself—particularly the stories of creation and apocalypse

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<sup>81</sup> Thus, for Weigel, Benjamin shows how "the concept of intellectual creation replaces that of natural creation, a process in which the female element necessary to it is consumed and exhausted, while the creator is newly born at the very same moment as the work is completed: as the first-born male of the work that he once conceived" (Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, 70). Yet, Weigel reads Benjamin as too much of proto-feminist critic. For a more balanced critique in terms of Kristeva's notion of "abjection" (mothers without children), see Geyer-Ryan, "Effects of Abjection."

<sup>82</sup> Geulen, "Towards a Genealogy of Gender."

<sup>83</sup> In a dialectical move, Geulen ("Towards a Genealogy of Gender," 166) goes on to argue that it is precisely ambivalence itself, a characteristic feature of Benjamin's work, that is the mark of sexuality and erotic desire. Her effort to bring in the hermaphrodite in order to deal with such ambivalence sidesteps the question of sexual difference in Benjamin's writings.



from the Bible—in order to attempt to go beyond myth. But there is a closer connection between the question of gender and myth in Benjamin's work. In order to pursue this connection, I pick up Geulen's suggestion that we need to reconsider Benjamin's major interests in terms of gender. Specifically, my argument is that the continual appropriation of the maternal body, of conception, pregnancy, and birth, is a signal of another problem in Benjamin's writing, namely the perpetuation of biblical myth itself. In fact, I would suggest that the mechanism by which he appropriates such images of procreation is to trace their removal from women under capitalism, who now become sterile prostitutes, corpses, mannequins, and frivolous foci of fashion (AP: 79–81; GS5: 130–32). Any creative process rests entirely with the break from capitalism. And the signal of this link comes in the theses "On the Philosophy of History" where the prostitute threatens the virility of the revolution; "The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called 'Once upon a time' in historicism's bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history" (I: 254; GS1: 702). Resisting the emptying of his semen into the body of the whore where it remains unproductive, he holds it back in order to blow into history itself. The anti-maternal figure of the prostitute allows Benjamin to appropriate the maternal function for his own work.

To return to the passage on origin I quoted above: the more specifically theological structure of this passage appears clearly towards its close. The "dual insight" required to perceive origin must be aware of a simultaneous process of reestablishment and incompleteness, of redemption and the imperfection of that redemption. But this is nothing other than the proleptic view of history characteristic of certain forms of Christian theology: the process of restoration or redemption has already begun but it is as yet incomplete, awaiting the final moment. The model here is Christ, for, through his birth, redemption began its precarious but certain path, engulfing the earlier patterns of redemption in Jewish thought. Yet, full redemption awaits his final return, his second coming at the eschaton, the close of the age. One may construct a similar pattern in strands of the Hebrew Bible, where the revelation of the Torah to Moses on Sinai begins





a process of redemption that will be fulfilled only with the messiah; Christianity then appropriates this for itself. Benjamin thus works with a proleptic eschatology characteristic of certain parts of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The eschaton is the end of history, the moment not only of redemption, but also of the full revelation of that which has been seen dimly and poorly until that moment.

Once again we find a peculiar sacred history, or more specifically biblical construction of history, operating in Benjamin's work. This is, in the context of the philosophy of history and art history, an extraordinary move to make, except that Benjamin's usage is always turned in a curious direction. So also with this origin passage, for he seems to remove the notion of origin from its immediate sense of genesis or beginning in order to let it float free in the longer expanse of the history with which he works. The image becomes one of a whole series of "origins"—he is after all speaking about the work of art—that emerge in history, all of which then become part of the proleptic redemption that his philosophy of history postulates.

Thoroughly immersed in what can only be termed a history of salvation, *Heilsgeschichte*, dependent as it is on a theological reading of biblical texts—a reading that exacerbates the mythical nature of these texts—I want to return at last to the *Passagenarbeit*. Here Benjamin seeks, as I have suggested, a way of conceiving the end of capitalism, itself a hellish myth, in terms similar to his earlier material on history, translation, language, that is, in terms of the myths of creation and eschaton. Not only does he pursue the question of a break out of capitalism, but he is also concerned, in the *Passagenarbeit*, with origin:

In studying Simmel's presentation of Goethe's concept of truth, I came to see very clearly that my concept of origin in the *Trauerspiel* book is a rigorous and decisive transposition of this basic Goethean concept from the domain of nature to that of history. Origin—it is, in effect, the concept of Ur-phenomenon extracted from the pagan context of nature and brought into the Jewish contexts of history. Now, in my work on the arcades I am equally concerned with fathoming an origin. To be specific, I pursue the origin of



the forms and mutations of the Paris arcades from their beginning to their decline, and I locate this origin in the economic facts. Seen from the standpoint of causality, however (and that means considered as causes), these facts would not be primal phenomena; they become such insofar as in their own individual development—“unfolding” might be a better term—they give rise to the whole series of the arcade’s concrete historical forms, just as the leaf unfolds from itself all the riches of the empirical world of plants (AP: 462; GS5: 577).

Apart from the conventional distinction that occurs here between pagan myth (nature) and Jewish history, the transposition of both origin and the mythic explosion of the eschaton from his earlier work to the *Passagenarbeit*, although now with a materialist register, seems complete.

## The Problem of Myth

I have argued that Benjamin’s attempt to find a novel way to deal with the Marxist problem of a future beyond capitalism is a mythic solution to the myth generated by capitalism. In other words, his effort to avoid mythic thinking fails.<sup>84</sup> Although the main element of my argument hinges on the theological reading of specific texts of the Bible, a reading that enhances their inherent mythology, there are other signals in his work of such a tendency—his interest in the utopian socialism of Saint-Simon and Fourier, as well as the figure of the messiah.

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<sup>84</sup> Contra Graeme Gilloch (Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (London: Polity, 1997), 9–13, 174–77), who argues that in a fourth sense of myth—its use as trope or metaphor—Benjamin wants dialectically to preserve that which is good about myth, namely that contained in mimesis, play, intoxication and intuition. The other three senses—error, creaturely compulsion and the inversion of submission to nature in modernity—must be read alongside Winfried Menninghaus’s detailed essay that traces myth in relation to space, language, beauty and time (Winfried Menninghaus, “Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Myth,” in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1991), 292–325). Via Benjamin’s connection between dream and myth, Menninghaus argues that in the final stage of his thought the positive and negative dimensions of myth achieve equilibrium so that the blasting out of myth becomes a dialectic escape and rescue of myth. I am less optimistic about this possibility, for although I agree with Menninghaus that myth continues in Benjamin’s thought, it appears despite his best efforts to overcome it.



Not only do Saint-Simon and Fourier, part of the mix in which communism arose, demonstrate most clearly the responses to technological and economic change in terms of mythology, but their distinct forms of theoretical and practiced socialism—the “family” and the “phylanstery”—to which Marx and Engels responded and by which they were influenced (especially Engels), provide a mythic solution. In the case of Saint-Simon, whose proposals relied upon capitalist technological innovation and the value of consumer goods alongside state intervention and the planned economy (state capitalism), socialism takes not merely a theological (or early Christian) form, but one that is also distinctly mythical. Comparing themselves both to the children of Israel in the wilderness and the early church, holding to notions of priestly marriage, the feminine and masculine principles in God, that physics should be the true religion, seeing history in terms of religious and irreligious factors, and waiting for a female messiah, *La Mère*, who would appear in Constantinople and subsequently marry their own high priest, *Le Père*, the Saint-Simonians were “a salvation army in the midst of the bourgeoisie” (AP: 594; GS5: 734).

Content, as usual, to collect quotations interspersed with commentary, the selection of the material itself, close by the *Konvoluts* on conspiracy (V) and Marx (X) is significant, since although Benjamin develops Marx's criticism of the utopian socialists, he remains intrigued by the very effort at offering an alternative. The same applies to the material on Fourier (*Konvolut W*). If anything, Fourier is even wilder in his speculations concerning the 810 forms of the human soul, its circuit around the planets and periods of happiness and unhappiness, the animate planets as mothers and as teachers, the importance of boreal light on the physical transformation of the earth (ocean into lemonade, non-violent animals) and human evolution (able to live in the sea, fly, achieve seven feet in height and live for 144 years), the full-scale number mysticism and the messianic timetable for the realisation of his plans. All of this came alongside the use of arcade architecture in the phylansteries and imagined technological innovation along the lines of the telegraph,



radio, television, satellites, and space travel. But it is the ideal society of the phylanstery, the socialist society that was distinctly beyond capitalism, concerning which he left detailed instructions for the Harmonian association, that drew the imagination of the nineteenth century and suggested to Benjamin that there was a revolutionary potential in the present. For Engels, Fourier is the great satirist, the more incisive critic than Saint-Simon of the economic and social deprivations of capitalism. But Benjamin, given more to Fourier than Saint-Simon (I: 251; GS1: 699), is as interested in the mythology as in the socialist criticism, and again it seems to be the form of the conjunction, (utopian) socialism and mythology, that intrigues him. For in the end Benjamin's own effort takes on a comparable formal quality, although for him it is not so much the content of the myth that is important—the sheer lunacy of the quotations and reflections on both Saint-Simon and Fourier indicate this, unless one wants to argue that Benjamin found such contents attractive—but the language itself. It seems to me that towards the end of the *Passagenarbeit* Benjamin became conscious of the mythical dimensions of his own proposals that rendered them, in a formal sense, comparable to the Saint-Simonians and Fourierists.

However, only with the *Konvolut* on the history of sects (p) does another dimension of Benjamin's interest in such groups emerge. The hint comes with a comment on the revolutionary Babick in a quotation from Georges Laronze's *Histoire de la Commune de 1871* (Paris, 1928). For Babick was not only a member of the International and the Central Committee of the Commune, but “at the same time an apostle of the fusionist cult—a religion of recent inspiration, intended for the use of brains like his” (AP: 815; GS5: 653). A mix of the doctrines of various cults, Babick added spiritualism and the language of perfumes and ointments, for he himself was a perfumer by trade. In bringing together various quotations on the nature of religious cults with socialist agendas, as well as socialist movements with a distinctly religious flavour (so Saint-Simon and Fourier), Benjamin suggests the affinity between socialism, communism, and religious sects, all of them attempting to imagine the possibility of moving towards and constructing an alternative future.



Thus, we find that Blanqui, who had appeared earlier as a prime exhibit of mythological and cosmological speculation, now appears as a key figure of the Paris Commune, and went from one futile uprising to another, spending most of his life in prison where he penned his astrological speculations. Benjamin ranges through those who argued for the validity of early Christian sects and the abolition of marriage (James de Lawrence), much of it focused on the interpretation of the Wedding of Cana in John's Gospel, to the search for omens and reverence for Jesus, "a great man of '48" since the end of the world seemed immanent.

Rather than merely exploring the range of revolutionary options available in nineteenth century Paris, the material in Konvoluts O, W and p places others in a different context. Thus, the Konvolut on social movements (a), with its note on the reverence for an icon of Christ in the February revolution (AP: 711; GS5: 867), and the Commune (k), along with the one on Marx I noted earlier (X), all begin to flow from those on the religious and quasi-religious movements. Less a criticism of communist and socialist movements as religious sects in political disguise, it seems to me that Benjamin's minimal commentary and maximal doses of quotation seek juxtaposition to the advantage of both. In other words, both Marxism and religion, especially theology and various heretical forms of Christianity, rub together to one another's benefit, not detriment. For in the end, Benjamin's interest in theology and myth is an effort to provide a language for Marxism that would meet some its shortfalls. I will return to this in a moment, but perhaps Benjamin's favoured myth, one that was most appropriate to Marxism, is that of the messiah.

At this point, let me track back a little to the dialectical image, the transformed theological symbol, which itself becomes a moment of rescue, although already such a moment is highly occult: "The rescue that is carried out by these means—and only by these—can operate solely for the sake of what in the next moment is irretrievably lost" (AP: 473; GS5: 592). Without naming him directly (the mark of the messiah), Benjamin draws near, speaking of the "prophetic gaze that catches fire from the summits of the past" (AP: 473; GS5: 592). Although such a materialist history must be truncated, its rescue in the form of a "brutal



grasp,” before long the messiah does appear: “The authentic concept of universal history is a messianic concept. Universal history, as it is understood today, is an affair of obscurantists” (AP: 485; GS5: 608).

In the end, the blast, the flash, waking from a dream, the birth of a new moment from the monad, is also a rescue from history, and for this we need the messiah. Of course, the messiah is one whom you follow, picking up an ambiguous trace here, a possible sign there, but this figure rarely if ever encounters you face to face, preferring to leave the doubting follower guessing, perplexed, ready to turn back and seek food and shelter. Similarly, the trail of the messiah in Benjamin’s writings is less clear than many have thought, emerging at key points only to disappear at the moment one has formulated the right questions. For the messiah, weaving in and out of Benjamin’s text, takes on various shapes, at times one of hope and at others of despair. The messiah is of course a profoundly allegorical figure in Benjamin’s texts, one whom we might follow in a pattern similar to the tracking of the messiah in the biblical texts. Always enigmatic, leaving a trace or two rather than appearing in full regalia, speaking in parables and riddles rather than pronouncing doctrine, the messiah is one who intrigues and perplexes. In the Bible as in Benjamin, for the appearance of the messiah in both texts follows a similar pattern.

The messiah is the most explicitly theological usage by Benjamin in his later work, particularly the theses “On the Philosophy of History,” one that he draws from the Bible and has been a key element in arguing for his Jewishness. For the messiah, the ‘anointed one’ in Hebrew, “Christos” or “Christ” in Greek, is the one expected and hoped for who will usher in the new era and the end of the old, bringing peace, justice, and salvation. The messianic era in both Judaism and Christianity is one that breaks radically with the present, bringing in a new era in which all that is evil and exploitative in the old is abolished. But it is characteristic of the messiah that there will be many false claims as part of an interminable delay—precisely the feature of the messiah Benjamin sought to apply to communism itself.

Where does the messiah appear in Benjamin’s texts? Where he begins



to reflect about history, particularly the future and what that holds. Rather than a redeemer figure per se (about which I will much to say later, especially in regard to Eagleton), I suggest that the messiah is very much an allegory for history in Benjamin's texts, particularly the history with which Marxism concerns itself, the history that unfolds, however tortuously, into communism. For the appeal of the messiah is that it embodies a paradox, simultaneously currently effective and retarding elements, moving both towards us and allowing us to approach it (see SW1: 213; GS6: 126). It is, if you like, a proleptic idea, in which the time of the future has already begun and yet we await its fulfilment: "The idea of fulfilled time is the dominant historical idea of the Bible: it is the idea of messianic time." (SW1: 55–56; GS2: 134). Yet that fulfilment suffers from chronic delay, so much so that history must also be represented as such.

The figure of the messiah has been one of the most contested sites in Benjamin's work, for Marxists uneasy with this material have argued that it is merely an image, a cipher, for the philosophy of history. Others have used it to point to the inherently religious nature of Marxism itself, given as it is (supposedly) to an eschatological form of politics. Others again take them as figures for each other with giving priority to either.<sup>85</sup> The problem, however, lies elsewhere, for the messiah is a profoundly mythical figure: in the Bible, he is as mythological as the various creation narratives (of world, people or land) and the hopes for personal and collective redemption. But here I return to my criticism of Benjamin: despite all his efforts he replicates the myth he so assiduously seeks to overcome.

For some strange reason, Benjamin felt that the biblical material was free of myth. Thus, in his "Critique of Violence" (SW1: 236–52; GS2: 179–203), mythic violence, that narrative of the establishment of the law and legal violence, belongs to the Greeks (Benjamin cites the myth of Niobe), whereas pure or divine violence, the arena in which the

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<sup>85</sup> So Ian Balfour, "Reversal, Quotation (Benjamin's History)," *MLN* 106 (1991): 622–47. He argues that the "*anders gesagt*" of the Theses points to this figural double-take.



messiah is to appear, is somehow free of myth (in this case Benjamin favours the story of the rebellion of the sons of Korah in Numbers 16). McCole points out that Benjamin was also influenced by Hermann Cohen's argument that Judaism was the religion of reason over against myth, which for Benjamin was always irrational and demonic: theology is thereby set over against myth.<sup>86</sup> Apart from the obvious point that the Hebrew Bible is as mythical as any other mythology, especially that of Greece, Benjamin cannot avoid, even in this text, keeping myth away from pure, revolutionary and messianic violence.<sup>87</sup> Such violence does not break out of myth; it merely uses one myth to counter another.

In fact, the messiah is predicated upon the creation narratives that so fascinated Benjamin, for the messianic era is one of a return to paradise, to the moment of creation itself: the eschaton is but a rebirth. Yet, the dialectical obverse of this is that all the various myths of creation and paradise are but utopian narratives, ones that seek a mythical solution to history. And so the messiah is the final mark of the profoundly mythical nature of Benjamin's own attempt at a solution.

## Conclusion

I want to conclude, however, via the underlying search of this book, namely Benjamin's contribution to a materialist theology. I pick up first the debate concerning Marxism and theology, the features of which were set by the two editors of the first posthumous collection of Benjamin's works, Theodor Adorno and Gershom Scholem. The astuteness of their comments has rarely been surpassed except in detail. Adorno suggests that Benjamin should take the dialectical logic of his theological method to its extreme, for only in this way would a properly Marxist reading and method emerge. In fact, for Adorno, who was always in dialogue with theology from the Kierkegaard book onwards, the

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<sup>86</sup> McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, 76.

<sup>87</sup> Tom McCall, "Momentary Violence," in *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions*, ed. David S. Ferris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 188.





directly materialist dimensions of Benjamin's work were less interesting than his theological moments, although for specifically dialectical reasons.

If I were to close the circle of my critique boldly here at a single stroke, as it were, then I should have to try and grasp the two extremes. A restoration of theology, or better still, a radicalisation of dialectic introduced into the glowing heart of theology, would simultaneously require the utmost intensification of the social-dialectical, indeed economic, motifs (Adorno CC: 108; BB: 143).<sup>88</sup>

Like Scholem, although for entirely different reasons, Adorno finds the melding of theology and dialectical materialism problematic: they appear uneasy with each other, the one effacing the other in an enthusiasm for immediate political relevance only to find that the other emerges again without warning.

For Scholem, Benjamin would be better off without communism,<sup>89</sup> although he suggests that only Benjamin would have been able to link

<sup>88</sup> In response to the Arcades project, of which the Baudelaire section was sent to the Institute, Adorno writes: "I think this brings me to the heart of the matter. The impression which your entire study conveys—and not only to me and my Arcades orthodoxy—is that you have here done violence upon yourself. Your solidarity with the Institute, which pleases no one more than myself, has led you to pay the kind of tributes to Marxism which appropriate neither to Marxism nor to yourself" (CC: 184; BB: 369). Further: "it would also prove most beneficial to the cause of dialectical materialism and the theoretical interests represented by the Institute, if you surrendered to your own specific insights and conclusions without combining them with other ingredients, which you obviously find so distasteful to swallow that I cannot expect anything good to come of it. God knows, there is only one truth, and if your powers of intelligence can seize this one truth through categories which may seem apocryphal to you given your conception of materialism, then you will capture more of this one truth than you will ever do by employing conceptual tools that merely resist your grip at every turn. After all, there is more of this one truth in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* than there is in *Bukharin's ABC of Communism*" (CC: 284; BB:370).

<sup>89</sup> "...it seems to me it is clear to any objective reader of your writings that though in recent years you have tried—frantically, if you will pardon the expression—to present your insights, some of them very far-reaching, in a phraseology that is as close as can be to the Communist kind, there (and this is what seems to me matter) an astonishing incompatibility and unconnectedness between your real and pretended modes of thought" (Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 228). For Scholem, the effort at materialist readings introduces "a completely alien formal element that any intelligent reader can easily detach, which stamps your output of this period as the work an adventurer, a purveyor of ambiguities, and a card-sharper" (228). See also, Gershom Scholem, ed., *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem: 1932–1940*, ed. Gary Smith and Andre Lefebvre (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 107–18, 206–7.



religion and politics in a unique fashion: “you would not be the last but perhaps the most incomprehensible victim of the confusion between religion and politics, the true relationship of which you could have been expected to bring out more clearly than anyone else.”<sup>90</sup> Here Scholem joins Adorno, although with a very different direction in mind. Only Brecht actually urged Benjamin away from theology. For Adorno, Benjamin should be capable of tracing the dialectical implications of theology through to their end, especially since Benjamin was an atheist who did not owe any ecclesial or religious allegiance.

For their own reasons, Adorno and Scholem missed the point somewhat, the one pushing a dialectics that he himself began to practice, as I will trace in the final chapter of this book, and the other a political program such as might have suited the Palestine to which he migrated. Both Adorno and Scholem feel that Benjamin’s Marxism is inadequate, either grafted onto his earlier method or too dangerous politically. It seems to me that Benjamin’s use of theology, or rather a theological commentary on the Bible, leads to the perpetuation of biblical myth in his proposed solution to the mythical dream-work of capitalism. Yet it is precisely through this failure that Benjamin may unwittingly have something to contribute to the problem of the future in Marxism and thereby to a materialist theology.<sup>91</sup>

I do not want to rehearse here the detail of the argument I have followed above, running through the development of allegory as a method from biblical commentary, the underlying sacred history with its focus on creation and eschaton that informs his effort at both analyzing and looking for a way out of capitalism, and the unmistakably mythical solution to the myth of capitalism. Rather, the nature of his unwitting contribution through the failure of his proposal may be described as follows.

<sup>90</sup> Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 230.

<sup>91</sup> Habermas (“Consciousness-Raising” 50) also wants to retrieve something from Benjamin’s failure, although in this case it is a theory of language and communication that can be retrieved and reworked from the detritus of a failed effort to break through myth while “preserving and liberating its wealth,” specifically in terms of its semantic potential (50). By contrast, I want to suggest that the failure itself is the important feature of Benjamin’s work.



Let me take a move out of Benjamin's own pages, specifically a dialectical one that has a history within theology. Not only are the various terms from the present used in their imperfect way—contradictions of capitalism, the dialectical image, the blast out of history—to give us a fleeting glimpse of that other future: the communist future in fact provides the terms with which we might understand our present, although those terms are but very imperfect derivatives of what that future contains. In other words, rather than taking terms from our present and projecting them into the future, Benjamin seeks to work in reverse: the terms and concepts of a communist future, however degraded and partial they might be in our present perception and use of them, provide the way to think about that future itself.

The problem of course is that if the future is as radically distinct—however gradual or sudden a transition might be—as Marxists like to think, then the very ways of thinking and arguing will also be qualitatively different. Here lies the reason for the unwitting insight that Benjamin's use of an allegorical method, in itself a theological mode of biblical interpretation, provides. It is not that such a method provides the resources for conceiving the transformation out of the mythic hell of capitalism: rather, the inescapably mythic nature of the material with which Benjamin works—the narratives of creation and the messiah—suggest that the language of myth, with all its promises and dangers, provides one way of imagining a very different future. What Benjamin needs, in other words, is Bloch's practice of the discernment of myth. Here notions like pure language, the eschatology of translation and the reflections on creation take on a different hue. The danger is that such mythological material will replicate the patterns of oppression and appropriation of the myths from which they draw, as I argued in regard to Benjamin's use of biblical myth. However, it is not merely that myth provides one option, an alternative language that falls into all of the patterns of previous and current myths: Benjamin's promising failure is that the use of such curiously mythical ideas and terms from the Bible raises the possibility of conjuring up an alternative language and the ability to imagine a very different future. It is, if you like, a dialectical criticism of religion within Marxism.



## Criticism of Heaven

This means that Benjamin's allegorical method not only generates the failure of his overt proposal but also becomes an appropriate method for what I am suggesting. It is not, as the anti-allegorical polemic of biblical criticism has argued for so long, that allegory seeks a wooden one-to-one correspondence to various items in the text. On the contrary, allegory, particularly in Benjamin's hands, might be seen to reach across the divide between a capitalist present and a communist future to draw terms from that future itself, however imperfect they might be. The question remains as to whether the mythological material that runs through Benjamin's writing is able to do the job. In terms of specific content, no, but in terms of the effort to think differently, then myth provides one way of doing so.



## Chapter Three

### The Ecclesiastical Eloquence of Louis Althusser

I remember this period as a time when perhaps I had a religious vocation which fizzled out and a certain predisposition to ecclesiastical eloquence (pour l'éloquence ecclésiastique) (FLLT: 306; LDL: 299).

Marx did not “say everything,” not only because he did not have the time, but because to “say everything” makes no sense for a scientist; only a religion can pretend to “say everything” (PSP: 59).

For one who was once attracted to a religious vocation—later described as merely the appeal of “ecclesiastical eloquence” (FLLT: 306; LDL: 299)—Althusser’s passing over of religion seems to be complete.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in the essay “Lenin and Philosophy” he writes of the Oztovist group of the Bolsheviks, formed after the failed October revolution of 1905: “Some Bolsheviks of this group even wanted to integrate into Marxism the ‘authentic’ humane values of religion, and to this end they called themselves ‘God-builders.’ But we can ignore this” (: 26; LLP: 10). Much of his writing does seem to “ignore this,” for materialism, the “world outlook” of the proletariat, had set its face over against the idealism of the bourgeoisie. And then there is the well-known “rejection” of and polemic against the early or humanist, Hegelian, Marx in favour of the late scientific writer of *Capital*, which may be taken as analogous to

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<sup>1</sup> Many critics have followed him, completely ignoring Althusser’s engagement with theology. See Alex Callinicos, *Althusser’s Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 1976); Gregory Elliott, *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (London: Verso, 1987); Simon Clarke, Terry Lovell, Kevin McDonnell, Kevin Robins, and Victor Seidler, *One-Dimensional Marxism: Althusser and the Politics of Culture* (London: Allison & Busby, 1980).



Althusser's rejection of the Church. Yet, Althusser is a little too hasty in his dismissal. For the hard line that separates the humanist from the scientific Marx begins to break up and fade later: in the "Preface to *Capital*," Althusser sees a residual Hegelianism in the four volumes of *Capital*. Here (LP: 93–94; AL: 29–30) he argues that Marx took 30 years, from 1845–75, to expunge Hegel, completed only with the "Critique of the Gotha Programme" of 1875.<sup>2</sup> Is this not a little too close to Marx's death to constitute a new phase? Similarly, Althusser was never quite able to find his way clear of religion, or, more specifically, the Church.

In what follows, I trace the perpetual effort to reject the Church that relies upon its continued presence in his work. In fact, my major argument is precisely this, namely that Althusser's expulsion of the Church from his life and work enabled the Church to permeate all of his work. Not so much a return of the repressed, the Church becomes the absent cause of his philosophy. So I will follow this subterranean presence of the ecclesial, its shortfalls and promises, the possibilities and limitations for Althusser's own thought that such a social, political, and theoretical context enables. Althusser is therefore a "catholic" Marxist, sliding between the catholicity of the Church itself, especially the Roman Catholic Church, and the internationalism of Marxism that worked itself out in the specific dynamics of a particular nation-state. Althusser's own "catholicity" becomes the necessary feature of his rejection of the Roman Catholic Church.

I have organised my discussion in terms of the form of Althusser's rejection of the Church, the use of history, the oppositional need to understand idealism and the logic within Althusser's arguments for a

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<sup>2</sup> The infamous "break" is itself continually refined by Althusser, the date when Marx finally arrived at Marxism itself perpetually fluctuating. For instance, in the 1965 introduction to *For Marx* there are 4 stages, early works (1840–44), works of the break (1845), transitional (1845–57) and mature (1857–83) (see FM: 33–34; PM: 25–27). Later, in "Elements of Self-Criticism" of 1974 (ESC: 107–118; SM: 159–97), he qualifies the break in reply to a spate of critics. Thus, even though *The German Ideology* is qualitatively different from the 1844 manuscripts, Marx's radically new move appears "in an often very unstable form, clumsy in working out its new object and terminology, or even still trapped in the old philosophical category, and yet terribly anxious to make its appearance in the world" (ESC: 108; SM: 165).



reconsideration of religion from the perspective of materialist philosophy. To begin with, the form of his rejection is not so much in terms of theology or the Bible, but of the Church with which he had a lingering connection after many years of involvement and religious commitment. The context of a Roman Catholic country was crucial in this respect, for in such a context where the practice of class struggle took a distinctly institutional form, the Church was the primary point of reference. When he does write directly on theology and the Bible, especially in the early theological texts, his thoughts flow within the distinctly Roman Catholic theoretical, social, and historical context of France. Thus, in contrast to Bloch, Benjamin, and even Adorno, for whom the Bible and theology could be engaged more directly (although this in itself is part of the heritage of Protestant, especially Lutheran, and Jewish thought), Althusser's theological material is more overtly institutional. But this would mean that the work of the fully-fledged Marxist philosopher would trail the dust of this earlier work. Not only does the form of his work remain stamped by institutional and social matrix of the Church, but with surprising regularity questions of religion and the Church also appear in his later Marxist texts.

History comprises a second dimension of Althusser's treatment of religion. Ostensibly religion is a feature of his analysis of the transitions from feudalism to capitalism, in which the Church is a major institution, the dominant Ideological State Apparatus of feudalism. However, I argue that in his efforts to account for the supersession and decline of the Church in capitalism—its ideological role was taken over by education—Althusser is also historicising a particular theoretical element of his thought. History, in other words, provides a distinct ideological mode for dealing with the Church. Third, since Marxism itself is a system and practice that arose in response to capitalism and the ideology of liberalism, Althusser must also deal with idealism in the effort to understand the enemy a little better. The world outlook of liberalism is idealism—only in such a context is it possible to believe in God—within which religion is essential.



Finally, although he sees the Church and its thought as a feature of idealism, Althusser also concedes the presence of religion in the spontaneous “world outlook” of materialism. This is less of a paradox than it seems, for along with ethical, legal, political, and aesthetic “practical ideologies” (LP: 18; SDM: 152–53), religion is one of the practical ideologies with which both idealist and materialist world outlooks operate. When such positions become “theoretical”—for Althusser the connection between science and the ideologies of science and scientists—philosophy appears. Here, especially in the later work, we find a subtle shift from the theological concerns of the earlier material to the philosophy of religion itself: even though the residues of theology and ecclesiology are everywhere to be found, Althusser provides the basis for a materialist philosophy of religion. As “class struggle in theory,” as something learnt from the spontaneous world outlooks of both idealism and materialism, philosophy must also deal with religion. The logic in this dimension of his thought, related to but distinct from the former, historical and oppositional dimensions, means that Althusser must also consider religion from within Marxism. In other words, I seek the logic within Althusser’s thought for a materialist understanding of religion and the various elements that contribute to such an understanding.

## Ecclesiastical Form: Theological Writings

That Althusser’s rejection of religion should take the form of a rejection of the Church is perhaps inevitable given his own former commitment to the Roman Catholic Church. But this gives (auto-)biography a prior and formative role in the development of his philosophy. Rather, autobiography comes in Althusser’s writing at the end, the last and only sustained act of his intellectual work, and so I will turn to biography in my conclusion; a little like the central station at Saint-Charles in Marseille, the “terminus” that he “always loved” (FLLT: 82; LDL: 75), rather than as a beginning that sets the agenda for everything that follows.





I could begin with the obvious point that Althusser always operated, could not seem to exist without, one institution or another, whether church, university (Romand Catholic or the Sorbonne), mental hospital or communist party, with its overwhelming concern for orthodoxy and orthopraxis (PSP: 63).<sup>3</sup> But I prefer to focus on what can only be called his theological writings, a description that dislocates and estranges the usual reading of Althusser as a scientific Marxist.<sup>4</sup> In particular, I offer a detailed exegesis of certain texts from the writings of an earlier Althusser vitally interested in the Hegel whom he would seek to expunge later: “The International of Decent Feelings” (SH: 21–35; EP1: 35–57), “A Matter of Fact” (SH: 185–96; EP1: 261–75), “On Conjugal Obscenity” (SH: 231–40; EP1: 327–39), the theological moments of his thesis on Hegel (SH: 36–169; EP1: 59–238) and his letter to Jean Lacroix (SH: 197–230; EP1: 277–325). Written between 1946 and 1951, while he was in the process of joining of the Communist Party, the first was written for and rejected by the Catholic journal *Cahiers de notre jeunesse*, the second appeared as the opening essay in the tenth *Cahier* of the religious community *Jeunesse de l'Église*, with which he stayed in close touch, “On Conjugal Obscenity” remained unpublished until after his death, appearing in the first volume of *Écrits philosophiques et politiques* (EP1), and both the thesis on Hegel’s philosophy and the letter to Lacroix were also unpublished until this 1994 collection.

In this strange Althusser we find a critic comfortable with both theological arguments and questions of ecclesiology, working through instead of finding various ways to reject theology and the Church. If the thesis on Hegel and “The International of Decent Feelings” are unabashedly

<sup>3</sup> In his account of his intervention at the meeting in which Lacan sought to dissolve the Ecole Freudienne de Paris in 1980, entitled “Open Letter to Analysts and Analysts in Solidarity with Jacques Lacan” (WP: 127–34), he writes: “since I had evoked my experience of two organizations other than the one whose meeting I was attending, namely, the Catholic church and the French Communist party” (WP: 132).

<sup>4</sup> Only some critics can bear to mention Althusser’s earlier commitment to the Church, let alone his theological writings. For instance, Margaret Majumbar passes by this phase with embarrassed brevity, preferring to begin with the moment he joined the PCF. See Margaret A. Majumbar, *Althusser and the End of Leninism?* (London: Pluto Press, 1995).



theological, at least at certain points, then “A Matter of Fact” and “On Conjugal Obscenity” belong with the traditional category of ecclesiology. Not unexpectedly, I will ponder these works more closely than some others by Althusser, but what interests me most is the nature of the writings themselves, their concerns and foci, especially those revealed by slips and breaks in his arguments. For the forerunners of Althusser’s later dealings with religion may be found in these early theological essays.

Thus, at various points in the Masters thesis he tracks the way Hegel’s dialectic begins its work in the latter’s early theological texts, especially the *Theologische Jugendschriften*,<sup>5</sup> how philosophies of the concept (*Begriff*) oppose the inherently theological philosophies of intuition (St. Augustine, Descartes et. Al.; see SH: 84–85; EP1: 124–25), the way Hegel anticipates the Kierkegaardian criticisms that he is himself the demiurge who usurps God’s own position as Creator and revealer of the truth (SH: 100–101; EP1: 144–45), the panlogistic misreading of how Christ the Logos is the unfolding totality of revelation and the always-already completed mediation of God and man (SH: 105–6; EP1: 151–52), and Christ’s ascension and return to heaven as an example of the mediator’s discretion in religious, philosophical and religious imagery (SH: 164, n.118; EP1: 230, n.118).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See the translation of *Theologische Jugendschriften* in Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel’s Theological Writings*, ed. T. M. Knox, and Richard Kroner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971) Other parts appear in Friedrich Hegel, *Three Essays* (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> “The mediator’s discretion is one of the major motifs of religious, philosophical, and literary imagery: In the Iliad, the gods swoop down from the sky, unleash a catastrophe, run the hero ragged, decide who will have the victory, and then vanish into thin air like a light fog. The same pattern underlies the revelations of the unhappy consciousness in Judaism: Yahweh speaks from within the flame or on the mountain-top, and then falls silent. Christ himself ‘goeth back to the Father,’ leaving men standing before an empty tomb. It is true that he is resurrected and allows men to touch him, but he disappears again from their world, which the Holy Ghost alone continues to dwell in. The theme of the disappearance of the demiurge is a literary standby: the third thief disappears before the end, Jean Valjean puts the world to rights and melts into the night, Sherlock Holmes solves the mystery, unmask the murderer, gives the lovers back their love, lights his pipe, and heads off: three’s a crowd. Occasionally, one sees a demiurge emerge despite himself; he quits the scene only reluctantly, before learning that ‘silence is golden’” (SH: 164, n. 118; EP1: 230, n. 118).



In and out of theological debates and categories, as much a part of Hegel's work as Althusser's reflections on it, what takes me in is less the concern with Hegel himself than the ease with which Althusser slips into theology. Of course, theology is hardly foreign territory for philosophers, but Althusser feels no need to engage in the polemic against religion that would emerge in his later work. But then Hegel is not your garden-variety theologian, searching for the odd sod that has not yet been turned over and broken apart in a field ploughed incessantly. If Hegel launched many of his own arguments from his earlier theological base, however distinct and critical they may have been, his influence on subsequent theology was far reaching, and Althusser is one instance of this effect.

Let us examine one extended example of Althusser's argument concerning theology and Hegel: both a major step in the development of the dialectic and the necessary logical step to Kant and the notion of self-consciousness, Althusser picks up Hegel on Christology. For Althusser, in a way that echoes Lukács's argument in *Theory of the Novel* and is part of the tradition of German classicism, Hegel saw a lost unity and harmony in the Greek world, where religion was immanent, an exercise of life without the transcendence of revelation. Christ destroys this world, coming from the Father on high with a transcendent truth and then returning to it. Christ's words—in the New Testament—in which he comes to sow dissension, set each against the other, bring the sword and not peace, give voice to Christianity's otherworldly destruction of the Greek world. Yet, the positive content of Christianity will not be lost so easily: "At stake is an attempt to recover the meaning of authentic positivity, to recover, that is, the practical uses of the content of revelation and its concrete implications for the conduct of action" (SH: 47: EP1: 75). Althusser is of course interested in the question of content in Hegel's work, so he finds in Hegel a move that would become characteristic of the latter's thought: Christ may have destroyed Greek harmony, but he brought reconciliation to the hopelessly fragmented Jewish people. The eye of a hostile God, looking upon Abraham from an empty sky while he tracks across an empty desert with his herd be-



comes the symbol of this fragmentation, the absolute separation from God in an unbridgeable transcendence. In this context, Christ's incarnation is the way such a disconnection is overcome. The Law is infused with love: Christ fulfils the Law. Hegel thereby reads Romans 10:4—"For Christ is the *telos* of the Law, that everyone who has faith may be justified"<sup>7</sup>—in terms of *Aufhebung*, the great reconciliation effected through love. The dialectic continues to spin its way forward—Christ's reconciliation fails in a bad positivity (he returns to the Father), which works itself out in the shift of Jewish consciousness from objective to subjective dismemberment in the Christian community and becomes the basis of a stinging criticism of contemporary Christianity's sect-like behavior—so that Hegel can get himself to Kant and the consciousness of subjectivity. What we get, in other words, is the transition by means of Christianity from consciousness to self-consciousness, and, in a case of the grand narrative of history writ small for Hegel's own intellectual development, the necessary stage that gets him to Kant.<sup>8</sup>

Althusser would always return to Hegel, although hardly in the same mood, but this example at least shows someone quite at home with theological arguments. I too will return to Hegel later, in the section where I argue that the logic of Althusser's argument regarding Hegel in his later work leads to a reconsideration of religion.

The more interesting and most explicitly theological text is "The International of Decent Feelings" (SH: 21–35; EP1: 35–57). Already the boldness and lucidity of Althusser's arguments appear in this text, except that they produce a curious estrangement effect. In this text, as well as the other two I will consider a little later ("A Matter of Fact" and

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<sup>7</sup> Althusser misreads the Greek text here, stating in the footnote (SH: 158n28; EP1: 220n28) that *Aufhebung* translates the Greek *pleroma*, rather than *telos*.

<sup>8</sup> "This kind of phenomenological development of the religious meditations of Hegel's youth thus leads up to a sort of transition from consciousness to self-consciousness; it prefigures the analyses of the *Phenomenology*. We set out from the void of consciousness that manifested itself first as a lost plenitude, and subsequently as the engendering of plenitude; it has finally revealed itself to be the essence of consciousness. This new-found consciousness of subjectivity as such has a name in contemporary thought: Kant" (SH: 51; EP1: 81).



“On Conjugal Obscenity”) we find criticisms that are both Christian and communist. Although both Christian and communist come at the problems with which he deals from very different directions, Althusser brings them together in an alliance that could not last. At the same time, the alliance between Christianity and communism enacts a slippage from one to the other, a slippage that will enable the development of particular theological positions that become characteristic of his later Marxist arguments when the allegiance to the Church had passed.

Thus, in ‘The International of Decent Feelings’, intended for the journal edited by his friend François Ricci (one of those who was to join the Communist Party), Althusser polemicises against the apocalyptic habit of reading for the “signs of the times” in World War Two and the Cold War. The war itself becomes both sin and God’s wrathful punishment, the concentration camps are the Last Judgement, the Moscow trials are the Passion, the atomic bomb is the will of God, and the equality of death before the bomb is equivalent to equality before God.

Such a messy leakage of terms runs in two directions for Althusser. First, this apocalyptic commingling of theological categories with historical events—to be found as much in writers such as Camus as the Roman Catholics Marcel, Mauriac and Bossuet—leads to the popular post-war notions of the “proletariat of fear” and the “proletariat of the human condition.” Against these slogans Althusser lines up both political and theological criticisms. As for the former, such a generalising of class difference, taking up the term proletariat in order to speak of humanity as a whole, serves to deny the specific political content of the proletariat. For them, the threat of war or the atomic bomb does not change the exploitation and poverty of their everyday lives. Later in the essay, the specifically Marxist nature of his analysis comes to the fore: “This reconciliation [of man with his destiny] presupposes a transition from capitalism to socialism by way of the emancipation of the labouring proletariat, which can, through this act, rid not only itself, but also all humanity of contradiction, delivering it, moreover, from the apocalyptic panic besetting it” (SH: 31; EP1: 49). At this moment, not long before he joined the communist



party, Althusser sees the possibilities of hope with the proletariat and not with some ideological shift that would efface the proletariat by fiat.

This emerging Marxist argument differs from his theological assessment, although we will need to read carefully in order not to be sucked up into Althusser's own blending of theology and politics. First, the two texts:

Fear is not a fatherland, nor is courage. . . ; more, *the human condition is not a human fatherland*. It is, perhaps, the fatherland of men as they appear to God; because we are Christians, we call this condition original sin. For the man who is not a Christian, and for the Christian who does not usurp God's place, the human fatherland is not the proletariat of the human condition, it is the proletariat *tout court*, leading the whole of humanity towards its emancipation. This proletariat has a real content (SH: 27; EP1: 42–43).

For, as Christians, we believe that there is a human condition; in other words, we believe in the equality of all men before God, and his Judgement, *but we do not want the Judgement of God to be spirited away before our very eyes; nor do we want to see non-Christians and, occasionally, Christians as well, commit the sacrilege of taking the atomic bomb for the will of God, equality before death for equality before God..., and the tortures of the concentration camps for the Last Judgement* (SH: 27; italics in original; EP1: 43).

Note the shuffle between Christians and non-Christians and the way certain alliances are set up. Thus, in the first quotation, “because we are Christians” (*parce que nous sommes chrétiens* (EP1: 42)) moves to “for the man who is not a Christian, and for the Christian who does not usurp God's place” (*Pour l'homme non chrétien et pour le chrétien qui n'usurpe pas la place de Dieu* (EP1: 42–43)). Similarly, in the second, “as Christians” (*comme chrétiens* (EP1: 43)) steps on to speak of “non-Christians and, occasionally, Christians as well” (*non-chrétiens et de chrétiens parfois* (EP1: 43)). The shift is ingenious, for it appears at first that Althusser aligns himself with the generic group of Christians—“we are Christians” and “as Christians”—and that the theological position he mentions applies



to him as well as to these Christians. But Christianity is hardly uniform at any point, even if one allows for the unconscious Roman Catholic assumption that Roman Catholicism is Christianity, and so the qualifier appears: the Christians with whom he is really concerned are those who do not usurp God's place or who occasionally side with non-believers. Although there is a doctrinal dimension to all of this to which I will return, the distinguishing feature of these Christians, the ones who do not clamber up God's footstool, is their allegiance with non-Christians.

Yet, there is a difference between the two quotations: for the first the allegiance is positive, whereas in the second it is negative. In the second, the non-Christian and odd Christian find themselves duped by the apocalyptic reading of the signs of the times, a sacrilege Althusser and his fellow Christians—"we"—would rather they avoid. In the first quotation, the Christian who does not attempt to lord it over others and the one who is not a Christian know the Marxist truth that the proletariat is not a generic description of the whole human condition, but has a specific, distinctly salvific, content.

And this positive connection intrigues me in light of Althusser's later absolute rejection of Christianity and the Church. At the time of this text (1947), he is still quite orthodox, holding to doctrines such as original sin and the Last Judgement. But Althusser sidesteps what is a very different—*theological*—criticism of the notion of the "proletariat of fear" in his desire to form an alliance with "non-Christians." What we would expect to be a major difference with the early Marxist analysis in terms of class—that the human condition is one of original sin and the equality of all before God's judgement, which itself runs in a different direction from class analysis—falls into the background of the desired allegiance. Instead, non-Christians, whom we can now read as a code for Marxists and the Communist Party, and Christians who leave God in charge, agree with each other concerning the specific class dimensions of the proletariat. It would not be long before Althusser had slipped from the ranks of Christians to the Communists, and the tough coalition he attempts to hold together in this essay had fallen away. But not before



he at least made the attempt to render the step as small as possible. With hindsight, he would argue that the effort of Catholic Action to connect Christian doctrines and political action constituted the mystification of politics and the dilution of Christian doctrines. Not in this essay.

He will not give ground to the non-Christians just yet, for later in the essay the criticisms are more clearly Christian, and although he wants to see continuity between his own Christian position and Marxism, he cannot avoid a particular tension. The hint comes earlier, when, in the midst of noting the string of theological identifications of recent events, he notes with dismay that “no-one is more vulnerable to blackmail based on this confusion of terms than Christians” (SH: 27; EP1: 43). And the specific Christian position he invokes against such “a perversion of religion” (SH: 29; EP1: 46), which smacks too much of the German Churches’ efforts to overcome their support of Hitler during the war, is the critique of idolatry. In Adorno’s hands such a criticism would take the form of the *Bilderverbot* or ban on images drawn from the second commandment of Exodus 20/Deuteronomy 5 that became a key to his philosophy, aesthetic theory as well as his polemic against liberal theology.

For Althusser, idolatry is specifically Christian: he takes the important phrase “for the Christian who does not usurp God’s place” (SH: 27; EP1: 43) in terms of the New Testament warnings against false prophets. The apocalyptic warnings of Mark 13 (especially verse 22) and Matthew 24/Luke 21 become for Althusser a paradoxical sign, the false prophets themselves being a mark of the Last Days although they themselves are false precisely because they predict the long awaited End:

*This false end of the world is teeming with false prophets* [the prime examples of which are Camus and Malraux] *who announce false Christs and treat an event as the Advent.* But Christ has taught us<sup>9</sup> that

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<sup>9</sup> “And then is anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘Look, there he is!’ do not believe it. False Christs and false prophets will arise, and show signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But take heed, I have told you all things beforehand” (Mark 13:21–23). Matthew has the same, with minor variations, although with the following addition: “So, if they say to you, ‘Lo, he is the wilderness,’ do not go out; if they say to you ‘Lo, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it” (Matt. 24: 26).





we must beware of false prophets, and also that they will reappear as the Last Days draw nigh. The paradox is plain: the end that is close for every Christian is not the end of the false prophets of history (SH: 28; EP1: 44).

A final twist awaits us, for although the criticism of idolatry may take the particular New Testament form of the warning against false prophets in the Last Days, the problem with idolatry is not that one becomes too connected to the representation of the deity, deluded into thinking that this is in fact God. Rather, the ultimate problem is that one replaces God with another, elevating the various idols in his place. And the New Testament's take on this thread of idolatry is that such replacements are human beings themselves. Alluding to Matthew 7:21—"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my father who is in heaven"—Althusser argues that the ultimate form of idolatry is the elevation of oneself in God's place: "*When we merely invoke the Lord, we serve, not the Lord we invoke, but another whom we do not*" (SH: 30; EP1: 47). This is where the various gestures from the European Churches—Koestler's sermon to the European Left, Malraux on the Western bloc as protection against both the USA and the USSR and Mauriac's vote of confidence in Léon Blum—become the marks of false prophets (Matt. 7:15).

If Althusser were to stick to this theological line of thought then he would rule out precisely the move he does make, which is to argue that these false prophets do not see the real problem, namely the exploitation of the proletariat under capitalism. The truth that these false prophets miss is the nature of socialism. They seek "socialism without class struggle," "a verbal, moralizing socialism" (SH: 30; EP1: 48), socialism in politics but none in government. But by identifying the truth of socialism, the proletariat and class struggle, is not Althusser playing precisely the same game as those whom he criticises? He puts this forward as a properly theological position free from idolatry, but, from a theological angle, the laying of hope at the feet of the proletariat is the type of idolatry that would enlist him with the false prophets, no matter how much he might



see himself as a true prophet. For his later Marxism it would be God himself who would become the mystifying, idolatrous figure that obfuscates the class struggle itself.

I have paused with this essay on decent feelings for more reasons than the argument itself, or indeed for the signs of Althusser's transition from the Roman Catholic Church to the Communist Party. What is remarkable about this essay, especially if we consider Althusser's well-known later writings, is the explicit focus on theological doctrines, or at least positions, rather than the institution itself. Apart from the sustained use of the criticism of idolatry and false prophets, he assumes certain doctrines, such as original sin and the Last Judgement (a vast sweep from creation to eschaton), without elaborating on them. But as a Christian he believes them, at least at this moment. In itself, this is quite extraordinary, especially in comparison to other Marxists such as Bloch, Benjamin, Adorno or Gramsci who never ranked themselves with believers.

What are the implications of the concentration on beliefs and doctrines rather than the institutional form of Christianity? Although not unaware of the institution and its myriad branches—the other two essays make this awareness clear—the surest sign of his location within the church is that he does not see the specificity of the institution that provides meaning for his life, that enables him to make some sense of his own place within the vaster rhythms of history and the world that are beyond the usual perceptions of the biological individual. By specificity I mean not the ambiguous term “Catholic Church,” but the French Roman Catholic Church. Of course, the preference by the Roman Catholics to drop the “Roman,” let alone any sense of a French Church, is that it allows the ambiguity of “Catholic” to run its course. The ideological success of Roman Catholicism is that it, like so many others, often assumes the catholicity, the universal exclusivity of its own version of Christianity. Only when Althusser moved from the French Roman Catholic Church to the French Communist Party was he able to begin an analysis of the Church as institution, famously described as a key ideological state apparatus.



In “A Matter of Fact” (SH: 185–96; EP1: 261–75), an explicitly ecclesiological essay, all of the assumptions concerning catholicity play themselves out. Published in a Cahier entitled “The Captive Gospel” by *Jeunesse de l’Église* three months after he joined the Communist Party in November 1948, the theme of the collection of essays is: “Has the Good News been announced to the men of our day”? Althusser argues in a clear style. Almost point form, it is a style that was to become his signature and one that he owed to his early teacher Jean Guitton. His argument is that the question itself raises the issue of the woeful state of the Church itself, which requires substantial and far-reaching reform if it is ever to communicate the “Gospel” in a language understood by the men of today. Using a corporeal and biblical metaphor—one that would have its own ramifications in the repression of the body of women, especially the maternal body, in his work—of the church as “sick man” no longer able to walk, he seeks not so much a cure of the illness as an analysis of its origins. The basic argument, which he elaborates in various directions, is the historical disjunction of the Church: since it hangs, socially, ideologically and politically, on to feudal and capitalist structures, its own structures are “alien (*étrangères*) to our times” (SH: 186, EP1: 263; see the detail in SH: 187–93; EP1: 263–72). The catch is that religion is a crucial piece of the structures the Church can only with great difficulty remove. In fact, the Church remains tied to a social and economic world without which it cannot imagine its existence, God himself being “a prisoner of a conceptual universe that no longer makes sense to the men of our times” (SH: 188; EP1: 264). All of which forces the Church to defend reactionary political positions in order to shore up the obsolete world-views and structures in which it finds itself imbricated.

The solution? It is quite simply the emancipation of the Church from feudal and capitalist structures, which will then lead to a re-appropriation of an authentic religious life. If the external liberation of the Church requires an alliance with the world-changing force of the proletariat, then the reclamation of religious life must take place through the isolated and far-flung radical cells within the Church itself.



Never identified, such groups must include groups like “Youth of the Church,” but also what were later to become the base communities of the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America (Althusser would keep track of liberation theology with great interest). As part of this internal revolution, Althusser is even more explicit than in “The International of Decent Feelings” on the need for an alliance between Christians and the proletariat in a broad emancipatory program. In other words, the Church’s hope lies with the proletariat, which now arrives en masse in Althusser’s text. And in this world-historical movement the Christian, now clearly in the singular, must play an active part. Although the uneasy alliance is still very much part of the agenda, one notes a distinct shift from the earlier essay, for in “A Matter of Fact” the weight shifts decisively to the proletariat: they possess the means for overcoming the social and economic conditions of the Church’s woeful state, and the only viable option for the (socially progressive) Christian is to join.

I want to pick up a few items in the argument of “A Matter of Fact,” namely, the shift to speaking of theology as ideology, the possibility that Christianity (and by extension religion per se) is not necessarily alienating and the pervasive assumption of catholicity. Let me pick up the second issue first. Still tied to a theory of alienation, especially that of the Church’s alienation through being tied to feudal and capitalist structures, Althusser can still hold out for a transformed Church. And so we find extraordinary statements, at least in light of the well-known later Althusser: “The Church will live thanks to those who, through struggle and in struggle, are once again discovering that the Word was born among men and dwelt among them—and who are already preparing a humane place for it amongst men” (SH: 195; EP1: 275). Neither a priori reactionary, nor even alienating the Church may take on a hitherto unforeseen, unalienated, form that will be appropriate for a communist society.<sup>10</sup> Here he struggles with Marx’s early argument that religion is the sign or mark of social and

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<sup>10</sup> “If religion is not, *a priori*, a form of alienation, this reduction should permit the Christian to reconquer an authentic religious life, whose conditions and limits he must already begin to define, in struggle” (SH: 194–95; EP1: 274).



economic alienation and would disappear when those real conditions has been alleviated. Later he will abandon such a possible role for the Church, becoming more conventionally Marxist, and the Church will become an ideological state apparatus, but not before the curious transposition into the argument for the eternal nature of ideology.

On the question of theology and ideology—the second issue I noted above—there are already signs of the shifts that were to come. Thus, in an intriguing paragraph (SH: 188–89; EP1: 265–56), he maintains a distinction between ideology and theology that makes the latter a subset of the former. Theology, or at least Roman Catholic theology, bases itself on an obsolete complex of Thomistic and/or Augustinian philosophies, which themselves rely upon Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical systems. This system, which is able to deal with problems by means of playing off Aquinas with Augustine, informs the economic, moral, political, educational, and, above all, theological concepts and ways of thinking in the Church; in short, Truth, that is Revelation, is possible for the Church only in these terms. The easy move for Althusser would be to argue—and this is the way his essay tends—that this whole system is dead on its feet, awaiting the slightest push to send it sprawling. But what interests him is the fact that “it must plainly have moorings in life in order to persist even as an illusion” (SH: 188; EP1: 265), and those moorings (*attaches*) are none other than the very real leftovers of a medieval world. At this the complexity of Althusser’s notion of ideology already begins to show itself: the medieval structures that lie at the heart of the Church foster and enable people within the Church to hold to an out-moded ideological formation, but those structures only continue to exist because the ideology keeps the structures in place. Using the example of natural law, Althusser argues that this and other concepts are “sustained by concrete structures that are still ‘lived’ by many of the men of our day, who need these concepts, precisely, in order to legitimise, defend, and perpetuate the structures in which they are born, grow up, and die” (SH: 189; EP1: 266). Much of this will return in his famous essay on ideological state apparatuses, including the fundamentally medieval nature



of the Church, in which context it was the dominant state apparatus, as well as the complex dialectic of ideology itself. What has happened in “A Matter of Fact,” however, is the linking of theology with ideology that will ultimately be to the former’s detriment. Yet it does not pass without leaving a distinct brand upon Althusser’s theory of ideology, as I will argue below.

The third issue is what might best be termed Althusser’s catholic blind spot, which I have already tracked in “The International of Decent Feelings.” Apart from the obvious singular capital *l’Eglise* that betrays an assumed united body, the language Althusser uses throughout the essay shows up the blind spot time and again. He writes of “the immense world of the Church” (SH: 195; EP1: 275), “policies on a global scale” (SH: 191; EP1: 269), the global struggle of capitalism and socialism in which the Church has a “deep, compromising commitment to worldwide reaction” (SH: 191; EP1: 269). But let me take one passage at the opening of the essay as the most sustained example:

To begin with, the question [regarding the Good News] takes a *universal form*. On the one hand, *the world* no longer listens to *the Church*, whose words fail to reach *the men of our day*; the Church has become a virtual stranger for *broad masses of people* who are already *the present and future of this world*. On the other hand, when we consider the people faithful to the Church, the question arises as to whether their faithfulness is still religious. This historical situation is simultaneously the historical context Christians are living in, and a reality *all men*, Christians or not, meet at every turn (SH: 186; EP1: 262; italics mine).

Althusser writes not so much about a global question—“universal form,” “all men”—but gives the ground of debate to the institution at which he directs his polemic. Not only is there a singular Christianity for which “Church” acts as cipher, but its questions and problems are also global problems. The specificity of the Church in question bursts out in a sentence in which he lists the various parts of the church that need reform—“the Church’s conceptual universe, theology, and moral system, its theory of the family, of education, of Catholic action, of the



parish, etc.” (SH: 194; EP1: 274). These are, of course, peculiarly Roman Catholic domains in both their content—morality, Catholic Action and education—and the way they are brought together. I suggest that it is precisely such a blindness to the specificity of the (French) Roman Catholic Church that renders Althusser a “catholic” philosopher, especially in this his explicit ecclesiological essay. The catch is that such a catholicity, that becomes a hallmark of his Marxism as well, emerges explicitly when he is taking on the institution itself, absorbing the very assumptions that steal away the force of his arguments. For in this essay and the others from the same period, the effort at alliance between Marxism and the Roman Catholic Church leaves open the passage that enables a nocturnal border crossing from one to the other, bearing smuggled goods that he will keep with him.

However, Althusser is not going to let me make this argument concerning his catholic blind spot easily. Just when it looks as though I can trace a consistent blockage to the specificity of the French Roman Catholic Church and his tendency to universalise in a catholic fashion, the penultimate essay of this early period—the extraordinary “On Conjugal Obscenity” (SH: 231–40; EP1: 327–39), which he saw as a contribution to the women’s movement and, secondarily, “feminism”<sup>11</sup>—shows an Althusser very much aware of this specificity. I am going to suggest that there is a difference between negative and positive criticisms of the Church in these early texts, a tendency to become specific when he is excoriating the Church and universal when he sees some value, something he wants to salvage. But let us first examine the argument of the essay itself, where he tracks the ambivalence and hypocrisy of the public theology of marriage in the French Roman Catholic Church.

Developed in the late 1930s and perpetuated thereafter, the refurbishing of the sacrament of marriage that is the subject of “On Conjugal Obscenity” dragged marriage and sex out of the dark and whispered domains of the domestic zone and placed it squarely in the

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<sup>11</sup> Althusser commenting on the essay much later in 1978, quoted by Francois Matheron, “Preface,” in *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings* (London: Verso, 1997), 19.



public arena. Sex became a sacrament that the couple administered (!) to each other, no longer merely for procreation but for mutual pleasure and enjoyment. Couples would say, in word and action, that they were Christian, married, sexual beings and not afraid to talk about it openly. Althusser describes it as “aggressive exhibitionism” (SH: 233; EP1: 331) that implied a condemnation of non-religious forms of marriage.

Although the movement had its pastors and theologians (Althusser lists some of the major ones), this is an ecclesiological rather than theological essay, since Althusser is concerned with the state of the Roman Catholic Church in French society rather than the theological dimensions of the movement. The argument here is that the various new directions of the Church in France, brought together under the umbrella of *Action Catholique*, whether agricultural, urban, youth, students, workers, managers, bosses, married couples, were part of the tradition of a dis-established Church. Without the political influence of the established churches of Spain or Italy (he limits his examples yet again to Roman Catholic Churches, neglecting the established Protestant Churches of England, Germany, or the Scandinavian countries), the French Church compensated for its lack of state power by developing a whole voluntary spiritual tradition. Whereas before Catholic Action this was largely passive and parish-based, Catholic Action itself enrolled large numbers of the faithful in active involvement in various arms of the Church. And the public movement of the sacrament of marriage must be read as part of this larger dialectic of French social life. Again we find an argument as much indebted to Marxism as Roman Catholic thought, deeply political and sociological but still focused on the Church.

But that focus is increasingly critical, for Althusser's interest was, as discussed above in relation to “A Matter of Fact” and “The International of Decent Feelings,” in the fringe and experimental groups of the Catholic Left. If he calls upon such groups in “A Matter of Fact” to join with the communists and the proletariat to effect social change as well as an internal transformation of the Church, in “On Conjugal Obscenity” another such group comes in for unrelenting criticism. The





problem with the open valorisation of marriage, relationships, and sex is that it also valued large broods of children and the domestic sphere, now part of this public sacrament of marriage. Althusser is no prude: the “obscenity” in question was not the public nature of the movement, nor even the conjunction of the sexual and the spiritual, but the way its apparent radical edge served to reinforce the most reactionary aspects of Roman Catholic positions on marriage. The bearing and raising of children is no longer a duty of Roman Catholic families, explicitly encouraged to ensure the continuance and increase of Roman Catholics themselves; it now becomes part of the public sacrament of marriage. And so the women, who had begun to have other options open to them, found themselves tied to the long labour of pregnancy, birth, and care for endless numbers of offspring, precisely through an ideology of sexual and spiritual equality. A glimpse of liberation, now channeled into the public affront (for traditional Catholics) of the sacramentalisation of sex, folds back to reinforce the most conventional and reactionary of Catholic positions on the family, except that now the women in question did so in the misguided belief that theirs was a radical path. In other words, through what seemed to be a new departure for women, in which there was for the first time within the Church a spiritual and sexual equality with men, the oppression and subjugation of women that is intrinsic to the Church itself showed itself in a new guise. While Althusser holds out the theoretical possibility that the movement may have run a different course, one that did not render the women Christian mothers and homemakers, there was precious little of that possibility in the movement itself. In the end, whether sexuality and marriage were restricted in the past to the secret and unspoken, or whether they were now aggressively public, it was merely a shift that exhibited what was formerly hidden. For Althusser, the apparent experience of emancipation was nothing more than a new form of servitude, a classic and pernicious form of mystification. The Church still holds sway: “the power that lifted the interdict is the one that established it: the authority that makes the laws can also unmake them” (SH: 239; EP1: 338).



At first sight, Althusser seems to have pulled the log out of his own eye, able to regard clearly the particular features of the French Roman Catholic Church that set it apart from others, such as those in Italy and Spain. The blind spot has apparently gone. But a difference emerges between the “On Conjugal Obscenity” essay and the others I have pondered: in the earlier pieces there was something that Althusser wished to retrieve from the Roman Catholic Church, whether specific doctrines or an allegiance between the bits and pieces of the Catholic Left and Marxism. And in these essays the catholic blind spot comes into play, the tendency to universalise an unacknowledged feature of the institution itself. However, with “On Conjugal Obscenity” he identifies a virulent form of mystification and alienation in the French Roman Catholic Church. Only when he finds nothing retrievable about a certain aspect of the Church can he become specific. But does this not function as a protective mechanism for precisely the features he felt were positive about the Church, universal features that go beyond the specificity of the French Church?

In the detail of my concern over the blind spot of Althusser’s catholicity I have neglected a more basic feature of the “On Conjugal Obscenity” essay that marks the pervasiveness of the institution on Althusser’s thought. This is also an ecclesiological essay that must be read not as a personal preference but as part of the nature of Roman Catholicism itself, where the institution looms large: no salvation outside the Church means that the very forms of religious reflection and life are determined by the institution itself. This feature would transmute into his fully-fledged Marxism that appears not long afterwards (see the essay “On Marxism” from 1953 (SH: 241–57)).

Although “On Conjugal Obscenity” shows an Althusser increasingly critical of the Church, especially of its newer dimensions that came within Catholic Action, he is still throughout these essays within the Church, however tentatively. Another thread that runs through them, as I have argued, is the strained alliance between an emerging Marxism, on the one side, and religious and institutional commitment on the other.



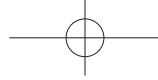
Even the unrelenting criticism of “On Conjugal Obscenity” still has the Church as its main concern. This coalition would eventually raise the question of the relationship between Marxism and Christianity, especially the Roman Catholic variety that Althusser unwittingly assumes to be the norm.

I suggest that the long, legendary letter to Jean Lacroix, a former teacher, does precisely that. In dealing critically with the relation between Roman Catholicism and Marxism, largely in favour of the latter, the letter to Lacroix marks the dissolution of the alliance Althusser had sought until this point. And this is the reason I consider it last in the collection of Althusser’s theological writings. Mainly a response to Lacroix’s book, *Marxisme, Existentialisme, Personnalisme*,<sup>12</sup> the parts that interest me come towards the close (SH: 211–20; EP1: 295–308). Here Althusser deals with the arguments of Lacroix concerning the theological dimensions of Marxism—(divine) judgement, history and eternity, transcendence, and truth.

As for historical judgement and the judgement of history, Althusser takes exception to the characterisation and criticism of Marxism as a theodicy that judges history in terms of a transhistorical ideal. Rather than preferring judgements immanent in history—which, for Althusser, is what Marxists do—Lacroix argues that it is possible to make transcendent judgements that attempt to usurp God’s place. The problem, as Althusser reads him, is that Marxists may also make such judgements, but that in rejecting God they miss the mark, making false divine judgements. From here Althusser pursues the theological contradictions inherent in Lacroix’s position. First, if God were wrong, then it would no longer be a divine judgement but an error in ascertaining God’s judgement. But then, as wrong, it could not be a historical judgement at all, and Marxists lose out on all counts. Second, if Marxists restrict themselves to judgements immanent only in history, they “sin by *omission*” (SH: 212; EP1: 297), for Marxists neglect the crucial dimension of transcendent

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Lacroix, *Marxisme, Existentialisme, Personnalisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950).



judgement. Finally, if we take the other tack and argue that history is transcendent rather than imminent, then divine judgement falls outside history, which would be patently un-theological, since the tradition (a fully Catholic tradition from Augustine to Bossuet) takes history as the judgement of God. Otherwise, Marxist judgements simply do not measure up to the judgement of God, and we are back where we began. In response to Lacroix's accusation that Marxists make the whole of history the judgement of God, precisely because they make value judgements, Althusser responds by taking the position that the only transcendent horizon recognised by Marxists is history itself, that any judgement is imminent to history, which thereby renders it transcendent: "We remain *within history*. Let God, if he exists and if he so desires, damn or save Hitler; that is not our affair" (SH: 214; EP1: 299). What has happened in this response to Lacroix is the gradual severing of the strands that tie Marxism and theology to one another, for Althusser ends up with no possible connection on the crucial question of history between the two. The only possibility left—that God operates by means of judgements immanent in history (for instance, the sin of economic exploitation is visited upon the exploiters)—is ruled out by the tradition of theological reflection upon which Althusser relies.

In his treatment of divine and historical judgement, Althusser interrogates the contradictory relations between Marxism and theology until the whole question falls apart at the seams. However, on the question of time and eternity he is content to prise open the tensions of Lacroix's implicitly theological argument. I do not want to pursue the details of this argument—the problem with eternity as the act of understanding and mastering time (would one need to understand the significance of eternity before mastering it?), the non-significance of any concrete concept of eternity (it does not add anything)<sup>13</sup>—save to emphasise Althusser's insistence that Lacroix stop whitewashing his theological arguments with philosophy,

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<sup>13</sup> "To dub man's understanding of time 'eternity' is to change the name of a street without changing wither its location or the people who live on it; it is a petty postal reform and a minor municipal ceremony" (SH: 215; EP1: 301).



the absurd core of theology with reason. Recognise the absolute transcendence of what you worship, says Althusser:

this transcendent entity has a content you aspire to and cherish with all the force of your soul—and I am convinced you cherish it—but a content so “transcendent” that, strictly speaking, you cannot but be ignorant of it; *not even your aspiration and your spiritual quest can be the sign and the guarantee of the content you aspire to . . . so that one can see that this aspiration is not even proof of itself and that this eternity is the annihilation of all meaning, beginning with its own*, and the condition of absolute absurdity (or rather, not even that, for absurdity still has a meaning, whatever you say) (SH: 216; EP1: 302).

Theology, and especially the object of its reflection, God, seems to have departed the universe without even a wisp of rocket smoke to mark his passing. Is this text yet another sign of Althusser’s parting with theology? On one level it is, but I would also suggest that in an extraordinary twist Althusser would like Lacroix to be a better theologian. In all his efforts to render “eternity” a viable philosophical concept, Lacroix has failed to register the absolute otherness of God: beyond aspiration, spiritual quest, meaning and even absurdity itself. Only such a radical transcendence—one Althusser has just distanced himself from—suits a notion like eternity, except that Lacroix should name what he avoids naming.

Later, transcendence itself comes under withering criticism. In his reply to John Lewis’s notion of the transcendence of “man”—man makes history by transcending history—in Marx’s work (see ESC: 43–45), Althusser charges him with making use of an old theological concept: under the Platonic and neo-Platonic philosophers, it became crucial to the ideology of the ancient or slave-based mode of production; later, following Augustine and Aquinas, it was used to support the Church as the major ideological state apparatus of feudalism; finally, after Hegel, transcendence, “wrapped” in the veil of the ‘negation of negation’ (ESC: 44) was transformed into the notion of bourgeois liberty, upheld most strongly by the petit-bourgeoisie. Lewis turns out to be a crypto-



theologian: “‘transcendence,’ in its authoritarian or eschatological form, is still flourishing today among large numbers of theologians, some reactionary, some very progressive, from Germany and Holland to Spain and Latin America” (ESC: 45).

But, returning to the Lacroix letter, the point regarding transcendence is by no means the end of Althusser’s objections, for any half-decent theologian knows that transcendence is neither the foundation (Lacroix’s position) nor the result of immanence. Rather, one cannot exist without the other. And so Althusser calls on Lacroix to render justice to immanence:

Or, again, this transcendent entity has an assignable content, i.e., you think there must exist values which explain history, which are history’s inner law, at once present within it and governing it, but in that case say so, name them, and *confront them with the history* they are part of, seriously, honestly, without sheltering behind an eternity which is supposedly a “*presence*” in time, and that which “constitutes” history; “incarnate them” if need be ... (SH: 216; EP1: 303).

The allusion to Christology is hardly accidental, for in theology the centre of the paradox of transcendence and imminence hinges on the figure of Christ, God inexplicably incarnated as “man.” I want to suggest that Althusser shows up as the better theologian of the two: if Lacroix is going to make theological points, then he should make a clean breast of it and say so.

Even though Althusser’s reprimand seeps with the nostalgia for a decent theological argument, it is not something he sees himself doing. Rather, a proper demarcation of theology and philosophy, like that between political science and theology in Montesquieu’s work (see PH: 21–22; MPH: 10–11), enables him to leave theology behind, although he walks on slowly, trying not to look back. Philosophy then becomes the explication and elaboration of the truths provided by the proletariat, or, as he later famously put it, class conflict in theory. What he does not want is the blending of the two that he finds in Lacroix’s work, exactly the alliance he had himself sought not so long ago (see SH: 206; EP1:



288), which leads not only to insuperable contradictions but also to ridiculous positions, such as the argument that eternity constitutes a transcendent or “spiritual” meaning to history (a path Lacroix does not but may be forced to take, and so Althusser uses the example of Mounier’s spiritual history of Munich).

In the breakdown of the alliance on which he was so keen in “The International of Decent Feelings” and “A Matter of Fact,” Althusser has taken two different tacks thus far: the impossible tensions between Marxism and theology, and the demarcation of theology and philosophy. He will make one more, drawn from the question of class, to argue that Lacroix’s positions—“a history ‘other’ than the one actually experienced by men, to ‘spiritual significance,’ to divine judgement, or to concepts shrouded in mystery” (SH: 218; EP1: 305)—are none other than those used by philosophers and kings to justify injustice. In others words, Althusser invokes the standard Marxist argument of mystification, that the language of religion and theology is nothing but a justification for oppression and hence a signal of alienation. But what interests me here is the biblical quotation used against Lacroix to back up his argument: “Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone” (Matt. 7:9). Read in light of Althusser’s argument, the biblical text becomes one that questions precisely Lacroix’s theological mystifications: “Can we give stones to those who give us bread?” Not the first time he has made this move,<sup>14</sup> but its ambiguity here is inescapable: the Bible against the quasi-theological arguments of philosophers and kings. But then, as I have argued in my discussions of Bloch and Benjamin, the Bible and theology are by no means the most comfortable of companions.

In the long process of the collapse of the alliance between communists and progressive Christians, particularly the groups of the Catholic Left, Althusser signals to his former teacher the “catholic” paradox of his own move:

... in *actively* rallying to the working class, we have not only not repudi-

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<sup>14</sup> “As for eternity, no man hath seen it but the Son, as St. John says” (SH: 214; EP1: 300); “No man hath seen God, says John” (SH: 216; EP1: 302).



ated what had been our reasons for living, but have liberated them by fully realizing them. I think we deserve our future, even from Wilde's point of view, in that *we have not disregarded our past*: we have watched our past grow inside us and bear fruit in a manner beyond the hopes of our youth. The Christian I once was has in no way abjured his Christian "values," but now I live them (this is an . . . "historical," not a divine judgement!), whereas earlier I aspired to live them (SH: 221; EP1: 308–9).

Obviously this marks a decisive moment in the long transition from Christian to Marxist commitment, and I am not the first to make the point. However, more is going on here. For this longer "confession" spins out the curious use of the gospel of Matthew against the theologian Lacroix: it seems to me that despite himself Althusser provides us with an unwitting recognition of his own inescapable catholicism.<sup>15</sup> And he does so by means of the blind spot I have been tracking in these early writings. The "values" of which he writes are those of love, hope, and faith, the radical political and moral code of the Beatitudes and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). The teleology rivals that of Bloch's argument for atheism as the logical outcome of the Bible and Christianity. But Althusser's comments obscure that which is so persistent in his thought, namely the catholicism that remained after he had discarded both the epithet "Roman" and the capital letter of "Catholic" itself. In other words, what Althusser regards as the realisation of Christian "values" in his communism, those that could not be realised when he was a Christian, include the Roman Catholic context in which he imbibed those values in the first place. In fact, we may go further than this:

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<sup>15</sup> So also with what may be read as the obverse of his comment to Lacroix, now on Spinoza from *Reading Capital*. Even though he substitutes the targets—capitalism taking the place of the Church—he must of course begin with the Church: "What also fascinated me about Spinoza was his philosophical strategy: . . . For Spinoza began with God! He began with God and finally (I believe, in accordance with the tradition of his worst enemies) he was (like Da Costa and so many other Portuguese Jews of his time) an atheist. A supreme strategist, he began by laying siege to the enemy's most vital and most heavily fortified point or rather placed himself there as if he were his own enemy and therefore not under suspicion himself of being the enemy, taking over the enemy's theoretical fortress and turning it against that enemy, as if one were to turn the cannons of a fortress against its occupants" (RC: 85–86).





the notion of Christian “values” is a sleight of hand for “Catholicism” itself.

From the thesis on Hegel to the letter to Lacroix, which I have characterised as Althusser’s theological and ecclesiological writings, I have argued for the gradual collapse of the troubled alliance Althusser sought to establish between radical Roman Catholicism and Marxism, the shift from someone comfortable with theological arguments to one highly critical, preferring that theology and philosophy keep to their own spheres, and the function of a certain blind spot in regard to catholicity. In the end, this catholicity interests me most. Not only is its perpetuation in his work enabled by the attempted and then abandoned alliance between Marxism and the Catholic Left, but catholicity leaves its mark in these early works precisely when he wishes to hold onto certain elements that he values from Roman Catholicism. And at these moments what I have called the catholic blind spot appears, when he assumes without acknowledgement that the particular Roman Catholic issues of which he speaks are universal issues. The paradox of the blind spot shows up most sharply at the moment he explicitly recognises his departure from the Church. Or rather, as he puts it, from his Christian faith: he could only realise the Christian values he aspired to as a Christian when he relinquished his commitment. It is precisely the use of these terms, severed from their specific Roman Catholic context and universalised as values and commitment, that signals the pervasiveness of Althusser’s catholicity.

## Historicising the Church

At any rate it [communism] will not come about as a result of the eschatological visions of a religious ideology with which we are all utterly bored (FLLT: 226; LDL: 219).

For one who had renounced the Roman Catholic Church and religious commitment, it is remarkable how often Althusser returns to what he



tends to call “religion,” by which he means primarily the Church, although theology appears often enough. One of the strongest ways in which Althusser deals with the Church in his later writings is by historicising its presence and influence, most notably in his most well known essay “Apparatuses.” But the move recurs in other texts, especially the similar analyses of Montesquieu and Machiavelli: “Montesquieu: Politics and History” (PH: 13–109; MPH) and the lectures, *Machiavelli and Us*.

I suggest that one way in which Althusser’s historicising of the Church may be read is as an allegory for his own path out of the Church. The allegorical key that links his personal rejection with history is the figure of Marx himself, particularly the “break” between the early humanist Marx and the later scientific manifestation. For Althusser, the early Marx took over Feuerbach’s criticism of religion, that is, Christianity (was not Feuerbach’s great text *The Essence of Christianity?*). Although Marx inverted Feuerbach’s argument—that religion projects all that is best about man, his powers and productive forces, on a being greater than himself whom he then worships—to argue that religion projects all that is worst about human existence, specifically understood in terms of alienation, he falls within the same logic. For Feuerbach, the lack of recognition of the true nature of religion—that man worships the best in himself—produces an alienation that can only be overcome when man becomes aware of such a situation and reclaims these powers, his own essence, for himself. For Marx, alienation may be overcome by realising the truth of the oppression that is projected into the heavens, an alienation that is in fact found in the State and in political economics. In this respect, he was for Althusser a humanist rather than a Marxist, since he “originally espoused Feuerbach’s problematic of the generic essence of man and of alienation” (PSP: 233). By *Capital*—although even here there were problems—alienation disappears, as does the humanist Marx, consigned to a biographical past that Althusser will replicate in his analysis of history.

In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser arrives at the notion of ideological state apparatuses in response to the initial



question concerning the reproduction of the conditions of production. Without going into the detailed discussion of the essay that I have written elsewhere,<sup>16</sup> my interest here is the way Althusser deals with the Church and religion. In an effort to answer the question as to what happens when key Marxist categories such as production, means of production, relations of production, the state and ideology are considered from the perspective of reproduction—as well as an attempt to provide a comprehensive theory of the state that goes beyond the mostly descriptive level of Marxist analysis—Althusser develops his distinction between Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses (which he earlier described as regions or domains (PSP: 26–27, 36–37)) and thereby produces a major advance in the notion of ideology.

Whereas the state apparatus—with its components of government, administration, police, law courts, prisons, and army—operates primarily by repression (violence and its threat), the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) work predominantly through ideology. Often the Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses function together in complex ways, but the ISAs are characterised by tension and conflict precisely in the realm of ideology. Given that ideology is intrinsically tied up with class—sometimes described as class-consciousness—the ISAs are thereby sites of class conflict (here Althusser develops a comment of Marx in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (LP: 147; SR: 284)). What strikes me about the essay, however, is not so much the list of ISAs—religious, educational, family, legal, political, trade union, communications, cultural—but the concentration on the Church and education in his discussion.

Thus, he argues that the educational ISA (rather than the more obvious political ISA), with its system of public and private schools, is the dominant form under capitalism (LP: 152; SR: 288). It serves to train children in the various skills and attitudes felt to be appropriate to the different functionaries of the capitalist state—exploited, exploiters, exploiters' auxiliaries, and the “high priests” of the ruling ideology. The success of the educational ISA is its ability to screen itself behind the

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<sup>16</sup> Roland Boer, *Marxist Criticism of the Bible* (London: Continuum, 2003).



more obvious ISAs, yet this is precisely why it is so effective. Althusser's analysis of the educational system, focused on France, is classic ideology critique, a devastating demystification of the nature of education (know-how wrapped in ruling ideology—language, literature, mathematics, science etc—and pure ideology—ethics, civic instruction and philosophy) and the stages of its productive cycle, from early proletarian school leavers through middle managers to the final products such as academics, capitalists, politicians, and professional ideologists. Each stage has its particular and appropriate ideology injected en route (see LP: 155–56; SR: 290–92). The sheer time, in terms of hours of the day and length of years at school, makes the educational ISA extremely powerful. And this is coupled with an image that the educational institutions project concerning themselves, as a neutral environment, free of ideology.

Apart from the passing comments that both school and family work together very closely (LP: 154; SR: 290), the significance of Althusser's concern with the educational ISA is what it replaces: the Church. He argues that under feudalism the Church was as “natural,” indispensable and generous as the school is today. In the same way that the school is now coupled with the family, so the Church made a highly effective ideological force with the family.

Here lies the historicising move Althusser makes with regard to the Church. In the Middle Ages, when the various ISAs were fewer, the religious ISA (the Church) undertook a variety of functions that have separated into different ISAs under capitalism, especially education and culture. Other ISAs operated, such as the political, proto-trade union (guilds and associations), publishing and communications, although these were developing out of the Church. Yet, by concentrating within itself the religious, educational, communications, and cultural functions, the Church was dominant.

However, it is the process of dissolution and usurpation, put forward as a historical narrative, that signals Althusser's own ideological treatment of the Church. “It is no accident that all ideological struggle, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, starting with the first shocks of



the Reformation, was *concentrated* in an anti-clerical and anti-religious struggle; rather this is the function precisely of the dominant position of the religious ideological State apparatus” (LP: 151; SR: 288). The process he describes of the attack on the Church, the reduction of its power, dissolution of its functions after the French Revolution and replacement with another dominant ISA, implicitly takes on a positive role in his analysis. The long struggle to do so, with its advances and setbacks, the various shifts and alliances of the bourgeoisie, the battle between landed aristocracy and industrial bourgeoisie—all of these were directed at taking over the Church’s functions. This struggle was not merely the result of a gripe against the Church, but necessary for the political hegemony of the bourgeoisie as well as the “ideological hegemony indispensable to the reproduction of capitalist relations of production” (LP: 152; SR: 288). This then brings him to the educational ISA, the successful bourgeois replacement of the Church.

With this narrative, Althusser has produced a double remove from the Church: his own political militancy against the bourgeoisie also renders it a buffer against the Church. Having removed the Church as a dominant ISA, the bourgeoisie has performed a distinctly useful task for Althusser. (In this way he replicates Marx’s recognition of the necessary role of the capitalism and the bourgeoisie for the eventual step to communism.) All of this Althusser casts in a historical narrative.

He returns to this historicising move on a number of occasions. In his long essay on Montesquieu, he notes with approval Montesquieu’s effort to render political reflection a science that neither bases itself on the transcendent orders of theology or morality, nor on the principles of natural law which still operated with a theological model of the legislator beyond law. But notice the way Althusser shapes his reading of what is by now an old argument: “it is hard to imagine today the weight of ecclesiastical decree on history” (PH: 21; MPH: 10). Montesquieu’s delicate separation of political science from theology (he seems to have had a religious commitment that he tried to keep out of his critical work) is thrown back into a past, one in the transition from feudalism to capitalism that is



familiar from the ideology essay but unfamiliar to contemporary political scientists. Besides this point, it is the form in which Althusser casts the observation that has by now become familiar: “the weight of ecclesiastical decree” is what stands over history and science. And Althusser glides easily between theology, religion and the Church: theology and religion understandably stand in for one another in a European context saturated with the assumption that Christianity and its ideology form the template for “religion” itself. But the slip to ecclesiology is the indelible institutional stamp of Althusser’s take on religion, let alone his wider philosophical positions in regard to ideology (see further below).

A comparable historicising move appears in the lecture notes *Machiavelli and Us* (1999; 1994), where Althusser acknowledges in passing Machiavelli’s treatment of the Church, or “ecclesiastical principalities” (ch XI of *The Prince*). Even though this is an “astounding chapter” (MU: 69; MN: 128), within a few lines the Church is thrown in with a number of other principalities—tyrannies, hereditary states and republics—that cannot and will not provide the basis for the unification of Italy and the modern state. Why? Machiavelli is interested in the ecclesiastical principalities only because of the Italian context. Second, Althusser notes Machiavelli’s own reason: since such principalities are controlled by a higher power beyond the human mind, they fall outside the categories that interest him. As a result, the rulers do not defend their states, nor do they govern their subjects. At this point, Althusser provides his own brief comment, namely, that such principalities are “*outside history*” (MU: 70; MN: 128; emphasis in original). This is more than the historicising I traced above, for the Church is now by definition beyond the historical process and therefore does not count.

The moment he has made this point, however, Althusser reverts to his historical explanation. Interpreting Machiavelli, he argues that the principalities with which the Church is grouped are outdated, that is, feudal. Now Althusser finds the historicising move in Machiavelli’s mind (“something Machiavelli himself does not specifically state, but which he thinks” (MU:70; MN: 129)). Thus, like Machiavelli, Althusser also makes



“a clean sweep of existing feudal forms” (MU:70; MN: 129).

Yet, for Machiavelli another dimension runs alongside the feudal uselessness of the ecclesiastical principalities, and that is his persistent argument that politics should not be subservient to religion (the pattern of the Church), but that politics must use religion to achieve its ends, namely unification and expansion. At this point, Althusser provides no comment, although such a political principle may well form part of a more developed materialist philosophy and politics of religion, the undeveloped pieces of which appear at various points in Althusser’s writings. In fact, in the final chapter, he exegetes Machiavelli’s arguments regarding the roles of the army and religion in the new state, but I will consider this more closely below.

As far as the ecclesiastical principalities are concerned, they are, along with tyrannies, hereditary states, and republics, to be conquered and transformed, to be the raw material of the new national state. The specific example is Cesare Borgia (see MU: 77–79; MN: 139–42), the model new prince whose fortune ran out when he succumbed to marsh fever at the moment when he might have made decisive moves for Italian unity. He put aside any benefit or heritage from ecclesiastical origins. Son of Pope Alexander VI, cardinal and archbishop at the age of 16, granted the Romagna at the fringes of the Papal state, he renounced his titles in order to consolidate and expand this marginal territory only to miss his final opportunity through a turn in *fortuna*. What Machiavelli provides for Althusser in the example of Cesare is the historical supersession of the Church in a biographical individual. Cesare’s own rejection of the Church’s hereditary and titular honours, his option for the secular rather than the religious, fits completely within Althusser’s model of the passing of the feudal Church for the bourgeois world of capitalism. Machiavelli provides him with the political theory for that transition.

I have suggested that the works I have considered here—the Ideology and Montesquieu essays along with the Machiavelli lecture notes—carry out a significant historicising move in Althusser’s thought. Apart from the more recognised and continuing contribution that the



Ideology essay provides for Marxist thought, an investigation into the mechanism of ideology rather than its effects, it also has this historicising function in relation to the Church. The other works bear this as a sub-theme as well. These works allow him, by means of a more substantial theory, to narrate the fact that he also has slipped, unnoticed, out the cathedral door—no matter whether the Church is “outside history,” or whether the bourgeoisie has performed the immensely useful task of dispensing with the Church in its own revolutionary emergence, or whether the Church is of a feudal past that must be superseded in the new Machiavellian state, even if it provides some of the raw materials for that state, or whether individual figures, either Marx or Cesare Borgia, provide Althusser with a biographical identification for his own apostasy. As far as Althusser is concerned, the Church is well past its dominance, both historically and personally.

Or perhaps not . . . for he cannot desist from speaking about the Church. It is surprising how often the pioneer of Marxist philosophy (what he would later term “aleatory materialism”), champion of a scientific Marxism and communist militant, returns to speak of the Church.

## Understanding the Enemy: Idealism

. . . who could claim that “man” had “made” the natural world which he knows? Only idealists, or rather only that crazy species of idealists who attribute God’s omnipotence to man. Even idealists are not normally so stupid (ESC: 55).

I have been concerned until now with the negative register of Althusser’s catholicity, specifically in terms of his gradual move out of the Church and his efforts to historicise that rejection. I will remain with his departure from the Church for a little longer, before passing over to reflect on a more constructive possibility arising from Althusser’s own work. A second effort to make sense of his gradual shift of allegiance is the critique of idealism. Here Althusser shifts from the specific concern





with the Church as an institution well past its historical moment to the generic notion of religion. Although habitual in European thought, steeped as it is with centuries of Christianity, it is rarely enough emphasised that when people like Althusser speak of “religion” they mean Christianity. Beneath the following discussion, in which Althusser repeatedly uses “religion,” we find the universalising move that I designated earlier as his catholicity, now operating at an even wider level.

Let us begin with sentence production: Althusser’s style, carrying on a tradition within Marxism, is noticeably militant. Indeed, his first wish—to become a communist militant (LP: 11; SDM: 148)—carries through in his second, to become a Marxist philosopher. The continual agenda involved not only opposition to bourgeois ideology and politics, but also dealing with the pervasive influence of such thought within Marxism itself. So there is an urgent need, following Marx’s own work, to understand the enemy.

In this respect, Althusser identifies what he calls the “spiritual complement” (glossing Marx) of the world outlook of idealism and its philosophical form, neo-positivism (he writes in the 1960s). For Althusser, this bourgeois world outlook itself is economism or technocracy; the spiritual complement is ethical idealism or humanism. Neither is necessarily religious, and indeed both, springing from the Enlightenment, carry a strong non-religious component. Yet, Althusser’s target is not merely bourgeois ideology per se, but also the strong emphasis on the “humanist” Marx of the early writings, as well as the continuing influence of the utopian socialists (Saint-Simon, Fourier et al). It is as though the earlier, humanist Marx is just a little too idealistic and utopian, that he veers too closely to the ideological mix of bourgeois thought for which the names of Hegel and Feuerbach act as codes. Thus, in an explication of the famous setting of Hegel on his feet at the beginning of *Capital*, Althusser identifies the specific Hegelian danger against which Marx sets himself. For Hegel characterises history in terms of an internal spiritual principle, which can be nothing other than the most abstract religious or philosophical consciousness, that is taken as the core of all the elements of the concrete



life of a people from economics to philosophy (see FM: 103; PM: 102). But this rejection of the humanistic and Hegelian Marx is a tricky move for Althusser to make, for if Marx was still influenced by humanist traits until 1875, Marxism can only expunge those elements with great difficulty. Althusser, would of course agree: the great task of Marxism is to be ever vigilant against the danger of bourgeois thought and practice.

Not only is it a strategy for understanding the enemy outside the gates, the need to understand idealism is also a weapon against the enemy within, the covert idealist in the ranks of Marxists. This danger emerges most urgently with the distinction between utopian and scientific socialism that Althusser picks up from Engels.<sup>17</sup> For Althusser, utopian socialist doctrine “proposes *socialist* goals for human action . . . based on non-scientific principles, deriving from religious, moral or juridical, that is, *ideological* principles” (PSPP: 3). Even though they may appear socialist, the various ends and means—the “reign of equality and the brotherhood of man” along with the workers’ cooperatives, people’s banks, moral education, and reform, even the conversion of the head of state (PSP: 3)—of utopian socialism are in the end bourgeois, even Feuerbachian (see FM: 225, fn 6; PM: 231–32, fn 6). The problem is, however, not that there is a distinct bourgeois socialism—even though this may well be the case—outside the socialist movement, but that a good part of the movement itself was and is driven by such ideals, which lead to either anarchist or reformist tendencies. Thus, Marxism needs both to identify the heretics within, guard against the threats from the dominant ideology, and ensure that their “doctrines” do not derail proper scientific socialism.

The key to the distinction between the utopian and scientific socialists is not merely the problems and dangers of the content of utopian socialism, but the very form in which Althusser casts the argument. The first signal is the use of “doctrine,” remarkably frequent throughout his writings but also a term that has all the wear and tear of a long and

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<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Engels, “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,” in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1880 [1989]), 281–325.



combative usage in the Church. Althusser sees philosophy operating in terms of didactic and dogmatic propositions, the latter taking the form of philosophical theses (PSP: 74). But the distinction in question is that between Marx's scientific "doctrine" and utopian socialist "doctrine." These doctrines are not merely theoretical bases but directives for belief and action with distinct consequences. Doctrine, as Althusser observes, influences the ends to which one works and the means of achieving them, and the distinction between utopian and scientific doctrines has the inescapable taint of ecclesial benchmarks for belief and practice that demarcate one denomination from another. As a doctrine, then, Marxism becomes the true "guide" for action (PSP: 13), dialectical materialism is the "guide" for historical materialism, and one would be forgiven for images that come to mind of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, or perhaps the Protestant reliance on the Bible, as the necessary and only guide for life. Too often, however, this point or one comparable to it has been used as a cheap shot at the "church of Marxism" or the substitution of one sacred text for another. Far more interesting is Fredric Jameson's point that the comparison of Marxism with Christianity functions not to the detriment of Marxism but to its benefit, that it can function as comprehensively as a system as Christianity for making sense of the place of the biographical individual within the vast spans of history and nature. Or to put it in Althusser's terms, Marxism is a far more adequate system than idealism ever could be.

One of the most sustained efforts to explicate the features of idealism comes in the lectures "Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists" (PSP: 69–165), where Althusser's slogan concerning philosophy as "class conflict in theory" appears as the organising distinction between materialist and idealist philosophies of science. These are the "spontaneous" philosophies of the scientists, over against the more explicit scientific world-views or philosophical arguments consciously borrowed from elsewhere. In light of the materialist-idealist opposition, he makes a division (again) between what he terms Element One and Element Two. The former, characteristic of a smaller group of scientists,



is one that holds to the material existence of the object of scientific knowledge, the objectivity of the knowledges produced and the validity of the scientific method. Element Two, also spontaneous, comes from outside, imposing religious, spiritualist or idealist categories on science. These categories call into question the assumptions of Element One, namely the material existence of the object, the objectivity of its knowledge and the viability of the scientific method.

Althusser will go on to argue that Element Two has dominated science, to the latter's detriment, and that the minority position of Element One—much like the communist party and true scientific Marxism—has held out against the inroads of Element Two only to await its emergence as the proper spontaneous philosophy of science through the agency of the scientists themselves. In this respect, science is no different from the political and ideological struggles of the world outside science. But the political point is that such a transformation can take place only through an alliance, comparable to the one in the eighteenth century, between materialist philosophy and materialist science: this point will become an increasingly dominant feature as the lectures draw to a close. The difference with the Enlightenment alliance and the one Althusser proposes is that the materialism of the scientists and *philosophes*, however much it stood against the obscurantism of the Christian Church, still fell into Element Two, for it resorted to the rising power of juridical ideology that began to replace that of religion. Like religion, the juridical comes from the outside, an idealist and practical ideology that left science no better off. Of course, only the materialism of Marxist philosophy can provide the means for a “correct” (a term favored by Althusser) spontaneous philosophy that comes from Element One.

I am interested, however, in the elisions and realignments of Element Two, which falls under the sweep of idealism. In the “Spontaneous Philosophy” lectures, the distinction between Elements One and Two comes later, after a lengthy discussion of the way scientists themselves respond to crises within science. In this discussion, Althusser distinguishes between three responses, one a manifestation of Element



One and the other two from Element Two (the realm of practical ideologies such as the religious, juridical, moral, and aesthetic). But the shift from two to three categories—or rather the designation of three that are then collapsed into two—is a move that gives religion much more space than the others, in the end swamping idealism itself.

According to Althusser, scientific crises—for instance, Greek mathematics or modern physics—produce three characteristic responses: science keeps its head and treats the crises as a test or episode, well within the perimeters of science (what will come to be seen as a Element One); or science goes off the deep end and sees a huge crisis that brings out either a religious response, discerning a “divine surprise” in the crisis, or a spiritualist response that appears more tempered; and then there are those who unwittingly engage in the philosophy of science, attacking the “bad philosophy” of materialism in the name of a better philosophy, whether that be Ostwald’s energeticism, Mach’s empirio-criticism or British empiricism, all of which are variations on idealism (both the second and third responses fall into Element Two). The first option is the minority response, the second the extreme and the third appears moderate, although it brings out the truth of the conflict between materialist and idealist positions. But note how Althusser focuses on the second response: “we have known since Pascal and Kant that behind the borders assigned science by philosophy there lurks religion” (PSP: 111). Science itself comes under question, and the crisis is read as a timely warning that science should remain within its boundaries.

A little later Althusser generalises this second category: “the vast *majority* of known philosophies have, throughout the history of philosophy, always *exploited* the sciences (and not simply their failures) to the profit of the ‘values’ (a provisional term) of *practical ideologies*: religious, moral, juridical, aesthetic, political, etc.” (PSP: 120; italics Althusser’s). Here he distinguishes between religious and spiritualist responses, the one exploiting science for overtly religious ends, as with the brilliance of Pascal or the vacuousness of Teilhard de Chardin,<sup>18</sup> and the other ultimately a moral

<sup>18</sup> Chardin is the subject of a curious polemic by Althusser, returning time and again for



philosophy, dependent on political, religious and then juridical norms. As the argument spins out, the spiritualists start to invade the territory of the idealists proper, which began as the third response to the crises of science. A shuffling takes place, the initial distinction between the second and third responses in terms of religious/spiritualist and idealist ends up being a distinction between religious (second) and spiritualist (third). Subsequently, this slippage will allow Althusser to subsume the spiritualists under religion.

The mechanism of this inclusion is a historicising one. Althusser goes on to read the spiritualists, among whom he numbers Bergson, Brunschvicg, and Ricoeur, as well as the humanist Marxists (he can hardly avoid the dig) like Garaudy, with their variations on the ultimate categories of freedom and the human spirit, as the successors to religious philosophers of science. In order to do so, he periodises, moving from the political ideology of the Greeks through the long dominance of religious ideologies to the rise of juridical ideologies among the emergent bourgeoisie: all of these provide the primary ideology upon which moral philosophy, the preferred mode of the spiritualist philosophers of science, depends. Indeed, such a moral philosophy functions as a fallback position, a second best option that allows one to deal with the decline of religion (the historical location of Christianity as past) or the overt strength of the juridical.

Before we know it, another reshuffle has taken place that allows religion to emerge as the all-pervading feature. Here Althusser makes a characteristic move, collapsing both dimensions of the spiritualist response—a response to declining religion or to the growing strength of the juridical—into religion.

To spell it out: when religion fails, it may be an advantage to be able to fall back upon morality: it makes no difference that the morality in question is bound up both with a declining religious ideology *and* with ascendant

a hammering: “palaeontologist and priest, authentic scientist [*savant*] and authentic clergyman, exploiting science for the profit of his faith: directly” (PSP: 111); “. . . without being able to find anything in his work to counterbalance the vacuous and deluded enterprise of a palaeontologist dressed in a cassock who prides himself on being a priest” (PSP: 121).



juridical ideology. To spell it out: when juridical ideology is too overt, and when espousing it might damage the cause you wish to defend, it may be an advantage to be able to fall back upon morality, its by-product, and *to treat it as if it had more to do with religion than with juridical ideology*, or, if not religion, then the Human Spirit and its freedom (PSP: 126; second italics mine).

Two lines of argument run through this text: the overt content has moral ideology dependent in various configurations on the religious and then juridical ideologies. But beside this dominant argument runs another: either religion begins to fail so the spiritualist resorts to moral arguments, or the juridical is too strong, so the spiritualist has recourse to moral-as-religious ideology, invoking the older relation between religious and moral ideology. In the former, religion is the background to moral ideology; in the latter it becomes the position of retreat to which one returns. In short, the moral ideologist, who is nothing other than the spiritualist philosopher of science, begins with religion and ends with religion, and even the juridical fades away. In the patterns of distinctions and slippages, religion, as absent cause, seems to reappear with what is becoming a familiar regularity.

What then, is the function of distinguishing three responses to scientific crises—*intra-scientific, religious/spiritualist and idealist*? In an extraordinary process of shifting allegiances and re-alignments, Althusser has had the spiritualists occupy the territory of the idealists and then subsumed these spiritualist philosophers under religion. So, by the time he gets to the discussion of Elements One and Two, the great philosophical class divide between materialism and idealism, we have already come to the point of identifying “religion” as a determining feature of idealism rather than merely one of the practical ideologies of idealism.

Throughout this text, Althusser prefers the term “religion,” but I will insist again that he means Christianity, not only because of the European context of his analysis, but also because he deals with a distinctly European and Western phenomenon, the philosophy of science. And I have already argued that in Althusser’s case Christianity means the



Church, specifically the Roman Catholic Church. With this in mind, the various patterns of his argument become an extraordinary instance of the catholicity of his thought subsequent to leaving the Church. I mean this in a specific sense: not merely the tendency to deal in universal categories, but also the inadvertent moves that grant religion, that is, Christianity, that is, the Church, a pervasive presence. This “religion,” however, remains firmly in control of enemy territory, idealism, or in the case of this argument, Element Two of the philosophy of scientists. Or rather, through his argument, Althusser has granted religion this ground. It remains to see whether he can contain it.

## A Materialist Philosophy of Religion?

For if we examine the question closely, we shall come to realize that philosophy is satisfied neither with dominating the sciences nor with “speaking” the truth of the sciences. Philosophy equally imposes its dominion over religion and morality, politics and aesthetics, and even economics (PSP: 245).

A distinct philosophical need for Althusser is the perpetual process of making distinctions, between, for instance, the humanist and the scientific Marx, or idealism and materialism, or utopian and scientific paths to a revolutionary theory and practice, or the various ideological state apparatuses. Some of these are extremely fruitful, but my own interest is the way “religion” operates in such distinctions. Religion therefore belongs to humanism, idealism and utopia, rather than the properly Marxist domains of science and materialism. It is, as I have noted above, a distinct ideological state apparatus—and thereby inescapably institutional—whose dominance under feudalism has been surpassed by education. Yet, like the fading of his line between the humanist and scientific Marx, or the ability of religion to dominate the whole realm of idealism that I traced in the preceding section, Althusser cannot contain religion within the distinctions he sets, for in his own work it leaks into the hard-headed and rational realms of materialism and science. In this final section of





the chapter, I am interested less with the various modes of rejection and opposition in Althusser's dealings with the Church. Rather, I want to piece together the bits and pieces that suggest the possibilities for understanding religion within materialist philosophy. And what has happened here is a shift from theology to the philosophy of religion: if the early Althusser was directly concerned with theology and ecclesiology, then the shift to the later, much more well-known Althusser, is marked by the seeds of a materialist philosophy of religion rather than theology.

Or, to put it differently, how can the materialist philosopher speak of the possibility, in regard to his favoured Montesquieu, of "*a true sociological theory of religious and moral beliefs*" (PH: 23; MPH: 13)? Further, such a sociology of religion, seeking to understand religion in human terms, must be distinguished from a religious meaning that is beyond sociology. We could write this off as Althusser's assessment of Montesquieu, one that he did not himself endorse. I suspect this may be the case with the second statement concerning the orders of sociology and religion, but not the first, for does not Althusser seek a materialist philosophy of religion? I suggest that there are two logical stages in Althusser's reflections: the first is the process by which he gets to the point, despite himself, where one of the proper subjects of philosophy is religion; the second concerns the various elements of what he calls the "practical ideology" of religion.

### The Logical Necessity

Despite the oft repeated rejection of religion, whether through a whole series of distinctions in which religion appears in the negative register of the equation, or through the historicising of the Church itself, Althusser makes a number of fascinating moves that bring him to the philosophical necessity of reflecting on what he calls religion: the notion that Marx's new science of History requires a new philosophy; the implications of his late engagement with Hegel via Lenin; the need for philosophy to mediate between science and ideology and to reconsider practical ideologies such as religion; the possible place of a theory of religion within proletarian ideology.



Let us begin with his famous argument, reiterated at various points, that Marx opened up a decisively new moment in human thought. Althusser's metaphor is the "continent" of History, the new scientific theory—understood as a system of concepts—of History. He compares it to the "continents" of Mathematics, opened up by the Greeks in the fifth century BCE, and of Physics by Galileo and then Newton (see LP: 38–46; SM: 115–21).<sup>19</sup> The implications of such discoveries must follow his argument that each new science then produces a philosophy, the need to produce the categories adequate to the new science. In the same way that Plato and Greek philosophy follow the discovery of Mathematics, and that of Descartes and Newton follows Physics, so also Marxist philosophy can only emerge after the discovery of a scientific theory of History. This argument also accounts for the time lag in the emergence of a proper Marxist philosophy, a philosophy that Althusser implies begins in large part with him.

But there are wider implications than philosophy—although this is the path that Althusser takes. He mentions in passing that the human and social sciences must also take into account Marx's discovery—economists, historians, sociologists, social psychologists, psychologists, historians of art and literature, of religious and other ideologies—and even linguists and psycho-analysts. Thus far only piecemeal work has been done. What interests me here is that Marx's "discovery" must also have a bearing on religion, or more specifically the history of religious ideology.

A second, and more specific, logical move is tied to Hegel. Even though he professed a profound aversion to Hegel, or rather argues that the properly scientific Marx emerged only after he had finally shed his Hegelianism, Althusser can never quite excoriate Hegel entirely. A major reason is that Lenin—in the context of Althusser's polemical assumption that Lenin could do less wrong than Marx—is fascinated with Hegel. And if we thought that Althusser had put Hegel's theology

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<sup>19</sup> Earlier (LP: 39; SM: 116), in 1968, he leaves open the possibility that Freud himself opened up a new continent, but within a year seems to have given up this suggestion (LP: 72; AL: 10).



behind him, then it is Lenin who permits him to return to that theology, now in the form of the philosophy of religion. Despite all his dislike for the Hegelian dialectic, he draws near to Adorno's contradictory critique of Kierkegaard, that is, he both rejects theology and reads it dialectically. Both sides of this response to Hegel's theology he finds in Lenin. Thus, Althusser quotes Lenin arguing that Hegel's criticism of Kant is correct:

Kant disparages knowledge in order to make way for faith: Hegel exalts knowledge, asserting that knowledge is knowledge of God. The materialist exalts the knowledge of matter, of nature, consigning God, and the philosophical rabble that defends God, to the rubbish heap (LP: 116).<sup>20</sup>

Here we find the rejection, the dumping of God and theologians into the garbage bin, yet while doing so, a more interesting move from Hegel to the materialist position emerges.

Following Lenin, Althusser sees a dialectical logic from Hegel to materialism—although this is only possible after reading Marx's *Capital*—which is the move from the “knowledge of God” to the “knowledge of matter.” All of this takes a further twist when Althusser explores Lenin's fascination with Hegel's discussion of the Absolute Idea in the last chapter of Hegel's *Science of Logic*. For here, ostensibly the characteristic Hegelian closure with God, Lenin finds the greatest possibilities for materialism in Hegel's thought. In other words, using Hegel's own dialectical method, the more idealistic he gets, the more materialistic he becomes (see LP: 120-1). Althusser's own elaboration is to argue that what we find in this section of the *Logic*, after having traced through Marx's own setting of Hegel on his feet, is that the Absolute Idea is none other than the process—History, Nature, Method etc.—without a subject (God). For in Hegel's own writing, God seems strangely to disappear from this final part of the *Logic*, and Althusser's argument is that it took Marx to make this clear. In the end, what emerges is the process

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<sup>20</sup> Quoting Lenin, *Collected Works*, 38:171. Also: “I am in general trying to read Hegel materialistically: Hegel is materialism which has been stood on its head (according to Engels)—that is to say, I cast aside for the most part God, the Absolute, Pure Idea, etc.” (Lenin, *Collected Works*, 38: 104, quoted in LP: 115).



of History, whose science Marx inaugurated with a distinct method for understanding the process itself.

Hegel's theological argument has suffered the fate of his own method: while Althusser, following Lenin, rejects theology (a particular form of idealism), he is also taken with its dialectical inversion into materialism. Here, like Adorno, there is not only a contradiction within Althusser's work (the simultaneous rejection and use of theology, as well as the use of a dialectical argument that smacks a little too much of Hegel), but also the basis of an argument for an approach to theology from a materialist angle that does not merely reject it.

This might be enough, given Althusser's militant championing of the philosophical credentials of Lenin, but there is a further, third, justification for the philosophical consideration of religion. And this comes in the midst of the famous lectures on "Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists" from 1967, whose forbidding title might lead one to expect that we are on the terrain of hard science. Yet they are saturated with reflections on religion, especially in the heart of one of Althusser's favored distinctions, this time between science and ideology. But what interests him is less the features of either than the task of philosophy itself. In his own way, Althusser comes close to Adorno's historical and logical troubling of the relation between metaphysics and theology, which have all too often been taken as inseparable partners. Thus, even though philosophy, which for Althusser is class struggle in theory, concerns itself with the revolutionary transformation of intellectual and social life, it does not seek to provide the answers to the old theological questions of destiny and origins, the ultimate ends and radical origins of human history. In other words, philosophy does not seek to take the place of theology or the church, even though it has traditionally done so. And the reason: these are ideological propositions, the realm of moral and religious thought; or, more specifically, practical ideologies, the various specific forms of ideology, those that characterise the dominant forms of behavior in a particular social formation: "*Practical ideologies* are complex formations which shape notions-representations-images into



behaviour-conduct-attitude-gestures. The ensemble functions as practical norms that govern the attitude and concrete positions men adopt towards the real objects and real problems of their social and individual existence, and towards their history” (PSP: 83).

I will have more to say on the difference in Althusser between ideology per se and practical ideologies below. But if philosophy is not such a practical ideology, if it does not concern itself with theological and ecclesial questions of origins and ends, if it is not, in other words, a pseudo-theological enterprise, then does it fall on the other side of the distinction, science? Practical ideology is foreign, in its social reality, to science, but philosophy is not a science either, however much Marx was responsible, as far as Althusser is concerned, for inaugurating the science of history. All of this comes as an answer to the relationship between philosophy and the sciences—the subject of the lectures themselves—and Althusser produces an answer that introduces a third member, the practical ideology of religion. He cannot keep away from it, feeling the need—a philosophical need—to speak of religion, specifically as practical ideology. Yet, the introduction of the practical ideology of religion enables an extraordinary shift in his argument that I read as a positioning of philosophy so that it can speak of religion: “Let us simply note this point: from now on, philosophy is defined by a double relation—to the sciences and to practical ideologies” (PSP: 83). Philosophy is neither a science, nor is it resolutely opposed to practical ideologies. Rather, it mediates between them, is constituted by the relation between them, and must therefore not only work out its place in relation to them, but also reflect upon their natures. In other words, one of the proper tasks of philosophy is the analysis of practical ideologies such as religion. At odd moments he does indeed say as much: philosophy, as that which sees the whole, concerns all human ideas and practices, including religion, subjecting them to a radical philosophical form that decomposes and recomposes them in its own fashion (see PSP: 245, 252).

Finally, I turn to a late essay, “Elements of Self-Criticism” from 1974, especially the section on “Science and Ideology” (ESC: 119–25; SM: 172–77), where the implication arises that there may be an ideology



of religion which does not merely fall into error. An astonishing claim to make for Althusser? In this essay, the various ramifications of his “Ideological Apparatus” essay emerge, particularly the theoretician distinction between science/truth and ideology/error. The whole Marxist tradition of mystification and false consciousness in relation to alienation, of which religion is a prime example, is under question here. His point is that Marx did not break with ideology in the name of science, but that he broke with bourgeois ideology “because he took inspiration from the basic ideas of proletarian ideology, and from the first class struggles of the proletariat, in which this ideology became flesh and blood” (ESC: 121; SM: 174). Of course, Althusser will now slap the labels of truth and error on these different forms of ideology. But here I want to extend him a bit, stretch him a little and make him run (without the ever-present cigarette): if ideology continues, now in a properly proletarian form and then subsequently after the revolution, and if one of the tasks of materialist philosophy is to come to an understanding of what he elsewhere calls the various “practical ideologies,” including religion, then is there not room for a viable theory of religious ideology that does not write it off as pure error or as something that has thankfully passed away?

### Elements of a Materialist Philosophy of Religion

After setting up the logical possibilities for a materialist philosophy of religion, there is a second stage that begins the work, in Althusser’s characteristic choppy fashion, of shaping and fashioning the various elements of the practical ideology of religion. Not unexpectedly, that project hinges on the question of ideology, and my interest is the neglected final section of the “Ideological Apparatus” essay on religious interpellation. Further, the reshaping of religion in the lectures on Machiavelli offers hints concerning religion in a new political order. I close with another fragment that gives us the strangest Althusser yet, namely, the materialist biblical critic. In other words I investigate three elements of a possible materialist philosophy: ideology, politics and myth.



## Ideology

To begin with, apart from the historicising function of the “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” essay (see above), particularly in regard to the Church, the essay begins a process of developing a theory of religion that builds on what he puts forward as Marx’s major discovery, the science of History.<sup>21</sup> There are three elements: the argument that ideology is eternal; that ideology has a material existence; and the interpellation narrative. Again, the pervasiveness of what I have called Althusser’s catholicity shows up in the emphases of my reading of the Ideological Apparatus essay, but what is appealing about this essay is the way that catholicity enables a materialist philosophy of religion.

Already in the first steps of his argument regarding ideology, he effects what may be called a theological transition, or an appropriation enabled by the prior historicising move. I am referring to his controversial argument that ideology has no history, that it is eternal. This is part of his search for a theory of ideology in general, over against particular ideologies that are distinct from class. It is this general ideology, upon which particular, historical, ideologies depend, that has no history. Although he makes the effort to connect his argument with Freud’s assumption of an eternal unconscious, the move is also theological, or rather an appropriation, with a twist, of theological arguments about God: “If eternal means, not transcendent to all (temporal) history, but omnipresent, trans-historical and therefore immutable in form throughout the extent of history, I shall adopt Freud’s expression word for word, and write *ideology is eternal*, exactly like the unconscious” (LP: 161; SR: 295 emphasis in original). I am less interested in the apparent polemic against the Marxist desideratum that history is the ultimate category of any analysis, but in the appropriation of what is primarily a theological argument concerning God. The implicit logic of such an appropriation

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<sup>21</sup> The contrast with the “Ideological State Apparatuses” essay and the discussion of ideology in “Marxism and Humanism” (FM: 221–47; PM: 225–49) could not be sharper, for in the latter essay the pages devoted to ideology (FM: 231–36; PM: 238–43) mention most of his main points without any reference to the Church.



is not the smuggling in of theology but the realisation of an internal logic about theology itself: deliberations on the nature of God actually speak of something else. And that “something else” is the ideology of which God is a feature: it is not that God himself is omnipresent, trans-historical and immutable, but rather the ideology in which God has a place. Yet, this is to favor religious ideology over all other forms (we will need to wait for Althusser to do that himself). Rather, what Althusser has done is make full use of the catholicity of Christian theology: the claims to God’s eternity, omnipresence and so on provide him with the language and system of thought to argue for the catholicity of ideology itself, of which religious ideology is but one part.

The general definition of this eternal ideology is the famous “ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (LP: 162; SR: 296; see also PSP: 24–25). This is, however, merely the first thesis on the structure and functioning of ideology, and even here the primary example remains the question of God. God is not merely the imaginary representation of the real conditions of existence; rather religious belief is a representation of the imaginary relations with real conditions. It is eternal, will not disappear, but now at two removes from any real conditions.

However, Althusser veers closer to religion, or rather ecclesiology (through the primary example of the Church), with the second thesis—“ideology has a material existence.” This section of the essay has drawn the occasional commentator to point to the extremely Spinozist form of his argument,<sup>22</sup> for as Althusser comments only a few pages later, “to be a Spinozist or a Marxist . . . is to be exactly the same thing” (LP: 175; SR: 306). In particular, Althusser echoes Spinoza’s argument that the cause can exist only in its effects, that God cannot be an external force, a creator who acts on the basis of an intention and plan. Rather, God is an immanent cause, inconceivable without his creation, whose intentions

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<sup>22</sup> See Warren Montag, “‘The Soul Is the Prison of the Body’: Althusser and Foucault, 1970–1975,” *Yale French Studies* 88 (1995): 53–77.





and decrees can exist only as they are actualised in that creation.<sup>23</sup> So also with ideology, which is immanent in its practices and apparatuses and cannot exist apart from them. Hardly a coincidence, then, that the explication of this thesis on the material existence of ideology should move all too readily into theological language.

Thus, in arguing for the material, rather than spiritual, existence of ideology, Althusser moves to particular or practical ideologies (religious, ethical, aesthetic etc.), each of which not only has a history but a location in an apparatus, an ISA and its practices. This is much more developed than his earlier statement that ideology functions in the context of objective structures, such as modes of production and class relations (PSP: 24, 26). But Althusser takes his general definition—the representation of the imaginary relations to real conditions—into this specific realm and gives the example of the Church. Here we find yet again that his way of dealing with religion is the Church, but also that that the reversion to theological, or rather ecclesiological, terminology is almost inevitable given the Spinozist roots of this thesis. To begin with, the individual belief in God—an “ideological ‘conceptual’ device” (*dispositif «conceptuel»*; LP: 167; SR: 300)—produces the material attitude of the subject—mass, kneeling, praying, confession, penance, repentance, and so on. Even tensions with other ideas that lead to contradictory actions still exhibit the thesis that “ideas” exist in actions. And here Althusser locates ideology in the ideological State apparatus:

This ideology talks of actions; I shall talk of actions inserted into *practices*. And I shall point out that these practices are governed by the *rituals* in which these practices are inscribed, within the *material existence of an ideological apparatus*, be it only a small part of that apparatus: a small mass in a small church, a funeral, a minor match at a sports’ club, a school day, a political party meeting, etc. (LP: 168; SR: 300–301).

His final move is to take a materialist slant on Pascal’s formula,

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<sup>23</sup> As Montag quotes Spinoza: “God could not have been prior to his decrees nor can he be without them” Benedict Spinoza, *The Ethics*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982), Proposition 33, Scholium 2, quoted in Montag, “The Soul Is the Prison of the Body,” 63.



whereby the practices themselves—kneeling, praying, etc.—generate belief. Thus, a “religious ideology can exist with rules, rites, etc., but without a systematic theology; the advent of theology represents a degree of theoretical systematisation of religious ideology” (PSP: 27). And in this inversion, with removal of the primacy of ideas (as spiritual) in ideology, a distinctly materialist philosophy of religion begins to emerge. Yet Althusser can do so only by reverting to yet another theological, or rather ecclesiological example. But, as Montag observes, it is not merely an inversion.<sup>24</sup> Over against Pascal’s scandalous response to the libertine, namely that belief will follow practice, Althusser misreads Pascal in a Spinozist fashion to point to the impossibility of separating ideas and beliefs from their material actions and rituals, that they are always already inserted into practices and cannot exist without them.

It is not so much that Althusser’s theory of ideology is derived directly from theology and the institution of the Church, for by the time he was militantly opposed to all matters ecclesiastical and theological. Yet, as I argued a little earlier, his rejection takes on in many ways the forms of the Church: the institution he has banished leaves its marks all over him. In the case of the “Ideological Apparatus” essay, the recurring “example” is the Church, yet it is not merely an example, for it recurs too often in the essay to be content with that location.<sup>25</sup> Rather, I would suggest that the form of the two theses on ideology—representations of imaginary relations and material existence—is analogous to the distinction between belief and practice, especially in the Roman Catholic Church with its emphasis on ritual and the practice of religion. In other words, the favoured example of the Church hints at a deeper connection with his theory: the range and complexities of theological thought provide Althusser with the conceptual tools necessary for his profoundly influential recasting of the

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<sup>24</sup> Montag, “The Soul Is the Prison of the Body?” 67–69.

<sup>25</sup> Although note the claim that Spinoza’s reflections on the materiality of the ideology of Jewish religion, with its temples, priests, sacrifices, observances and rituals profoundly influenced his notion of ideology (FLLT: 217; ADL: 210). Is this to be read as a nervousness about the pervasive theological tenor of the Ideology essay?



theory of ideology. Yet, his theory is not an implicit theology, or theology dressed up as philosophy (his accusation directed at Jean Lacroix), but a properly materialist theory of ideology that realises, as with Lenin's reading of Hegel, the internal logic of theology itself. The final outcome of such a materialist philosophy is that it can then fold back and offer a materialist understanding of religion by means of the very tools that theology first supplied.

The final part of the ideology essay—the famous and oft-cited interpellation section—maintains the ecclesial and theological questions at the fore of his writing. What is often neglected by those who cite and discuss this section of the essay is not only the early material on reproduction, but especially the extended example from Christian religious ideology, even though, in light of his earlier “examples,” it is by no means unexpected. This final “example” has languished, even in Althusser criticism, in singular obscurity.<sup>26</sup> Yet the two sections—the interpellation narrative and the religious example—belong inextricably together, for the interpellation narrative begins a final argument that is incomplete without the mis-named “example.”

The interpellation section is an effort to deal with the final dimension of ideology, the subject. Thus, not only is there “no ideology except by

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<sup>26</sup> Even Paul Ricoeur, whom we might expect to comment on the ecclesiological and theological features of the last part of the ideology essay, gives it but the briefest of glances: all he says is that the notion of interpellation is based on the Christian idea of the call; see “Althusser's Theory of Ideology,” in *Althusser: A Critical Reader*, ed. G. Elliott, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 64. Michèle Barrett also mentions the crucial last section in passing in her *The Politics of Truth: From Marx to Foucault* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 101. Thomas Pepper's less than helpful discussion of religion in Althusser's essay focuses on the earlier reference to Pascal and neglects the last section entirely; see “Kneel and You Will Believe,” *Yale French Studies*, 88 (1995): 27–41. Warren Montag's astute essay identifies the Spinozist features of the earlier theses but ignores the last part of the article; see “The Soul Is the Prison of the Body.” An exception is Ashraf H. A. Rushdy's *The Empty Garden: The Subject of the Late Milton* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), 35–42). However, Rushdy argues that the religious “example” falls short since the state, Althusser's ostensible subject, is not like God. This criticism misses the mark somewhat. And Gabriel Albiac's brief reading argues that the last section of the Ideology essay sets up the religious subject of Althusser's autobiography without explicating the argument in full; see “Althusser, Reader of Althusser: Autobiography as Fictional Genre,” *Rethinking Marxism* 10, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 80–89.



the subject and for subjects,” but also “ideology interpellates individuals as subjects” (LP: 170; SR: 302). Both statements indicate a dialectical interplay between subject and ideology: the subject as a category is absolutely necessary for all ideology, but “the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects” (LP: 171; SR: 303). Ideology requires subjects to function, but creating subjects is the function of ideology. This also means that “subject” for Althusser has the meaning of an ideologically constituted being, one who lives spontaneously in ideology.

Thus Althusser attempts to answer the question as to how ideology constitutes individuals as subjects, and the metaphor he selects is that of interpellation or hailing. Yet the narrative is also an endeavor at understanding ideology in the context of the all-pervasive presence of ideology, the inability to escape ideology even in an analysis of ideology. In fact, the famous narrative is preceded by earlier narratives which indicate such a presence, put now in terms of ideological recognition. For Althusser, the ‘It’s me’ response to “Who’s there?” and the French “hello, my friend” in the street illustrate such ideological recognition.

Given the impossibility of escaping ideology, particularly as Althusser has defined it, the interpellation narrative that follows is not so much an effort at escape as one that recognises the pervasiveness itself.

I shall then suggest that ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it “recruits” subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or “transforms” the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!”

Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn around. By this one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognised that the hail was “really” addressed to him, and “that was *really him* who was hailed” (and not someone else). Experience



shows that the practical telecommunication of hailing is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognises that it is really him who is being hailed. And yet it is a strange phenomenon, and one which cannot be explained solely by “guilt feelings,” despite the large numbers who “have something on their consciences.” (LP: 174; SR: 305).

Althusser is keen to stress that the narrative sequence gives a false before-and-after effect, for ideology and the hailing of individuals as subjects is the same thing. That is, individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, and so individuals are always-already subjects.

However, the argument does not stop here, for in the “example” he takes religious ideology to develop the argument further. Despite appearances, it is not a specific example with its own variations, for “the formal structure of all ideology is always the same” (LP: 177; SR: 307).<sup>27</sup> Although the call of Moses appears as the biblical exemplar, Althusser takes up a distinctly Roman Catholic instance of ideology hailing individuals.<sup>28</sup> The implicitly

<sup>27</sup> Even more, in “Theory, Theoretical Practice and Theoretical Formation: Ideology and Ideological Struggle” (PSP: 1–42), Althusser argues that religion is the first form of ideology (PSP: 25), after which moral, juridical, aesthetic, political, and philosophical forms appear, although ideology conveniently becomes a system of representations dominated by a false conception of the world, which enables the dominant and exploited classes to identify their relations to each other. Following Marx and Engels, religion becomes not only the primary form of ideology, but one that dominates until the eighteenth century, characteristic of peasant revolts and early stages of the workers’ movement. In this essay, Althusser follows the more traditional Marxist line on ideology as false consciousness. However, the contrast between this PSP essay and the ISA essay is that the latter operates with a more neutral or descriptive notion of ideology. The catch with this approach is that Althusser opens himself to the criticism that if ideology is total, that if it permeates all human activities, then any position outside ideology, one that may identify is falsity or truth, becomes impossible. Yet he not unaware of the problem, which is by now a well-worn criticism of the whole theory of ideology. His point to the scientists—“Intellectuals live in culture, just as fish live in water; but fish cannot see the water in which they swim” (PSP: 95)—only partly sees the problem, identifying a gap between the immediate work of intellectuals themselves, their specialisation and focus, and the profoundly influential ideological and social context in which they live. It is this gap, the break between the immediacy of intellectual labour and the broader ideological system that operates “behind their backs” that allows him sufficient space to identify, partially at least, the workings of ideology.

<sup>28</sup> Rushdy’s suggestion that the narrative should be called “Mosaic interpellation” simply



‘catholic’ tone of the well-known text I quoted above emerges clearly in the following, which deserves a fuller quotation precisely because it is less well-known:

The Christian religious ideology says something like this . . . I address myself to you, a human individual called Peter (every individual is called by his name, in the passive sense, it is never he who provides his own name), in order to tell you that God exists and that you are answerable to Him. It adds: God addresses Himself to you through my voice . . . It says: this is who you are: you are Peter! This is your origin, you were created by God for all eternity, although you were born in the 1920th year of Our Lord! This is your place in the world! This is what you must do! By these means, if you observe the “law of love” you will be saved, you, Peter, and will become part of the Glorious Body of Christ! Etc.

Now this quite a familiar and banal discourse, but at the same time a surprising one.

Surprising because if we consider that religious ideology is indeed addressed to individuals, in order to “transform them into subjects,” by interpellating the individual, Peter, in order to make him a subject, free to obey or disobey the appeal, i.e., God’s commandments; if it calls these individuals by their names, thus recognising that they are always-already interpellated as subjects with a personal identity (to the extent that Pascal’s Christ says: “It is for you that I have shed this drop of my blood!”); if it interpellates them in such a way that the subject responds: “*Yes, it is really me!*” if it obtains from them the *recognition* that they really do occupy the place it designates for them as theirs in the world, a fixed residence: ‘It really is me; I am here, a worker, a boss or a soldier!’ in this vale of tears; if it obtains from them the recognition of a destination (eternal life or damnation) according to the respect or contempt they show to “God’s Commandments,” Law become Love—if everything does happen in this way (in the practices of the well-known rituals of baptism, confirmation, communion, confession, and extreme unction, etc. . . .), we should note

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misses the Roman Catholic specificity of the example (*The Empty Garden*, 35).



that all this “procedure” to set up Christian religious subjects is dominated by a strange phenomenon: the fact that there can only be such a multitude of possible religious subjects on the absolute condition that there is a Unique, Absolute, *Other Subject*, i.e., God (LP: 177–78; SR: 308–9).

Might not this second passage be read as a commentary on the first, far more well-known passage? Whereas in the former quotation, Althusser places our already interpellated subject on the street, the setting of the second quotation is by no means explicit, although it conjures up an image of an individual kneeling at worship in church, addressed by God. Not necessarily, for the second passage fills in much of the detail that the cryptic first passage leaves open. Apart from them both being narratives of interpellation, at the centre of the first is the “physical conversion,” the turning around of the subject at the moment of interpellation itself, a redirection that runs at so many levels: turning around in the street, religious conversion, the awareness upon such a “conversion” that it has always been so and that one’s former direction was “mistaken.” The second passage assumes such a “conversion,” now explicating it in terms of the address by God to an individual. Or rather, it is the address of “Christian religious ideology” to an individual, claiming that God speaks to him through such an ideology, constituting God and the individual as subjects in the process itself.

However, I want to stress first the Roman Catholic saturation of the second passage in order to ask how it not only advances Althusser’s theory of ideology, but also how it contributes to a materialist theory of religion. The second passage could hardly be thought without Roman Catholicism: God addresses the individual through “religious ideology,” that is, the Church; the sample name is none other than “Peter”; the implicit liturgical moment of confirmation when a new name is given and the person consciously recognises the call of the Church; the rituals or sacraments themselves, baptism, confirmation, communion, confession, and especially extreme unction; the emphasis on obeying the commandments, the “Law of Love”; and the quotation from Pascal, who has already appeared earlier.

Althusser has made it rather easy for me here, for the Christian



religious ideology in question is none other than Roman Catholic. But in order to see how this translates all too readily into Althusser's "catholicity," let me trace the rest of the argument in this under-studied and final section of the ISA. This 'religious ideology' calls a particular person, who, created by God, must respond to this call. God speaks to this person through the Bible and Church, and if this subject responds to the law of love he will have eternal life and so on. However, religious ideology has many subjects that all relate to or mirror God, who is a singular Subject (capital S). These then relate to each other, except that in Christian ideology the Subject also becomes subject—Christ—in order to present an example of "salvation" for the many subjects. The point here is that all ideology has a mirror structure—duplication of Subject into subjects and Subject into subject-Subject—and centred in the Absolute Subject. Since religious ideology has both multiple subjects, a single Subject (God), and a relationship posited between the two, Althusser argues that *all* ideology has the following features:

1. the interpellation of "individuals" as subjects;
2. their subjection to the Subject;
3. the mutual recognition of subjects and Subject, the subjects' recognition of each other, and finally the subject's recognition of himself;
4. the absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognise what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right: Amen—"So be it" (LP: 181; SR: 310).

The universal claim (all ideology), along with the final "Amen" and its translation, the rush of the paragraph-long sentence in the previous quotation, but above all the identification of the one, absolutely other Subject at the centre of any ideology—all of these suggest a desire to say everything about ideology. Far from an example, the final "catholic" section of the essay takes the discussion of interpellation to its conclusion: the famous hailing-in-the-street example gets us only as far as the first point above. Althusser can draw the remaining three points only from the discussion of religion.





When this quadruple system is in play, subjects can operate perfectly well, without supervision. Through ideology and the rituals of the ISAs, subjects recognise the existing state of affairs and operate within them. All of which leads Althusser to his final formulation: “the individual is *interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection*” (LP: 182; SR: 311; italics in original).

Only through the religious “example,” which is absolutely necessary to Althusser’s argument, can he reach an answer to a question he posed somewhat earlier: why do people seek to represent their imaginary relationship with their real conditions of existence? The answer comes only at the end: so that people can work and live “normally,” that is, freely subject themselves to the Subject. Even here, Althusser draws on a paradox from the tradition of Christian theology, namely, the tension between free will and determinism, cast in a specifically Roman Catholic form. Although most traditions attempt to hold the relation in some balance, however paradoxical, the emphasis tends to fall on one side or the other. Thus, the Jansenists tended towards a position similar to Calvin: that free will could be possible only within the doctrine of predestination. Even Luther in his debates with Erasmus sides with a form of determinism, although in theology determinism is itself carefully distinguished from predestination or the doctrine of election, the former being philosophical and ultimately pagan (Fate), whereas the latter holds to some form of free will. It seems to me that Althusser follows a Jansenist line here: ideology operates successfully when subjects believe they are submitting of their own free will, even though ideology predetermines them to arrive at precisely this position.

In the end, Althusser can develop his theory of ideology only by passing through ecclesiological and theological arguments. In other words, the intricacies of theological materials, particularly in their Roman Catholic form, provide the still appreciated breakthrough and depth of his theory. He can then extrapolate from the Christian form of ideology to argue that the “Subject” can also designate State, Duty, Justice, and so on, that the connection between ideology and the Repressive and



Ideological State Apparatuses also begins to clear, for here may be found the conflict between the ideologies of exploiters and exploited, the effort to assert the ruling ideas, and the central role of such ISAs in the reproduction of the relations of production.

Yet, in the very process of using theological arguments he transforms them, providing on the way a distinctly materialist theory of Christian belief and practice. By this stage, Althusser is no Christian believer, and there is no implicit argument for God's existence or the need to return to the Church: rather, in the same way that his theory of ideology draws upon theology to make its point, transforming Marxist discussions of ideology in a profound fashion, so also theology itself is transformed and we find ourselves with a materialist theory of religion. For its benefits and woes, the opening words render theology and ecclesiology a "religious ideology": God, the Church and the believer as subject are all part of an extraordinarily complex ideology, one that requires its own dose of demystification and reshaping.

## Politics

A further fragment of this working through of a materialist philosophy of religion appears in the final chapter of *Machiavelli and Us* (1999/1994). The value of this section is that it gives a political dimension to such a philosophy. In his exposition of Machiavelli's text, Althusser considers the three main apparatuses that the prince must use in forging the new state: the army, religion and law, one repressive and the other ideological state apparatuses. All three are indispensable, but on a different footing from previous or current (for Machiavelli) practices. The army should be a people's army, drawn from the citizens, both town and country, with a predominance of infantry. Here Althusser follows Gramsci's praise of Machiavelli, since here appears the shape of later revolutionary communist armies (theorised also by Clausewitz, Engels, Lenin, and Mao Zedong), citizen militias in which the bonds necessary for a new social order form.

However, what Althusser finds most appealing in this new sense of the army is its subservience to politics. So also with religion, and



here the important break with the Church takes place. Over against the Church with its focus on credentials, origins and the dominance of religion over politics, Machiavelli dispenses with the Church (the subject of sustained polemic in his *Discourses*) and approaches religion as a necessary ideological instrument, to use Althusser's terminology. As an ideological force, religion is absolutely necessary for the political success of the new state. The constancy of religious belief and observance over against the vagaries of a human ruler, the inculcation of fear of the gods and, if possible, love, the rallying of the people to existing institutions, the securing of obedience to military and legal institutions, the formation of the people for strength and action (*virtu*) and not weakness and abnegation, all serve to ensure consent, that is, the opinions, beliefs, and judgements of the masses, without violence. In the end, the political function of religion is the same, although now on an ideological plane, as that of the army—the forging of a successful and united popular state.

This exposition of Machiavelli contains an advance and two problems. The first problem lies in the easy slippage between the Church and religion, something I have replicated in my own discussion of the Machiavelli text. The attraction of Machiavelli for Althusser, at least on this point, is that religion becomes an ideological instrument of the state. At a crude level, I could observe that religion has at times operated in this way, especially where the state sanctions a particular religion. But at least state and religion remain separate domains, however much they might overlap. In Machiavelli's proposal, religion becomes seamlessly a part of the state apparatus, which realises the logic of the Church itself. And this is where Althusser's inescapable catholicity shows itself again, for in the substitution of religion for Church (see especially MU: 90–91; MN: 157–60), the institutional nature of the Church—and he writes “Roman Catholic Church” (MU: 91; MN: 159)—washes over the usage of the term “religion.”

We may detect, however, a slight advance within this problem, which lies in the possibility of a break between Church and religion. Althusser notes Machiavelli's polemic against the Roman Catholic Church and the reconfiguration of religion beyond the particular forms of this church as an ideological instrument in the service of politics. Is



it possible that through Machiavelli, Althusser begins to break with his dependence on ecclesiastical form? Even his normal historicising move in regard to the Church now moves forward into a consideration of religion from the perspective of a materialist politics.

The second problem is that religion becomes merely an instrument of consent, which differs little from the cruder forms of materialist and Marxist critiques of religion. All the same, I do not need to go outside Althusser to find a more complex understanding of religion, for it is precisely in the notions of ideology and ideological state apparatuses that we find the emphasis on the tensions and contradictions of those apparatuses—and that because they are primarily ideological and not repressive. Yet, such an attractive notion of the function of ideology would raise problems for Machiavelli's model of a smoothly operating and successful new state, for if religion is the prime ideological force, then it also becomes the major site for tensions and conflict that will need to be resolved. Althusser does in fact raise the question of class conflict in a minor key, noting that Machiavelli seeks a union between nobles, people and king. This does not happen in a resolution of what he calls the "humours," into a peaceful new form; rather, precisely through the conflict of humours, that is, by means of class struggle, may the state be strengthened and expand (see MU: 120; MN: SM: 316). Yet, this observation does not creep into a critique of Machiavelli's notion of religion as—to use Althusser's own terms—ideology.

## Myth

I would like to close this discussion of the various bits and pieces of an Althusserian philosophy of Christianity with a small personal indulgence, namely Althusser's own biblical criticism. I began this chapter with the jolt of Althusser's theological writings, but is Althusser also a biblical critic? Elsewhere I have drawn material from Althusser's work in order to offer a reading of the book of Genesis,<sup>29</sup> but Althusser himself has a moment or two of his own exegesis, particularly of Genesis 1–3. The question that lurks here is what Althusser's biblical exegesis might mean

<sup>29</sup> See the first chapter of my *Marxist Criticism of the Bible*.



for a materialist philosophy of religion. It will turn out that he has more to say about philosophical theology, especially concerning myth, so I will explore that question as we investigate Althusser's biblical criticism.

As a preliminary to an astonishing footnote, Althusser picks up, in his Masters thesis on Hegel, the importance of the myth of the Fall in Hegel's discussion of the naïve notion of the content-as-given. Adam and Eve live in a "paradise of joyous animality" (SH: 65; EP1: 99), unconscious and innocent of thought's givenness—until Eve takes the apple, sins, and thereby gains knowledge of all that had been given. In that moment of cognition, the awareness of the division of the given from itself, the truth of the given appears in its destruction.

Apart from a curious slip that I will pick up in a moment, this reading of Hegel is less interesting than an extraordinary footnote that seeks to read the narrative of the Fall in light of Marx's argument concerning the fall of the product of human labour into nature. This argument follows the discussion of alienation in which the apparently natural form of economic determinism is in fact a human product: although the economy appears natural, to which human beings are subject, it only appears so because it is alienated from human beings. Thus, the realisation of human freedom is the process of reclaiming this natural necessity as a human necessity. So also with labour, for the moment the product leaves the hands of men it falls into nature, appears perfectly natural, which is thereby a signal of the alienation of labour (so the early Marx, whom Althusser read avidly before dismissing this work and the theory of alienation as not properly Marxist). Let me quote the footnote in full, which follows at this point:

The plunge of the product into Nature, which occurs as soon as the product escapes the producer's control and is no longer posited as being identical with him, gives us a better grasp of the creation myth. On the purest conception, God is the circularity of Love; he is sufficient unto himself and has no outside. The creation is literally a rupture in this circularity: God does not need the creation, so that it is, by definition, different from him. This non-identity of the Creator and his creature is the emergence



of Nature. The product of the God-who-works escapes his control (because it is superfluous for him). This fall is Nature, or God's outside. In the creation, then, men unwittingly repress the essence of work. But they do still more: they try to eliminate the very origins of work, which, in its daily exercise, appears to them as a natural necessity (one has to work in order to live, work is a natural law entailed by the Fall—as appears in the myth of Eve: “you will earn your bread by the sweat of your brow”). Moreover, work is inherently conditioned by nature, since the worker transforms a nature that is given. In the creation myth, this natural character of work disappears, because the Creator is not subject to any law, and creates the world *ex nihilo*. In God the Creator, men not only think the birth of nature, but attempt to overcome the natural character of this birth by demonstrating that the creation has no origin (since God creates without obligation or need); that the fall has no nature; and that the very nature which seems to dominate work is, fundamentally, only as necessary as the (produced) nature which results from work.

Developing and deepening this myth would perhaps enable us to anticipate what Marx means by “the identity of man and nature in work.” Approached in this way, that identity would have two aspects. On the one hand, men are identical with nature in that they are identical with what they produce; their products become nature for them (this immediate identity through labour re-emerges in revolutionary action; one may therefore say that this alienation is already overcome in thought—men no longer need a myth to represent it, since it has become the object of economic science). On the other hand, men would also be identical with the nature that forces them to work, and which they transform through work; this second identity would be clarified through reflection of the first. Here, however, we would have only an embryonic anticipation, for, in the obvious, elementary sense, identity is still beyond men's grasp. Men see clearly enough that the natural world is given to them, and that they themselves exist because they exercise a measure of control over it, thanks to their knowledge and industry; however, they have not completely overcome natural alienation: they are subject to the elements,



illness, and old age, and obliged to work in order to live. Moreover, if the work of scientific knowledge and of the transformation of the world is itself a recurrence of, and recovery from [*reprise*], natural alienation, the recovery is not complete: circularity is not re-established, and human circularity will no doubt be established before natural circularity (in a socialist world, say the Marxists, one will still have to overcome natural alienation). This deficiency explains why it is still necessary to revert to myth in order to conceive a totality which has not yet attained its concept; it is in the story of creation, on this view, that men contemplate the *reprise* of natural alienation (SH: 168, n. 252; EP1: 236–38, n. 252).

If for no other reason than the extraordinary nature of this footnote, Althusser's jettisoning of the early—humanist and non-Marxist—Marx is a profound shame; after such a move, footnotes like this were no longer possible. Let me pick up the various stages of his argument: the Fall as narrative of the alienation of labour; the story of creation itself as a counter to such alienation; and where such a myth might continue to function.

Only once does Althusser quote from the Bible (Gen 3:19), and this a misquotation to which I will return. But the solitary biblical reference indicates the heavily theological nature of his reading, where the narrative of Genesis 1–3 is overlaid with a number of Christian doctrines: the self-sufficiency of God, *creatio ex nihilo*, and original sin. The transition from the mention of the “creation myth”—by which of course he means the creation myth of the Hebrew Bible subsequently appropriated by Christians—in the first sentence to the next couple of sentences on the self-sufficiency of God is not as smooth as it seems. Too quickly do we assume that he is still speaking of the creation myth of Genesis 1–3 (although even here we have two myths) when he already draws upon a particular Christian doctrine of God to interpret the narrative of Genesis. And this is the Thomistic doctrine of the self-sufficiency of God, that God does not need the world or anything outside of his triune nature to be complete, for otherwise he would be incomplete and therefore not God. Divine love then becomes one of pure gratuity, one



in which God loves the world precisely because he does not need to do so, a love that has no reciprocity about it and is thoroughly undeserved by God's creatures. It matters little whether the doctrine of God's self-sufficiency was developed in order to facilitate such a notion of love or whether self-sufficiency produces the particular idea of love that has to a large extent determined the perception and practice of love in the West.

To be sure, the creation narratives of Genesis 1 and 2 have been used to justify the doctrine of God's self-sufficiency, but it is hardly the case that the text itself is a pure, or even contaminated, representation of the doctrine. The two forms of ancient Near Eastern myths that we find in the biblical text show all the marks of that indeterminate context, from the plural gods ("Let us make man in our image" Gen 1:26) to the ambiguity of the first phrase of Genesis 1:1, which may be either "In the beginning God created" or "When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth without form and void." The implication of the second translation, based on what may also be read as a temporal construction, *bereshith*, "When [God] began" (literally "in a beginning") is that there was indeed something with which God began, rather than the vast emptiness that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* assumes. And here we have the second traditional Christian doctrine that Althusser assumes in his discussion of Genesis 1–3, one that faces a good deal of trouble when brought face to face with the text.

However, I am not so much interested in charging Althusser with being a less than astute exegete of the Hebrew Bible than with the implications of such a heavily theological reading. To begin with, the overbearing presence of the Roman Catholic Church is there in every word; for the Roman Catholic Church has been most insistent that the Church sets the agenda for interpretation of the Bible, that it provides the means and meanings by which the Bible must be understood. And for good reason, since the reading of the actual text raises perpetual problems for the doctrines the Church holds dear. Yet, the Roman Catholics only make explicit that which is part of any type of Christianity, namely, that interpretation is always determined by the institution itself. The most subtle form of





this control of interpretation is in the Calvinist notion that Scripture is sufficient unto itself, that it can interpret only itself with no outside body imposing a foreign interpretation. I need not elaborate on the way this ensures precisely what it seeks to forestall, since any interpretation that runs against the institution is dismissed as a foreign body in the pure self-sufficiency of the Bible itself.

What does Althusser do with his heavily theological reading of the creation myth? The doctrine of the self-sufficiency, or auto-generation and auto-telism, of God allows him to offer a reading of the doctrine, and then obliquely, of the narrative of the Fall, in light of the early Marx's notion of alienation. Given the theological—although not necessarily biblical—doctrine of the triune self-sufficiency of God, what Althusser calls the “circularity of Love,” creation can only be something extraneous to God. It cannot be intrinsic to God (pantheism), and so nature is superfluous to the divine economy. The telling move is from arguing that nature is the result of the non-identity of God and his creature to the identification of God as worker who loses control of the product of his labor. On this reading, God becomes the model of the worker (although it is not clear whether such a worker lives under capitalism) whose product falls into nature the moment it is finished; or rather, the Fall is itself nature. But just when we seem to have Althusser's point—the theological reading of the creation myth as a curious precursor to the pattern of work itself—he executes a double switchback: “In the creation, then, men unwittingly repress the essence of work” (SH: 168; EP1: 237). God's creation is the model of work but only because it is a myth that “men” relate in order to explicate the meaning of work. Yet not quite, for Althusser writes, “men unwittingly repress”: they do not express, explicate or elucidate the essence of work, but *repress* it. In other words, the Christian doctrine of creation, with which Althusser overlays the creation myth, is a narrative of the alienation of labour. In God's self-sufficiency, his auto-generation of the creature that is a stranger to him, that is not part of his nature, lies the alienation of labour. But what is repressed? For an early Althusser indebted to an early Marx, this



will be un-alienated labour—which is repressed by what he takes as the creation myth.

The close reader of Hegel and the early Marx that Althusser is at this point finds alienation (*Entäusserung*) not only in the objectification of the product of labour but also in the relationship with nature itself. And God in the creation myth is also the representation of this alienation. Nature is systematically excised: God is beyond the law, creates *ex nihilo*, which then becomes the absence of obligation and need, the tautological absence of the origin of creation, and the restriction of nature to the product of work which then falls into Nature at the moment of its production. Except that all of these items in Althusser's list are very much part of the Christian doctrines of the God's self-sufficiency and *creatio ex nihilo*, as well as the philosophical category of nature, rather than the creation myths of Genesis themselves. This is not to say that these myths are somehow free from a whole series of problems of their own, many of them turning around questions of gender, ideology, politics, the Lacanian symbolic, and so on.<sup>30</sup> However, Althusser's theological reading of the creation myths does bring out another crucial element of these myths, namely, the question of labour.

I would suggest that this foundational material may be read as part of a much larger political myth that runs from Genesis to Joshua, turning around the questions of the promise of a people and a land. If the former is realised ambiguously only when Jacob's family arrives in Egypt, outside the land that Abraham has spent his life traversing in the book of Genesis, the latter is almost inevitably delayed until its troubled fulfillment in the book of Joshua, the first book outside the Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy). But what the myths of creation and the fall do work over is the question of the division of labour, revealing and attempting to deal with the myriad tensions of such a question in the way that myths are able to do like no other genre. And at the heart of the division of labour is the vexed problem of the logically, if not historically, primary

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<sup>30</sup> On this, see my *Political Myth: On the Use and Abuse of Biblical Themes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).



division along the lines of sexual difference.

Less through explicit acknowledgement than through the odd phrase and mistake, Althusser hints at the ways the questions of the division of labour and sexual difference might become central in a reading of Genesis. Let me return to the Fall, which for Althusser now becomes part of the creative act by God. The Fall is not enacted after the creation is complete, from which God is removed and thereby not responsible. Rather, the Fall is, on Althusser's reading, inherent in the myth of creation itself. Unwittingly he picks up a tension in the whole creation-Fall narrative of Genesis 1–3: if the creation were perfect, why would God place the forbidden two trees in the garden, one of the knowledge of good and evil and the other of eternal life. Is there not a flaw in the crystal, one that is geared to the breakdown of paradise as a necessary narrative device? And the Thomist doctrine of creation, onto which Althusser latches, neatly captures the truth of this contradiction: the Fall is in the act of creation itself, which he now reads as a narrative of alienated labour.

What of the conventional Fall, the one contained in Genesis 3:1–24? Is it merely an addendum to the “real” Fall in creation? That which is usually identified as the “Fall” becomes an effort to “eliminate the very origins of work” (SH: 168; EP1: 237). Here, work becomes a natural necessity through an etiological narrative that mislocates the origins of work: as a result of their disobedience, their eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, at the enticement of the serpent and then of the women, brings about the curse of God on all three—serpent, man, and woman. The serpent is to go upon his belly, eat dust and be at enmity with the woman and her seed; the woman will have her pain in childbearing multiplied and be subject to the man for whom she will feel desire; and the man will find the ground cursed, full of thorns and thistles, which he will need to till in order to eat: “in the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground” (Gen 3:19). For Althusser, this narrative is not about the origins of work, but its very elimination, providing justification for the notion that one must work in order to live, that it is a “natural law entailed by the Fall” (SH: 168; EP1: 237).



Here Althusser's argument takes a slightly different turn, a turn which is more than the "still more" that opens this part of his discussion. Rather than operating with an underlying assumption that there is unalienated form of labour (he will return to this), he suggests that work itself is not a given for Marx. The criticism of Baudrillard,<sup>31</sup> that labour becomes an ontological category for Marx, an eternal necessity for human beings, falls before Althusser's point. For Althusser, the idea that work is a natural necessity constitutes the elimination of the origins of work. The implication is that work properly understood is not a natural law, not an ontological category, but one subject to the vagaries of history, with its own narrative of beginning and end. For Marx, the origins and—if I may use the term—nature of labour, lie in the interaction of human beings with nature: work is not part of nature, is not a necessity of such a nature.

However, before I get to that point, which is the last part of Althusser's own re-reading of the creation myth, let me pick up a couple of his symptomatic misreadings of Genesis. Neither is plainly wrong, but rather exploits an ambiguity in the biblical text itself that allows it to run in an unexpected direction. The first, appearing earlier in Althusser's text than the long footnote that interests me so much, concerns the two trees in Genesis 2:9, 16–17 and 3:1–3. Althusser writes, "In Eden, Adam and Eve could eat of the tree of life, but were forbidden to touch the tree of knowledge" (SH: 65; EP1: 99). Of course, the tree of knowledge would interest Hegel, concerning whom Althusser writes his Masters thesis. But in this brief sentence Althusser takes a textual ambiguity on its own path. In Genesis 2:9, the "tree of life in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" are specified out of all the other trees that God made grow and that were good to mouth and eye. By verses 16 and 17 we find a ban only on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, along with the command of God, "You may freely eat of every tree in the garden" (Gen 2:16). The implication is, as Althusser,

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<sup>31</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (New York: Telos Press, 1975).



reading Hegel, takes it: that Adam and Eve could indeed eat freely of the tree of life. But all is not so clear, for in the initial moments of the dialogue between the serpent and the woman, she says in response to the serpent's question, "God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die'" (Gen 3:3). However, in 2:17 the phrase "in the midst of the garden" applies to the tree of life and not the other one. In fact, Eve refuses to specify which tree she means, and it is only the serpent who clarifies that he means the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the following verses. The hint of a mistaken arboreal identity in 3:3—are both trees under a ban? Has Eve already acquiesced to eat of the tree of good and evil in her words?—unwraps in 3:22, where the risk of the human beings eating of the tree of life as well and thereby living forever prompts the (plural) God to banish the people from the garden: "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever . . ." The only explicit proscription on the tree of life is belated, one that comes into effect when Adam and Eve broach the primary ban. Althusser's reading, based on Genesis 2:9, 16–17, follows a perfectly viable way to read this text, except that like most readings, it decides on one at the expense of other options. Nonetheless, Althusser's interpretation rubs up against the expectations of readers for whom this text is intimately familiar.

In the end, Althusser's wooden interpretation of the trees does not come to much, except perhaps to give a hint of the way he works with texts. It anticipates the much more consequential "misreading" of Genesis 3:19 in the footnote I have been considering for a while now. Quoting from the *Segond* (French) edition of the Bible, which was found in his library after his death, he writes: "as appears in the myth of Eve: 'you will earn your bread by the sweat of your brow'" (SH: 168; EP1: 237). "Earn your bread" (*gagneras ton pain*) rather than the Hebrew "eat" (*'kl*) lends itself more to a metaphorical interpretation, although this is not excluded by "eat your bread." But what interests me is the



curious phrase “as appears in the myth of Eve” (*comme on le voit dans le mythe d’Eve* (EP1: 237)). He does not write “as appears in God’s words to Eve,” which would be strictly incorrect, for the words are directed to Adam, not Eve: he is the one who shall work. Nor is it strictly a myth of Eve, but a myth of the Fall. Even so, Althusser seems to take the words as those addressed to Eve. Yet, in Genesis 3:16 her “labour” is not to work the fields full of thorns and thistles, to toil in order to eat. Rather, God says to Eve: “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children.”

We might read this slip on Althusser’s part in a number of ways. To begin with, he unwittingly identifies the problem with the whole question of labour itself, namely, that it is men who work and are alienated in their work, whereas women in gestation, childbirth, and child-rearing do no work: it is a natural process beyond the realm of labour. Here his criticism of the myth of the Fall comes to bear: the very identification of “work” as natural is even more the case with the maternal body. If the elimination of the origins of work takes place with the idea that men must work in order to live, then the notion that childbirth is a natural process is an even greater elimination of the origins of work, the ultimate form of the alienation of labour. Yet, this does not go quite far enough, and here I anticipate the later stages of his rereading of the creation myth. A second unconscious outcome of Althusser’s misreading is a commonplace of feminist criticism first voiced by Adorno and Horkheimer: the identification of women with nature. In specifying Eve rather than Adam as the recipient of the curse of work, Althusser brings out the deeper truth of the Genesis narrative: the pain of the woman’s childbirth is at one with the toil required of the man to produce bread. Althusser will later make this assumption crucial in his own argument with the statement that nature is a given, but here he provides a glimpse of the problem with such an identification.

Yet, a third level of reading Althusser’s misquotation picks up a final ambiguity of the Genesis narrative. On this level—and here I anticipate his discussion of the possibilities for un-alienated work—the problem



becomes one of the parallelism between the curses for both the woman and Adam. He will toil and sweat over the ground in order to produce bread; she will labour in pain in order to produce children from her own body. In both cases they work, one with the ground, another with her body. But the problem with both is that the work they do becomes, through the myth of the Fall, a natural necessity. Their work, which is identified with pain and toil, is therefore part of nature, unavoidable. For Althusser, however, the key lies in Marx's point that there is an identity of nature and work that does not make alienated labour a law of nature. Both woman and man remain alienated as long the products of their work fall into nature, that is, continue to become something beyond themselves and not identical with them. And, as long as there is pain, death, disease, natural disasters and so on, human beings remain alienated from the nature that forces them to work. On this highly eschatological point, Althusser loops back to the last part of Genesis 3 on which I have focused for a few moments. But I have also anticipated the later part of his argument, to which I can return soon.

Yet, before I do so, let me go back to the first reading of Althusser's misreading, where I argued that the problem with the curse on Eve in Genesis 3 is that it makes childbirth a natural process and not work. Now all of this is inverted, or at least becomes a new problem at another level of the dialectic: the most fundamental alienation is, if I may put it in such a convoluted fashion, the naturalisation of labour that is itself an alienation of nature itself, or rather, between nature and work. In other words, the first alienation is to transform a natural process into work, and the second alienation is to make this work a part of nature. In this way I read Althusser's comment on the creation myth: "In God the Creator, men not only think the birth of nature, but attempt to overcome the natural character of this birth" (SH: 168; EP1: 237). The alienation of the labour of childbirth finds its ultimate expression in the Creator's act of creation, for here, in the very process of writing a myth of the birth of nature, "men" erase such a birth's natural character. Of course, Althusser is, as I mentioned earlier, dependent on the Hegelian



notions of the alienation of the product of labour and of nature itself, but I want to suggest that precisely through such troubled categories, ones that he would soon reject, is he able to come, however obliquely, to a profound insight. Once there, he (or rather I) can kick away the ladder by which he got there in the first place.

In the second paragraph of Althusser's footnote, one that I have been exegeting in some detail, he seeks to explicate, or rather develop and deepen, the creation myths (or what he continues to refer to as a singular myth, which it has indeed become in Jewish and Christian usage). The purpose: to see how it "anticipates" Marx's famous phrase: "the identity of man and nature in work." This "anticipate" is ambiguous, for although Althusser suggests that a more sustained reading of the creation myth may turn it into a precursor to Marx's own formulation, he ends up reading the myth in Marxist terms. The "development," in a Marxist fashion, renders the myth an anticipation of precisely those Marxist categories. Dialectical or ambiguous? I am not sure, but in my reading I have been arguing that Althusser in this early text provides some of the most detailed possibilities for a materialist philosophy of religion. And what he does with the second paragraph is seek out the possibilities of un-alienated labour, the first option being the identity of worker and product, the second of worker and the nature that forces him to work. I find much of this less promising than the first paragraph, since Althusser slips back into assumptions that are troubled by his other arguments, particularly the idea that nature is a given.

Thus, on the first point—the identity of the worker with the product and thus with nature—Althusser moves rapidly to argue that such an identity takes place in revolutionary action. He leaves aside the next step, but I am going to assume it in Althusser's cryptic argument: that the other side of the revolution would also embody such an identity of worker and nature. What interests me, however, is the concluding observation, "this alienation is already overcome in thought—men no longer need a myth to represent it, since it has become the object of economic science" (SH: 168; EP1: 237). It is no longer the creation myth per se, but any





myth that is in question. For Althusser, myth itself will pass, and the condition for such a passing is the overcoming of alienation. Not the overcoming in reality, in terms of class, politics, and economics, but in thought. When it becomes possible to think of an un-alienated condition, then the need for myth has gone and economic science takes over. Apart from the anticipation of Althusser's later scientific Marxism, he shares at this point the problematic assumption of other Marxists such as Benjamin and Adorno, for whom myth in all its ambiguity could only be negative. In contrast to Benjamin (for whom the myth of capitalism was one with its dream phantasmagoria) and Adorno (the dialectic of myth and history, as well the entwinement of nature and myth meant it would not so easily disappear and so what one requires is a constant mythological suspicion), Althusser relies here on a conventional notion of the early Marx: myth is part of ideology, which is itself mystification and false consciousness, the mark and result of alienation. Eliminate alienation, and myth will follow.

I am not sure that there is much mileage in such a position on myth, and Althusser would only become less patient with the function of myth. Or rather, he becomes explicitly impatient, for his later theory of ideology implies a continued presence of myth in any political economic formation; myth becomes one, eternal, mode of representing the relationship with real social conditions. He hints at this in the second point ("On the other hand" in the long quotation from the footnote made above) on the identity of work and nature. Over against the abolition of myth in the promised union of labour and its product in revolutionary action, myth remains to bridge the gap between labour and the nature that forces human beings to work. Spoken otherwise, one can imagine the identity of human beings and transformed nature (the nature that results from human work), but the identity of human beings and un-transformed nature (that with which we first engage in work itself) is a thought that has yet to make its way into human consciousness. Or, in terms he uses a little later, "human circularity," the overcoming of human alienation that echoes the language he uses for God earlier on, is con-



ceivable, but natural circularity is not, for “in a socialist world, say the Marxists, one will still have to overcome natural alienation” (SH: 168; EP1: 238).

However, just when I feel that I can accuse Althusser of falling back to a theory of myth as a gap-filler, as a temporary measure until a properly socialist society can be achieved, his argument becomes much more complex. The temptation to seize on his suggestion that nature is a “given” (is it a “given” as an unacknowledged and unrequited producer, like woman?), that existence relies on “control,” “knowledge,” and “industry” (does this not posit nature as a hostile other that threatens human existence?) must hold off, since this is only the “obvious, elementary sense” (SH: 168; EP1: 237). I might point out that since the time in which Althusser wrote nature has ceased to function in human consciousness in such a fashion: no longer a given with which human beings must wrestle, nature is that which human beings choose not to exploit, to preserve as smaller (national parks, wilderness, and world heritage zones) and vaster regions (Antarctica). Or I might suggest that the presence of illness, old age and the fact that human beings are still subject to the elements is a profoundly utopian image of a communist world.

But Althusser moves on—“moreover” he writes—from the hint of the last item in his list of signs of natural alienation, namely, the continued presence of work as itself an interaction and transformation of nature in order to live. This work, as well as that of scientific knowledge and the transformation of the world itself, is not merely a process necessary for the achievement of communist society, for the overcoming of natural alienation, but it is, more importantly, an incomplete “recurrence of, and recovery from (*reprise*), natural alienation” (SH: 168; EP1: 238). Work itself, the need to interact with and transform nature, becomes in Althusser’s text a mark of alienation itself, a recurrence of natural alienation, as well as a recovery from that alienation. One may read this conjunction of recurrence and recovery as a trap, as the closing down of any possibility of moving into communism, for if the mode of recovery is the same process that perpetuates natural alienation, then the way out



is barred forever. However, I will read differently, in the sense that work, understood in the basic Marxist sense—and this includes the work of science that Althusser would later favor so much in his ideal model of Marxism—will itself pass when and if a communist society arrives. This would be a more radical reading of both Marx's phrase, with which Althusser begins the second paragraph, and of Althusser's own interpretation. Simply put, if work is one of the signs of natural alienation—the antagonism between human beings and the rest of a nature from which they cannot be separated—then the overcoming of natural alienation means the abolition of work in any known sense. Here we come upon the limits of any language to speak of a thoroughly different world the language of which cannot as yet be imagined. Is this not Althusser's point in the end, that a fully communist society without natural alienation is unable to be thought?

What, finally, of myth? Let me quote again the last sentence of Althusser's footnote: "This deficiency explains why it is still necessary to revert to myth in order to conceive a totality which has not yet attained its concept; it is in the story of creation, on this view, that men contemplate the *reprise* of natural alienation" (SH: 168; EP1: 238). The key lies with the French word *reprise*, which bears the senses of resumption, return and repair or mending. He has already used the word in relation to work and a communist society free from natural alienation; now myth takes on a function comparable to work: the resumption or return (as in tennis) and mending (as of a sock) of natural alienation is crucial to both work and myth. I want to pick up the wonderful image of darning or mending a sock, something I do regularly, along with other clothing, in order to speak of myth. Rather than the gap-filling function of myth, hinted at by the "still necessary," or even the pre-scientific mode of thinking suggested by "not yet attained its concept," myth takes on in this final sentence of Althusser's a more substantial function, both utopian and dialectical.

The two are, of course, intimately related, especially in Louis Marin's terms. Thus, myth conceives "a totality which has not yet attained its concept" (SH: 168; EP1: 238). This is more oriented to the future



than Lévi-Strauss's widely influential understanding of myth as the effort to resolve social contradictions (Althusser's later definition of ideology will draw closer to Lévi-Strauss). As a genre of thinking and imagination that seeks to circumvent the restrictions of language in order to speak about an inarticulable future, myth might be understood as an impossible attempt to draw its terms from that future. I have suggested this with Walter Benjamin earlier in this book: the dialectical leap of myth is not that it uses another means, an alternative genre, to speak about a desired world (in itself this is enough of a challenge to theories of myth that reiterate the crude designation of myth as circular and therefore locked into unchanging repetition), but that myth itself is an imperfect genre of thinking that derives its terms and very mode of operating from that future, reaching across to grasp in a loose and slippery grip a glimpse of that yet to be achieved totality.

The other side of the semi-colon in Althusser's sentence gives us the particular mechanism, if I may use the term, of myth's utopian function (all the while with Marin peering over my shoulder). As the *reprise* of natural alienation, both its return and mending, myth turns out to be for Althusser a thoroughly dialectical exercise. The impossible conjunction of recurrence and repair, perpetuation and overcoming, or my favored return and mending, is not so much the trap of myth as the utopian function of the dialectic. I am tempted to read this in Adorno's fashion, where one pushes each term of the dialectic as far as it will go until it unwillingly yields to the other term: in this case, the very condition for the mending that myth provides relies upon its recurrence of natural alienation. In other words, only through the return of natural alienation is the repairing, darning function of myth possible. But the more difficult obverse then also applies: that mending, when taken all the way through, sees a recurrence of precisely that natural alienation one sought to repair. But here Marin becomes extremely useful, for it is not in the content of the terms themselves that the possibilities for utopia open out, but in the form of the dialectic that Althusser deploys without developing here. For Marin, utopia becomes possible when the terms of the dialectic are allowed to run at full stretch, to go free rather than be rein them in, all of



which brings him to the notion of neutralisation as the crucial utopian feature. Neither contradiction, nor contrariness, nor even the resolution of the dialectic, but the neutralisation of the terms in their release.<sup>32</sup>

Except that in the Marin-driven reading of Althusser I have offered there remains what Marin would regard as an impossible conjunction, namely, that between myth and utopia. For Marin, the two are incompatible, myth barring the road to utopia and utopia seeing myth off the field. Althusser, it seems to me, opens a line of thought in which myth and utopia are less antagonists than necessary allies, precisely in Marin's terms. One final observation on a stretch of text on which I have already tarried for too long: at the close of this extraordinary note Althusser loops back to where he began, for it is not merely myth per se (although I have taken some warranted license in order to speak of myth for a while). Rather, he writes of the "story of creation" that may be read, however theologically in Althusser's case, not merely as the effort to deal in narrative form with the alienation of labour, but also as the reprise of natural alienation, its return and mending, as well as the not-yet conceived totality.

In this long discursus on myth, spinning around Althusser's reading of the creation myths in Genesis, I have cut a path between the two parts of his work that he fiercely sought to keep separate. For the discussion of myth that we find in this long footnote is replete with the terminology and concepts of Hegel, the early Marx and theology itself, all of which Althusser would later excise as a militant scientific Marxist. Does this mean that religion and the possibilities for a materialist philosophy thereof belong to a youthful enthusiasm that one puts away with maturity, the giving away of youthful speech and thought? No, for my argument has been not only that Althusser was too thorough in his expulsion of Hegel and the early Marx, especially on alienation and labour, but that it is possible to appropriate his conclusions regarding myth without endorsing the means by which he got there. It seems to me that any materialist philosophy

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<sup>32</sup> Louis Marin, *Utopics: Spatial Play*, trans. Robert A. Vollrath (London: Macmillan, 1984).



of religion that neglects myth is left halting. What function of myth in a materialist philosophy of religion? As the *reprise* of natural alienation, it provides precisely through the dialectical tension of the term itself space for the concept of utopia in Althusser's work. And for Marxists, utopia is but a code word for communism.

## Conclusion: The Terminus of (Auto)Biography?

Throughout this chapter, I have traced the various shapes of Althusser's catholicity: the alliances sought and dispelled in his early theological writings; the catholic blind spot in these same texts; the necessarily ecclesiastical form of his departure from the Church; historicising the Church and locating it with the enemy of idealism in an effort to deal with its perpetual presence. But what is most fascinating about Althusser's work is the way it provides not merely the logical necessity for a materialist philosophy of religion but also some of the pieces of quality timber that allow a patient construction of such a position. Throughout the long final section of the chapter where I tracked the whole question of a materialist philosophy of religion, it turns out that Althusser's catholicity, understood in both its ecclesial and Marxist shapes, provides simultaneously the resources for the advances Althusser was able to make and a materialist transformation of religion itself, or rather—in order to avoid claiming too much at this stage—of Christianity.

But now, at last, (auto)biography. I have left this question until last, since it tends to affect nearly all studies of Althusser in some way or another, particularly the murder of H el ene and the events following her death, but also the chronic bouts of depression and manic productivity of a bipolar psychological state. Biography seems to follow a number of paths in Althusser criticism, one completely ignoring it, except perhaps as a series of unfortunate incidents in the life of a brilliant man, another attempting to ward off the undermining effect on Althusserianism itself, and a third seeking the key to his work in his troubled psyche and difficult



relationship with Hélène. If the latter option over-reaches itself, the former speaks with a perpetual sense of repression.

Yet, if I shift focus to Althusser's relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, then that biography everywhere seems to confirm my argument concerning the absent cause of the Church in his work: his training by Roman Catholic intellectuals, Jean Guitton, Jean Lacroix, Joseph Hours (Père Hours) at the Lycée du Parc at Lyons for the entrance exam to the *École normale supérieure* (FLLT: 92–94; LDL: 83–87); the continued influence of Guitton and Hours in his life (FLLT: 162, 205, 315, 346; LDL: 154, 197, 309, 338); the various publications in Roman Catholic journals such as *Dieu Vivant*, *Témoignage chrétien* and *Lumière et vie* from 1946 to 1966;<sup>33</sup> the “first political cell” he formed in Catholic Action while at the Lycée, replete with chaplain and retreats to a Trappist monastery (FLLT: 95–6, 305–6; LDL: 87–88, 299); the continued interest in the community *Jeunesse de l'Église* and the Left Catholic *l'Union des chrétiens progressistes*, from which many activists, such as Maurice Caveing, Jean Chesneaux, François Ricci, and Althusser himself, joined the Communist party, the antithesis of its purpose (FLLT: 205–6; LDL: 197–98);<sup>34</sup> the influence of the political vision of “Père Hours” in such a transition for Althusser himself (FLLT: 205, 315; LDL: 197, 308–9); the close connection with the religious community of *Jeunesse de l'Église* at Petit-Clamard under the direction of Maurice Montuclard and the attraction of the monastic vows of chastity, manual labour and silence later in life as a solution to all his problems (FLLT: 96; LDL: 88); his trips to see the pope, whether Pius XII or John XXIII (FLLT: 122–23, 346; LDL: 114–15, 338);<sup>35</sup> the interest in liberation

<sup>33</sup> See Matheron, “Preface,” 6–8. The items in question are: Louis Althusser (as Robert Leclos), “En Attendant le Blé Américain, Rome Sommeille,” *Témoignage chrétien* (10 May 1946 et 17 May 1946), Louis Althusser, “Review of Georges Izard’s *L’homme est révolutionnaire*,” *Dieu vivant* 6 (1946): 149–52, and Louis Althusser, “Crise De L’homme Et De La Société,” *Lumière et Vie* 93 (May/June 1969): 26–29.

<sup>34</sup> François Matheron, “Introduction,” in *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings* (London: Verso, 1997), 7–8.

<sup>35</sup> Matheron, “Introduction,” 7.



theology;<sup>36</sup> and statements such as “I was still a believer” (FLLT: 123; LDL: 114; translation modified) and “I kept my ‘faith’ for a long time, until 1947 or thereabouts” (FLLT: 205; LDL: 198).

Autobiography is, of course, the most treacherous ground upon which to base an argument for Althusser’s “Catholic” Marxism, even though Douglas Johnson does his best in the introduction to *The Future Lasts a Long Time*.<sup>37</sup> He suggests that Althusser’s connections with the Church remained ambiguous. Nothing formal, critical of the director of *Esprit*, Emmanuel Mounier, who nevertheless published some of his work, scornful of Jean-Yves Calvez’s interpretations of Marx, yet he kept up relations with individual Roman Catholics such as Jean Guilton. With a degree from the University of Lille, Johnson suggests that with a Roman Catholic upbringing and as a former leader in the Catholic youth, he remained sympathetic to the Social Catholic movement and the worker-priest idea, always seeking a reconciliation between Roman Catholicism and Communism.

But Johnson hints<sup>38</sup> at the role of the canular, or practical joke, in the life and work of a *normalien*, although he restricts it to incidents in the autobiography such as de Gaulle asking Althusser for a light in the street (FLLT: 347; LDL: 339), or the claim by Althusser that he was a fraud as a philosopher, never reading much (especially of Marx), nor studying for his exams. And the editors, Corpet and Boutang, argue that the whole autobiography is the work of both a madman and philosopher, a mix of fact and delusion, hallucination.

Rather than playing the game of distinguishing the phantasy from

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<sup>36</sup> Matheron, “Introduction,” and Breton, “Althusser Aujourd’hui,” *Archives de la philosophie* (1993): 417–30.

<sup>37</sup> Douglas Johnson, “Introduction: Louis Althusser 1918–1990,” in *The Future Lasts a Long Time*, ed. Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang (London: Vintage, 1994). In her reading of Althusser’s autobiography, Gabriel Albiac notes the common point: “. . . autobiography is an essentially mystifying literary genre” (Gabriel Albiac, *Lire Althusser Aujourd’hui, Futur Antérieur* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997), 81).

<sup>38</sup> Johnson, “Introduction: Louis Althusser 1918–1990,” xvi–xvii.





the “facts” of his life,<sup>39</sup> it seems to me that a more ingenious motif appears in the work itself, specifically with respect to the Roman Catholic Church. The two influential figures from his youth, Jean Guilton and Père Hours, the one an intellectual the other a political influence, have a curiously skewed and deceptive presence in his work.

Père Hours, politically committed to the Catholic Left, Althusser presents as an astute observer of political events, Jacobin and Gallican, anti-bourgeois. Hours provided Althusser with his “earliest views on politics and the risks involved” (FLLT: 95; LDL: 87). And yet Hours has an ambiguous role: militant in the Catholic Left and possessed with a sharp political mind, he is both guilty of the vague solutions of the Church and yet provides the avenue for Althusser’s own move to Marxism:

In fact the Church, via its chaplains and encyclicals, made their own militants aware of the “social question,” of which most of us were *totally* ignorant. Of course, once we recognized that there was a “social question” and that the remedies proposed were ridiculous, it did not take much, in my case the profound political vision of “Père Hours,” for us to explore what lay behind the wooly-minded slogans of the Catholic Church and rapidly convert to Marxism before joining the Communist Party! (FLLT: 205; LDL: 197).

Hours’ antithesis, Jean Guilton passed on, claims Althusser, the fraudulent ability to pass off ignorance for knowledge purely through the form of a work. During the year that Guilton taught him at Lyon, relates Althusser, he learnt, after failing his first assignment, to write on the vaguest of topics with clarity and conviction:

Soon after that we were set our first written essay. We wrote it in a large classroom where the older boys worked together after lessons. They were old hands and knew all the tricks of the trade. Guilton had given us the subject: “*Reality and fiction.*” I was struggling in vain to get a few vague ideas into my head and again feeling completely lost when one of the

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<sup>39</sup> In this respect, I would merely be replicating the detailed biography of Yann Moulier Boutang, *Louis Althusser: Une Biographie*, vol. 1, *La Formation Du Mythe, 1918–1956* (Paris: Grasset, 1992), especially 99–171.



older boys came up with some sheets of paper in his hand. “Here, have these. They might help you. Anyway, they’re on the same subject.”

It was true; Guitton must have set the same subject the previous year and the older boy mischievously gave me Guitton’s own fair copy. I was certainly filled with shame but my despair was even greater. Without a moment’s hesitation I took the teacher’s fair copy, retained most of it (the overall plan, the development of the ideas, and the conclusion), and reworked it as best I could in my own way—in other words, what I had managed to grasp of Guitton’s approach, including his style of writing. When Guitton gave the essays back to us in class, he seemed quite amazed and showered me with sincere praise. How had I made such progress in such a short time! I came top with seventeen out of twenty (FLLT: 92; LDL: 84).

The result: Althusser became the prize pupil, one of the few to gain access to the *École normale supérieure*, Guitton’s favourite, all through a “supreme act of deception and artifice” (FLLT: 93; LDL: 85). An allegory for the Church in Althusser’s work and life? I suspect so, primarily because it did not lead Althusser to despise Guitton. Rather, Guitton, the “great philosopher” and Roman Catholic, taught him two genuine scholarly virtues that remained with him: “first, to strive for the greatest possible clarity when writing and, second, the art (artifice as always) of constructing and expounding an argument on any essay subject, *a priori* and as if by pure deduction, which was coherent and convincing” (FLLT: 93–94; LDL: 86). If the content and truth claims of the Roman Catholic Church no longer held him, fading from his life and work, the form of the Church—here specifically the form of its thought in all its scholastic rigor—remained fundamental to his intellectual life. But it was a form that was based on a deception, an allegory of the absent cause of the Church itself.



## Chapter Four

### The Heresies of Henri Lefebvre

Can I have been the last of the faithful (CEL: 221)?

May '68, surrealism, Dada, Class War Punks, die Grünen, Parti Communiste Français, sex and, impossibly, religion, specifically dissident Roman Catholic theology—these, among many other items, might begin to list the influences, both to and from, Henri Lefebvre. However delectable these various items might be, my concern is Lefebvre's continual negotiation of religion, specifically the strange ghost of Roman Catholicism and catholicity that continues to visit Lefebvre's work. As with Althusser, the fact that Lefebvre's reflections on religion take the Roman Catholic Church as the norm, that religion means ecclesiology of a specific sort, that the mark of the Church in his work may be designated "catholicity" in the various sense I will explore below—all of this indicates the specific situation and trajectory of Marxist intellectuals in France before and after the Second World War. Like Althusser, there is a moment of profound religious commitment and involvement that is subsequently passed over, rejected. Also like Althusser, Lefebvre was a philosopher (among other things) and member of the PCF, although he did not stay as long as Althusser. But Lefebvre's thought took a very different path, one that included mysticism, a lifelong emphasis on the theme of alienation in Marx's work and a predilection for the Hegelian side of Marx that eventually became anathema for Althusser but found a response among the Roman Catholics themselves (much to Lefebvre's chagrin). In fact, for all that they had in common, the two of them sit on either side of the see-saw: Althusser with his scientific, late, Marx on one side and Lefebvre with



his early humanist Marx, whose central idea is that of alienation, on the other.

Yet, in making these comments I revert, like an old smoker rediscovering former habits, to a biographical moment to launch my critical appreciation. Although I am suspicious of the trap, of the assumed coherence of an individual life, almost all of Lefebvre's work is autobiographical in some sense. So also the key text of the "mature" Lefebvre, coming from the extremely influential *Critique of Everyday Life* of 1947: "Notes Written One Sunday in the French Countryside" (CEL: 201–27). This essay will become the hub of my analysis of Lefebvre and I offer a detailed exegesis and response to it in the bulk of this chapter. Given the pervasive presence of autobiography in Lefebvre's work, I will take the opposite tack to the one I used with Althusser, where I steadfastly refused to read his work in light of (auto)biography since it has been done so often: here I engage directly with autobiography by counterpoising Lefebvre's with my own.

The discussion of religion that we find here, running back to ancient Greece and its festivals and then focusing on the small country church near Navarrenx in the Pyrenées, wants to know why and how the Church can have such an influence, how it can be so significant, not only in society and politics at large but especially in his own life. But the essay will lead me to consider other dimensions of his thought, especially the notions of alienation, space, women and everyday life, particularly in the way they seem to undermine his virulent polemic against the Church and open up the possibility of a materialist theory of religion. I will also consider Lefebvre's distinct liking for heretical positions, including his earlier disavowed but radical mysticism, Jansenism, and the theological education he received from the dissident Roman Catholic theologian, Maurice Blondel, at the University of Aix-en-Provence.

## Threshold

And now let us go for a moment into the little village church, surrounded by its graveyard (CEL: 213).

At first sight, Lefebvre's rejection of the Church is more resolute



than Althusser's, his hatred more entrenched and venomous. As far as Lefebvre is concerned, the Church—and he speaks specifically of the Roman Catholic Church—is complicit with the alienation of capitalism. And with the overcoming of alienation, a life-long project, the Church must be swept away with the bourgeoisie and the institutions of capitalism itself. I will return to the question of alienation below, but let me focus on the passionate essay for a while, seated with Lefebvre in the churchyard of his native village of Navarrenx. I would like to imagine Lefebvre writing in a small notebook, away in the country soon after the end of the War on his own for a few moments, jotting in his frenetic and passionate way. But I suspect that what passes for “Notes” were in fact dictated on his return to Paris. The parenthetical remark, “I forgot to check whether it [the vault decorated by an amateur painter with stars] is turned eastward towards Jerusalem and the sunrise” (CEL: 214), suggests as much.

All the same, I am there, having also gone through a childhood and adolescence in small country churches, although this time in Australia, moving from one small country town to another as my father plied his trade as a minister in the Reformed Churches of Australia. A different country, a different tradition, but the essay resonates in so many ways; I feel as though the answer to Lefebvre's autobiographical mode is to sink into my own in the process of reading, which then becomes more of a commentary, one of my favoured modes of dealing with a text that has its own long tradition in biblical studies.

In the end I am more interested in the form of this text, the various hints such a reading may reveal, but first let me summarise both the ostensible content and then the formal questions. For Lefebvre, the overall argument moves from a discussion of the rural cycles of peasant life, full of rhythm and balance, rich festivals and celebrations, to the disastrous effect of differentiation in terms of both property (the rise and dominance of wealthy landowners) and the organised religion of the Church. However gradual it may have been, both property and the Church come later, aliens in a landscape and society that would have been better off without them. But it is the Church that stands directly in the path of the storm



of Lefebvre's polemic, and after the intimate pages where he satirises, mocks and demystifies the role of the Church in a peasant community like Navarrenx, he closes with the argument that Marxism provides the only answer to such a pervasive and asphyxiating alienation of everyday life.

As for the question of form, once he enters the Church, it is as though the careful argument he has been building threatens to, and often does, get swamped by the passionate hatred of the Church. In these moments he loses sight of the main argument, only returning to the question of alienation at the end of the essay. The first person pronoun dominates the pages (CEL: 213–24), to the extent of reciting some of his own planned rebellions against the Church. Finally, the intense rush of his polemic can only be brought to a close by advocating Marxism in the conclusion. The contrast in style between the point form of Marxism's response and the running sentences and paragraphs (the last three full of ellipses) of the preceding tour of the small Church has its own story to tell. By this time Marxism and the Church could not be further apart.

Let us stay with the question of form for a while, returning to content at the close, for it seems to me that the content—the Roman Catholic Church and religion more generally as a major element of alienation that only Marxism can overpower—begins to appear in a different light once the other signals of the text have been explored a little further. The overall structure that holds these “notes” together is not the rhythm of rural life and festivals that Lefebvre valorises so strongly in the opening pages; rather, the measured liturgical beat of a Roman Catholic Sunday morning becomes the thread that renders the whole essay coherent even as it simultaneously reveals the inescapable presence of the Church in the way Lefebvre thinks and writes. From the churchyard (the impression is of 44-year old Lefebvre seated outside the church before the worship service) where his imagination conjures up—in this sequence—the patterns of rural peasant life, the village itself, the churchyard, entry into the church, a tour of the dark interior and then the service, or mass, from the moment worshippers



enter in response to the church bell to the vernacular sermon and then communion. Alongside the structural coherence of the liturgy, the other line of coherence is that of the autobiographical individual, much like Lukács's argument in *Theory of the Novel*: the narrative of the hero, especially the coherent chronology of an individual life, holds together the disparate pieces of a disintegrating world. And what Lefebvre traces is in fact the disintegrating and alienating effect of both capitalism and the organised religion of the Roman Catholic Church. In this context autobiography, especially the trajectory from Church to Marxism, attempts to hold everything together. As organising principles, both liturgy and autobiography work together, but they also generate the tensions of the narrative. For Lefebvre's own track away from the Church sets up the impassioned criticism that perpetually threatens to fire off in all manner of directions. But it is precisely the spark and rub of these two features, liturgy and autobiography that makes the essay so fascinating.

I have already suggested that the liturgical structure of the text betrays a certain catholicity. So also at specific points in the text, the first of which is the crucial transition where he enters the church building—"And now let us go for a moment into the little church" (CEL: 201). Any reader of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* will be alert to the "humble, unadorned threshold" on which Lefebvre hesitates, apprehensive. Let us give this threshold its full tropic weight, for it is also a threshold in his argument, a transition into a space in which he shifts gear. On one level, the whole existential tour of the church—a mode of writing that De Certeau in New York City or Jameson at the Bonaventure in Los Angeles would replicate—is built upon and then undermines the way the faithful would enter a Roman Catholic Church. For the pause on the threshold is initially one of reverence, a dipped knee and a hurried cross before passing into the sacred space (Protestants of course know no such "superstition," walking confidently and sometimes noisily into a church building).<sup>1</sup> Not so Lefebvre: his pause is full of foreknowledge of what

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<sup>1</sup> I recall the pure estrangement effect of a small Roman Catholic church in Québec City, full of its adornments, candles and saints—a vivid contrast to the stark interiors of the Irish-derived



he will find—anger, disquiet, memories of childhood, and fascination.

I hesitate on its humble, unadorned threshold, held back by a kind of apprehension. I know what I shall find: an empty, echoing space, with hidden recesses crammed with hundreds of objects, each uttering the silent cry that makes it a sign. What a strange power! I know that I cannot fail to understand their “meanings,” because they were explained to me years ago. It is impossible to close your eyes and your ears to these symbols: they occupy you, they preoccupy you immediately, insistent, insidious—and the more so for their simplicity. Already a feeling of disquiet, suppressed anger, mingled with the reluctant but tenacious memories of a childhood and adolescence shaped by Christianity . . . And I know that this suppressed anger is another aspect of the power, the nascent fascination of the “sacred” object. It is impossible to free myself from it. For me this space can never be just like any other space. But precisely because I feel this obscure emotion I can begin to understand its obscure causes. So I must not despair, the fight goes on . . . (CEL: 213–14).

For Lefebvre, it is the vacillation upon entry that gives him the possibility of fighting the pull of the Church, the extraordinary hold that it has on his life. And that fight involves a search for the causes of the Church’s power, over himself and over French society, however difficult those causes may be to uncover.

A large part of me would rather that Lefebvre had been more open about his debts to the Church, rather than setting his face to fight it every struggling and grudging step of the way. But this process takes its own hard path, full of pain and rejection. Only when the Church has kicked you in the teeth on more than one occasion do you begin to realise the hold it has upon you. The easy path is to have nothing to do with it any more, to focus one’s energy elsewhere, blocking the many moments that the Church and the particular strain of Christianity one

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Roman Catholic churches in Australia. My son Tom, when he was smaller but no less a handful, immediately ducked under the railing of the Virgin Mary herself to peer a little closer at the candles and strange paraphernalia. One of the faithful dragged him away and warned me about such sacrilege.





has grown up with influences and determines one's life. So I thought too, coming from a staunch Calvinist background, and having given too many years of my life to the Church at various levels from youth work and parish to the theological college itself. And yet, the transition to Marxism, which has taken as long as my departure from the Church, particularly the forms of Marxism that attract me, have a strange continuity: Calvin's predestination to historical materialism, the emphasis on reason and reflection, the need for an intensely trained intellect to deal with the complexities of a dialectical and paradoxical tradition, the disciplined asceticism of everyday life that allows one a perverse pleasure in work and self-denial until the revolution itself arrives (whose gratifying excess may one may taste with absolutely no guilt).<sup>2</sup>

It seems to me that Lefebvre says as much with this passage, all the while maintaining his opposition. Thus, the silent signifying cry of the objects that clutter the inside of a Roman Catholic church building, replete with meanings that are so well known to him, still have their power, a strange power, over him. In their simplicity they saturate his thoughts, or rather feelings. However much he may attempt to blot them out, he cannot close his eyes and ears to them. Or, to put it more directly: even though he tries to evacuate them, to shit them out, he is always full of shit. But note the string of negatives: "I know that I cannot fail to understand"; "It is impossible to close"; "It is impossible to free myself from it"; "For me this space can never be just like any other space" (CEL: 213-214). Cannot fail, impossible, never: the simple but telling point of the perpetual negative is that he protests too much, each resistance falling all too readily to the recognition of the Church's hold on him. He digs deep, finding with great difficulty the obscurity of both his emotions and their causes, buried in the damp niches and corners of this ancient building. Even the memories surface, reluctantly, despite his best efforts to excise them, the hidden recesses of the church crammed with hundreds of objects that now appear as an allegory for those memories. And the anger that he

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<sup>2</sup> See further my *Political Grace: The Revolutionary Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009).



suppresses speaks too readily of the fact that he does in fact acknowledge the Church, for only when he neither feels hatred nor love could he truly say that he was free of the Church.

However, Lefebvre does keep a zone free of his explicit admission of the Church's hold. The whole paragraph that begins his tour of the small village church of his youth remains in the realm of emotional response, the feelings that the space and rituals of the Church evoke. In what follows, in fact in the essay as a whole, he attempts to provide a reasoned description of the Church's power, but even in this exercise he cannot help but show how much the emotional response remains in check, breaking out only to be reigned in time and again: "Ah! Now here's something better, or more precise" (CEL: 214); "Sunday morning!" (CEL: 218); "A widow! It's a widow!" (CEL: 218); "I recognize you, despicable peace of my childhood! But what torments it takes to be free, just to destroy these ashes!" (CEL: 219); "What a combination—the art of fascination and the art of control" (CEL: 220); "How childish, simple and profound divine mystification is" (CEL: 221); "I mustn't get annoyed" (CEL: 221); "But how cold it all is, and how dried up!" (CEL: 222); "A caricature of humanity! Profound? Inner? No!" (CEL: 222). The "threshold" of the little church is also the threshold of the argument as a whole, since from here on the dark interior space of the church draws out much more than can be contained in a reasoned and ordered argument.

Lefebvre has given me almost too much, made it too easy for me to argue for the legacy of the Church, its spaces, symbols, emotional appeal. But what he does not do, what he cannot do, is offer a reasoned analysis alone of the continued effects of the Church on his thoughts and acts. He attempts a curious balancing act, searching for the power of the Church, particularly the hold that it has upon him, and at the same time breaking out vitriolically, for nothing good at all can be said about the Church. Yet what interests me are the modes of refusal and rejection that Lefebvre employs.



## Exploration

Apart from the threshold passage itself, there is the spatial move through the interior of the small church building, moving about, identifying various items, corners, features of the church, with Lefebvre himself acting as part tour guide, part cultural critic on an ethnographic run, and part diarist revisiting the familiar. This spatial aspect of the essay begs an analysis in light of his famous distinction between spatial practice, spaces of representation and representation of space, but I will hold with that for a moment. Rather, the language itself draws one's attention, as it has in various ways until now. Apart from the first person narrative, the adjectives and nouns that race from Lefebvre's pen have their own emotive force: "an empty, echoing space" (CEL: 213); "hidden recesses" (CEL: 213); "insistent, insidious" (CEL: 214); "obscure" (CEL: 214); "despair" (CEL: 214); "small and dark" (CEL: 214); "sickly light" (CEL: 214); "grimy little panes" (CEL: 214); "small, dark, mysterious" (CEL: 214); "smell of must and mould" (CEL: 214); "clumsy" (CEL: 214); "discoloured and worn" (CEL: 215); "the little human families which crawl along in this vale of tears" (CE: 216); "sordid secrets" (CEL: 216); "fearful depths" (CEL: 216); "terrors," "worries," "misgivings," and "despair" (CEL: 216); "frightened," "tormented," "anxieties," "sufferings," and "weakness" (CEL: 217); "inhuman" and "craftiest" (CEL: 217); "history of human poverty" (CEL: 217); "massive dehumanization" (CEL: 217); "living monster" (CEL: 217); "craftily reticent manoeuvres" (CEL: 217); "double-dealing, treble-dealing" (CEL: 217); "empty abstraction" (CEL: 218); "threatening, domineering" (CEL: 218); "melancholy," "childish," and "decrepit" (CEL: 218); "unspeakably insipid, unspeakably dreary placidity" (CEL: 218); "faded" (CEL: 218); "stagnating" and "falsely pious modesty" (CEL: 218); "distraught" (CEL: 219); "unutterably bored peacefulness" (CEL: 219); "contemptible" (CEL: 219); "despicable peace" (CEL: 219); "torments" and "anguish" (CEL: 219); "lost illusions" and "painful scar" (CEL: 219); "inevitable catastrophe" (CEL: 219); "bored to tears" (CEL: 220); "disguise" (CEL: 221); "secretions" and



“accumulated sediments” (CEL: 221); “childish” and “simple” (CEL: 221); “burdened, sickened, poisoned, by the philter of the absolute, the venom of peace and the dreary peace of innocence” (CEL: 221); “mental torture” (CEL: 221); “little authority” (CEL: 222); “weak chest” (CEL: 222); “meaningless weight” (CEL: 222) ; “comical” (CEL: 222); “cold” and “dried up” (CEL: 222); “insipid symbol of infinity” (CEL: 222); “dreariness” (CEL: 222); “dehumanized beings” (CEL: 222); “fiendish” and “terrible” (CEL: 222); “dubious” (CEL: 223); “facile” and “comical” (CEL: 223); “extraordinarily naïve” (CEL: 223); “a dry, frigid theory” (CEL: 223); and the ever-present damp and its smell.

Hardly a list I would expect anyone to read in its entirety, but even skimming one’s eyes over it gives a distinct impression of the weight of Lefebvre’s descriptors. He cannot be accused of restraint in his choice of words in order to speak of the Church. The venom of the terms spills over from the Church and runs onto the people, the villagers and farmers, and even his own reactions and rebellions. One of the clearest markers of the shift, the transition from the bench outside the church and the step over the threshold, is in this terminological move, putting on show the sheer negativity and hatred that the Church seems to draw from him.

But what we find is that the negative terms weigh more heavily, the venom is more concentrated, in certain stretches when Lefebvre can hold himself back no longer. These burst out from a text that often at least attempts to give the Church its due, attempts to explicate as far as he can the power he admits the Church still has over him. Or rather, the essay throws up two images, one an effort to see how the Church works its spell and the other where he has had enough and lets the Church have it. The first such contrast structures the tour through the building itself, after he has entered the threshold and before the next transition marked by the church bells and the beginning of worship (CEL: 214–18).

And so in an evocation that eventually runs through all the senses—the sound of Latin and the vernacular, the sights of devotional items and figurines in the half-light, the touch of lips on St. Anthony’s



toe, the taste of the eucharist (at least for the priest), and the smell of damp and incense—he seeks out the Church’s appeal and hold, however insidious and sinister it might be. It brings together the familiar and the strange, the mystical and the musty, far-away splendour and the mundane; and all of this purely in the mix of smells as he enters the church building. (Here Lefebvre is far from the small church of my youth, where incense and mould would have been banished some centuries earlier, had it been around then. Rather, the first assault on the nostrils was a curious mix of Brasso, furniture wax and bleach for the communion tablecloths, along with the perfume of flowers. Nothing, apparently, to distract one from the contemplation of transcendence, which usually turned out—for me—to be meditation on the high iron bars holding the walls together or counting the planks above the pulpit.)

The mundane and the transcendent mingle not only with the curiously appealing smells of Lefebvre’s small Roman Catholic church, but also in the artwork and the manifold curios and devotional items scattered throughout. Whether the star-spangled blue border, summoning the cosmic order God has made, painted by “a clumsy but inspired artist” (CEL: 214); or the dim bald central lamp that evokes the sun or the Holy Spirit; or the patron saints Blasius (cattle) and Roch (sheep) in a chapel, surrounded by a rough painting threatened by patches of spreading damp, to whom the peasants offer a few burnt bristles from the tails of diseased cows; or St. Anthony’s statuette with its toe worn and stained from kisses; or, in contrast to the aloof father, the immanence of Mary, who as both Mother and Virgin sums up “the feminine totality” and would be a great goddess were it not for a wise and crafty theology that restricts her role to one of mediator; or the joining of heavenly family—two Fathers (one real and heavenly, the other. . .), a Mother and a Son—and the earthly families that come to visit and pay homage. Never far away, irony slips in every now and then, reinforcing the power of the multifarious links between heaven and earth. If we tasted it in his description of the starry border to the vault, or in the dim lamp that stands in for the sun, then it breaks forth in the description of God himself. The vindictive and justified power of the Father, tempered



by the mild and brotherly son, threatens to come to pieces, paranthetically as it were; “(ah! the stories they tell in their pious conversations and their parish newspapers, of the host bleeding and speaking, of sudden deaths and unexpected conversions)” (CEL: 216).

God forbid that we would have anything like this in my small unadorned Protestant church! A simple, small vestibule with an old table upon which were stacked some faded blue hymn books, once a new edition from faraway and over the seas (in a Reformed homeland). Perhaps a newsletter and notice board with some out-of-date information on the church picnic or fete. Inside the sanctuary we find the simplicity of plain pews, windows with panes tinted in only three hues, organ to the right of the communion table, the towering pulpit—for all that counts is the Word itself—to the left (my father would move from pulpit to organ and back again), chairs for the elders behind the table, the board with hymns and readings. All of these sweep upward to the towering timber ceiling, itself only a pause on the way to heaven. Or at least it seemed towering at the time, in comparison to the width of the place and the three or four parishioners that turned up for the monthly service at 6.15 pm. And the bar radiators on the walls barely altered the frigid feel of winter.

Lefebvre can allow himself a moment or two of admiration in the midst of all of this, such as the attractive names for Mary (The Gates of Heaven, The Morning Star, the Ivory Tower and the Consolation of the Afflicted), or the ability of this small, ordinary building to “offer us the world and the human drama in resumé,” (CEL: 216), along with history itself. But he has barely contained himself up until now, the small glimpses of irony and scorn breaking out in a paragraph that runs for almost two pages.

“O Church, O Holy Church, when I finally managed to escape from your control I asked myself where your power came from,” he begins (CEL: 216). And with that he is off, the anger and scorn and fear all mingled in a rush that apparently leaves the Church no room in Lefebvre’s communism whatsoever: “Now I can see the fearful depths,



the fearful reality of human alienation! O Holy Church, for centuries you have tapped and accumulated every illusion, every fiction, every vain hope, every frustration” (CEL: 216). The charges he levels at the Church? That it involves large-scale deception, offers a totalising position that both absorbs all in its path and will brook nothing outside it, and that through such deception and totalisation it seeks to control human beings in every aspect of their lives.

On the first and third points—deception and control—Lefebvre takes the line that with its sordid collection of secrets and lies, the Church has plied its trade through a range of tactics and tricks. In particular, the clergy brings to bear “skills amassed over more than twenty centuries of experience” (CEL: 217) in order to perpetuate the big lie with the ultimate aim of controlling people’s lives. From birth to death, life becomes one long run of terrors, worries, hopes, and despair; the clergy takes advantage of people in moments of doubt, fear or anxiety to insinuate its message. The grand narrative of the human drama in the context of world history becomes a litany of oppression and repression.

(Having dwelt for too many years in the walls of the Church, I find myself nodding involuntarily. Surely, Lefebvre is correct! Is not one of the prerequisites for becoming what I prefer to call a religious professional the realisation that the complex of beliefs, doctrines and practices are but sop for the faithful? There is, after all, a deeper truth, which is, as one Church luminary bluntly put it, that “we have to keep the show on the road.” Forget any commitment or beliefs, all that is worth anything is the institution itself. And in doing so, the Church has developed the extraordinary knack, honed over so many centuries, of being able to touch precisely that spot of self-meaning, the coherence of one’s life in the vast scale of history and nature, and wrench it into line. That same luminary also told me, at about the same time, that I too must “be brought to heel.”)

On these points Lefebvre reiterates the old Enlightenment criticism of superstition and deception, and he comes very close to the position on ideology that Althusser finds unacceptable. For Althusser, as we have seen, ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to



their real conditions of existence. The key to this definition is that there are two removes from the “real conditions”: the representation and the imaginary relations. Althusser seeks to counter the mistaken assumption that ideology is an imaginary way of conceiving one’s real conditions of existence. At this level, there is only one stage, one step from reality to ideology: ideology is therefore an illusion, does not correspond to reality (belief in God, justice, etc.), but it does allude to reality. This is the level at which Lefebvre seems to operate. The task of interpretation is then to cut through the illusion, pick up the allusions and locate the reality behind this imaginary representation. Althusser identifies various types of interpretation—the mechanistic (God is the imaginary representation of the king or despot) and the hermeneutic (Church Fathers, Feuerbach, Karl Barth etc.), in which the imaginary inversion of ideology need only be set on its feet in order to discover the real source.

As to why people need to do such a thing, that is, make an imaginary transposition in order to represent their real conditions of existence to themselves, two standard answers have been offered. First, a group of cynical priests and despots have constructed these lies so that people will serve them in the belief that they are serving God. Second, this imaginary representation is a result of human alienation (Feuerbach and Marx): human beings therefore construct an imaginary and alienated realm in order to deal with such alienation in their real lives. Lefebvre seems to be guilty of taking up both positions at once, cynical priests and alienation itself. I shall return to the whole question of alienation later, especially in light of my argument in the preceding chapter that Althusser threw out too much, both means and ends, on the question of alienation. So let us stay with the cynical priest option: on this argument, a religious text or institution or doctrine is produced by a religious and scribal elite who use such materials to give expression to the ideological assumptions of that group of writers: priests will then produce documents with priestly concerns, men will produce documents with male interests, political groups will put forward their own propaganda. Lefebvre comes perilously close to the position that the Church is made up of a clique, a group of





ideological manipulators who seek to dupe their opponents and/or the masses into following them. In other words, he understands religion, or more specifically the Church, as an instance of unmediated ideology, to use Althusser's terms, as the imaginary representation of the real conditions of existence, without any mediation.

Lefebvre is, it seems, guilty on all counts. And yet, this characterisation of the Church as a clique of cynical manipulators is not in the end what really gets under his skin. The problem with the Church is that it lays a total claim on any individual: "he who is not for me is against me" becomes the claim that Christianity provides a complete and closed system that excludes any other, let alone Marxism. As with any analysis that starts with form, content must return, as it already has in my discussion for some time now. What we find here, in other words, is a clash of the Titans, Christianity and Marxism being the great totalising systems that have become state ideologies in a way like no other. Time and again in these pages (CEL: 216–18), Lefebvre picks up the strategies of totalisation: "O Holy Church, for centuries you have tapped and accumulated every illusion, every fiction, every vain hope, every frustration. You have garnered them in your houses like some precious harvest, and each generation, each era, each age of man adds something new to them" (CEL: 216). Absorbing every possible position, like some great sponge or stomach, both the strategies of control and deception that I discussed above become aspects of this totalisation. The definition of the Church is then that it "is nothing more and nothing less than the unlimited ability to absorb and accumulate the inhuman" (CEL: 217).

Lefebvre, however, is not speaking of Christianity per se, but the Church, particularly the Roman Catholic Church. I have been insisting and will continue to insist on the specificity of the existential tour through the rural church building at Navarrenx. It is a French Roman Catholic Church, and part of the burden of my own autobiographical response to his essay is to show the foreignness, for me at least, of what he takes to be universal about the Church, about Christianity. And that is precisely where the "catholicity" of Lefebvre's argument appears at its



strongest. Along with the half-recognised power that the Church still exerts over him, the need to account for this, explain it and negate it, there are a number of assumptions that indicate Lefebvre's unacknowledged and unpaid-for debts.

First, as with Althusser, he perpetuates in his rejection the claim of the Roman Catholic Church to universality: it is the "Catholic" church, a term first used in the early centuries of the Common Era not to designate inclusion but exclusion and division. The "Holy Catholic Church" of the early Christian Creeds is one that refused entry to various heretics such as the Arians, Donatists, and all manner of Gnostics. Let alone the great division with the Orthodox Churches over the date of Easter. Too often the underlying assumption of the "Catholic Church" is the theological doctrine of the Church Universal, the vast panoply of divisions and denominations still united under one faith. But, as I will argue in my discussion of Gramsci, the universality or catholicity of the Roman Catholic Church is not one of ecumenism but of exclusion. And this shows through in Lefebvre's own polemic, for he assumes the universality of the highly specific Roman Catholic Church.

Second, the very description of the Church, as an absorbing and rampaging monster growing ever larger the more it consumes, still presupposes, for all its negativity, a "catholicity" that takes the notion to its logical extreme. Third, he speaks not of Christianity but of the Church. This is both an astute observation of the necessarily institutional nature of Christianity itself, but it also cannot move past the Roman Catholic doctrine of "no salvation outside the Church." In this respect, the Church lays a total claim upon people: should you choose to join, then we expect complete submission, obedience and faithfulness. What is more, rather than being forced, you will *want* to do all of this (the ultimate success of ideology, as Althusser pointed out). Finally, and following on from this, the rejection of the Church can only be one of total rejection. No half-measures, no polite promises to remain friends; for Lefebvre the departure must be final, the earth scorched behind him so that there can be no turning back. But in doing so he perpetuates still



the “catholicity” of his perception and experience of the Church.

In this scenario, the Church must depart the scene on which Marxism is emerging: the premier agent of dehumanisation and alienation, it will dissipate with the overturning of alienation that Marxism promises. For Lefebvre, it is either all or nothing. And the signs of such a demise he sees in the Roman Catholic engagement with Marx and in Catholic Action, which was to exercise such an ambiguous attraction for Louis Althusser. For Lefebvre the appropriation of Marx is the craftiest and most daring of all the Church’s subtle efforts at control: “And now you have the gall to take up the cause of Man, promising to turn yesterday’s slave into tomorrow’s master! No. The trick is too obvious, and above all the task is too great” (CEL: 217).

The catch is that for all his polemic, it was precisely thinkers on the Catholic Left that engaged with Lefebvre, both drawing from him and criticising his work. The battle was over the humanism of Marx’s 1844 manuscripts, for this was common territory for Lefebvre and his collaborators such as Norbert Guterman on the one hand, and various Roman Catholic thinkers on the other, especially Gaston Fessard, Jean Daniélou, Henri de Lubac.<sup>3</sup> Each of these influential Roman Catholic thinkers sought both to combat and appropriate Lefebvre’s Hegelian and Romanticist Marxism. The crucial texts were *Morceaux choisis*, a selection from Marx’s early writings edited by Lefebvre and Guterman in 1934,<sup>4</sup> and their *La Conscience mystifiée* of 1936,<sup>5</sup> in which they attempted to broaden the concept of alienation in terms of mystification. Already in the latter book the polemic against the Church appears. Lefebvre and Guterman attack the Church as anti-humanist, as an expression of mystified consciousness and the cause of further mystification, and as a

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<sup>3</sup> See further D. E. Curtis, *The French Popular Front and the Catholic Discovery of Marx* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1997), especially 151–84.

<sup>4</sup> Henri Lefebvre and Norbert Guterman, *Karl Marx: Morceaux Choisis* (Paris: Gallimard, 1934).

<sup>5</sup> Henri Lefebvre and Norbert Guterman, *La Conscience Mystifiée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1936).



false solution to the contradictions and problems of human existence. Marxism is, by contrast, the true humanism, providing “*la force d’une religion . . . sans être une religion.*”<sup>6</sup> Marxism could deliver on the promise of Christianity through its notion of “l’homme total,” for Christianity was part and parcel of the alienation that must be swept away.

Fessard, Daniélou and de Lubac responded in different ways. Whereas Fessard argued that the early Marx was not dialectical enough and then used Lefebvre’s arguments against vulgar Marxism, Daniélou sought to seek a way between Catholic thought and the humanist faith of Lefebvre and Guterman. De Lubac took a different tack, stressing the shortcomings of abandoning ontological transcendence in favour of an absolute temporalism, which he traced back to the earliest point of Marx’s atheism, his *Theses on Feuerbach*. In each case, these Roman Catholic thinkers found significant value in Marxism and sought to incorporate its insights into theology. That they did so through Lefebvre seems to have horrified him, and left him a little non-plussed.

Lefebvre is not sure which way to go here, for on the one hand he hopes that this is the big contradiction that will lead to the Church’s undoing—attempting to combine the liberating drive of Marxism itself with the comprehensive lie of the Church. Is this one trick too far? On the other hand, he knows that the Church has been adept at adapting, absorbing, and transformation all that it encounters. The secret of its success has been this vast syncretistic enterprise, and so all he can do is close with a question: “So what is to become of this accumulation of every conceivable myth and empty abstraction, of this extraordinary apparatus which combines the flaws of every State that ever was without even the virtue of some connection to the life of any one people or any one nation” (CEL: 217–18)? In other words, will Marxism oversee the demise of the Church, or will the Church absorb Marxism?

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<sup>6</sup> Lefebvre and Guterman, *La Conscience Mystifiée*, 58.



## Worship

I want to hold the discussion of the Church and Marxism, the over-riding theme of the essay, until a little later, for there is a third phase of his entry and presence within the little church building where reasoned analysis jostles with polemic. Most of the careful analysis comes in the irony-sprinkled effort to understand the appeal of the worship service, or mass, and I will stay with that for a moment before turning back to consider the obligatory perusal of worshippers as they arrive, where again Lefebvre's ire gets the better of him and provides much more delectable material.

What of the Mass, that distinctly Roman Catholic form of worship, albeit with a recognisable general structure? Prayers, singing, sermon, eucharist, give or take a couple of things, especially the underlying theological justification for certain items and not others. Lefebvre suggests we may read this flawed event as both more than and less than a tragedy, with protagonist (priest), audience (congregation), choir, and the community's founder who comes to a gruesome end only to revive himself and the community. More than? Here he allows perhaps the most scope, searching for the uncanny appeal and versatility of the Mass: "What a poetic drama, where anyone watching who is not insensitive or immune is challenged, gripped if only by the style and flow of imagery—forced to participate, drawn on by the senses even into the realm of theological meanings"(CEL: 220)! And this appeal works its mystique all the way from the magnificence of a High Mass in a cathedral to the lowest Mass of bench and upturned crate. Less than tragedy? In the mock tone of a theatre review, Lefebvre cites all that dissipates the power of the Mass, lost in the clutter of centuries: abstractions, symbols, gestures, abstractions, language, the net weight of which is to sink worship itself in unrelieved boredom.

Boredom would have to be the quintessential state of the pew sitter, particularly through the sermon. Perhaps the best way to read the ruminations that follow, the sprinkling of Latin phrases along with Lefebvre's free-associating reflection, is as a way to deal with boredom in



the worship service itself, especially the damned sermon (the only part of the worship service in Lefebvre's text that was in French). I write of course as a Protestant, where the sermon competes with the "Lord's Supper" or Eucharist as the most important element of the worship service. In the Roman Catholic tradition there is no competition, for the culmination of worship is the Eucharist, the sermon being merely part of the lead-up. Various triggers set off Lefebvre's run of thoughts, a compilation of wily Jews, pikes and infantry, Judith and Holofernes, youth and the Word itself. Now and then he chides himself for inattention—"But hush! We mustn't be flippant. Pay attention. . . . I mustn't get annoyed" (CEL: 221). But all of this is not yet the Eucharist.

(By comparison, for Protestants, most of the service would rattle along at a sufficient speed to forestall boredom: call to worship, hymn, prayers of approach and confession, first Bible reading, hymn, second and third Bible readings, announcements, collection, prayer of dedication, hymn, prayers of thanksgiving and supplication, hymn, sermon, hymn. But the sermon would always get you. As a child I sat through my father's complex forty-five minute sermons, any fidgeting bringing the sermon to an abrupt halt and a stern paternal reprimand. Over the years I have counted bricks in the wall, planks in the ceiling, escaped to the toilet, watched girls, and yet seemed to find much worth listening to. And when, for God knows what reason, I found myself in the pulpit itself, I resorted to myriad tactics to fight off that moment when the congregation's eyes glazed over one by one, heads nodded, stared out windows, began to shuffle. Would I try to hold them by sheer rhetorical power, shock them with outrageous interpretations, start with a few sermon icebreakers, preach by punch line, or take a homeopathic approach and drone them to the death of a thousand boredoms? At least Roman Catholics have the Eucharist with which the finish off the worship service.)

Here, with the close of worship and the nearby close of the argument as a whole, Lefebvre finally returns to the thesis with which he began, namely the gradual alienation generated by the Church's appropriation of the rural festivals. But I began my analysis of his essay at midpoint,



at the moment of crossing the threshold into the church itself and into a different stage of his argument. There has been little sense of the overall argument of the essay in the section I have considered (Lefebvre's existential tour). In fact, apart from the references to alienation, no connection has been made with the earlier phase of the argument until now. What, for Lefebvre, is wrong with the Eucharist, the holy meal? All that had life, enjoyment, warmth, and vitality seems to have been sapped out of the meal. For Lefebvre, no community exists apart from one that is fictitious and abstract. The introspection, false piety, absorption in dreariness, dryness and coldness that characterises the participants in the Eucharist are not even in the same ball park as the enthusiasm, overflowing cups of wine and beer, never-ending food and the sensual pleasure of eating and drinking. Lefebvre wants the Eucharist to be just that, a celebration (the meaning of the Greek word *eucharistein*), full of pump and energy and food and drink and community: "Where are the overflowing cups and the huge, consecrated loaves of bread" (CEL: 222)? But he is not going to get any of it, for it has systematically been milked out of the Christian sacred meal.

(Once upon a time I made the mistake, a six-year mistake, of teaching at a theological college or seminary. One of the hot debates at this place of negative enlightenment concerned the Eucharist, some of the enthusiasts being in favour of a little more festivity in the aforesaid meal. Big chunks of bread were to be torn off the whole loaf and handed to communicants, who would then swill the fortified wine in the communion cup. In my mis-spent thirties I took this notion of festivity to heart, taking groups of students to the local pub every Friday night for a decent night on the grog, and once at a college camp I thought the best method for getting to know each other would be a solid drinking session, with plenty of food thrown in. Some of the students got plastered, an inebriated visiting lecturer and choir director/candidate disappeared into the bush, sex-starved students were romping all over stuffy, middle-aged and somewhat rotund lecturers, I was in severe trouble for bringing the name of the college in disrepute (what name? I thought to myself) and any notion



that candidates for the ministry might enjoy themselves with more than adequate amounts of alcohol, food and sex somehow disappeared.)

## Archaeology

With the close of worship via the high point of the Eucharist we come back to Lefebvre's main argument in this essay, and the moment of content proper. Which is that in rural, peasant communities dating back to ancient Greece and Rome, there was a rhythm of life and community, determined in large part by the agricultural season itself, that had an extraordinary balance and harmony. Honed over centuries of experience, the annual patterns of life both respected and took license from the all-determining nature all around them. As far as Lefebvre is concerned, life in a contemporary French village (he writes in 1945) has not changed much from ancient Greece.

Or rather, it hangs on, degraded, impoverished and humiliated, overlaid with the alienating effects of social differentiation and organised religion; what Lefebvre will call the social mystery. The brief pages on the village itself (CEL: 210–13), squeezed in between the far-ranging utopian speculation of rural balance and the vitriol directed at the Church, actually form the crux of the essay as a whole. The argument is very Hegelian, moving in the pattern of the undifferentiated to differentiation, and then through to a resolution in utopia. Hence his fascination with the pastoral idyll. If the section on the church itself, with its mixed effort to understand and condemn, presents the causes of alienation, and if the evocation of bucolic balance holds out an un-alienated state, then the village itself provides the link between these two other parts. In effect, what Lefebvre does here is undertake a cultural and spiritual archaeology of the village he sees before him, a projection backwards and forwards that seeks both the appeal of the rural French village and attempts to deal with its gradual decline. There are two aspects to this archaeological effort, the one based on a notion of uneven development and the other on a theory of relics or survivals. If social and cultural development is uneven, if some parts or regions follow a different path





or move more slowly, then it becomes possible to compare a select contemporary social formation with one or more of the past. For instance, in social scientific approaches to the ancient Near East and the Bible, anthropological research from so-called “primitive” societies is used to develop hypotheses concerning ancient societies and make sense of some of the textual material. Closely related to this is the notion of survivals, in which one may find traces of earlier social, political, and cultural practices in contemporary societies. In Lefebvre’s unnamed village, the alienation of social differentiation and religion has not completely obliterated the older practices that he values so much. In order to get there, he lifts various layers of alienation in order to uncover the ideal community beneath: the myth of the community and its dead, the winter solstice festival now overlaid with Christmas, spring festivals with their relics of Dionysius and Hecate now sapped of any joy and celebration, the degradation of sacrifice and charity into “spiritual” investments, and the ancient gestures and rituals, now dead and without meaning.

The notion of relics, half-buried under contemporary forms, has another more suggestive shape in Lefebvre’s work: one may focus either on the remnants of the past lodged at various points in the strata of the present, or on the transformations wrought on earlier bits and pieces by a particular mode of production. Lefebvre stresses this second perspective in discussing the differences between serious belief in Christianity (or occultism, spiritualism, vegetarianism, or a particular moral code) and the absence of such seriousness in regard to Greek gods such as Apollo or Venus. Except that artists and lovers will invoke Apollo and Venus far more often than God, or Jesus or the Holy Spirit. The reason? The disparate and heterogeneous way in which capitalism appropriates and transforms so many elements from different modes of production: “capitalist society brings with it all kinds of outdated forms which it raises to a ‘modern level’” (CEL: 191). In fact, the uniqueness of capitalism is not the invention of new cultural and economic items—such as patriarchies or money or religion or the detached bourgeois house and other necessary items—but the transformation and combination of those that already exist.



Lefebvre is no sociological slouch, having made some of the first forays that would establish rural sociology as a discipline in itself. I am going to be more critical of his arguments concerning the development of religion, but it seems to me that for all its archaeological form, the depiction of rural balance is less an image of the past than a utopian possibility for the future. Only when he invokes Marxism at the close of the essay does the dangerously Romantic<sup>7</sup> and regressive bucolic landscape establish itself as a version of socialism. In other words, the fullness of life, the risk of the festivals that challenged nature in their very excess, are all part of an ideal image that I want to suggest functions less as a picture of past than as a utopian image of the future under communism. This is Lefebvre's "primitive communism" (even though it is very much a feudal picture), the rudiments of a way of life that would find their fulfillment in the demise of capitalism. Here he draws nigh to Bloch's utopian hermeneutic, perpetually seeking utopian hints in material of past and present. Only with the emergence of wealth and property, particularly the wealthy landowner who always was more generous than anyone else at the annual festivals, does division and inequality begin to appear: differentiation begins to overtake the earlier undifferentiated state. These are the first stages of what will become capitalism, but it is not clear whether Lefebvre means the feudal social hierarchy or the first signs of capitalism. In order to avoid the problem of clarifying, his evocation of ancient Greece recalls a much earlier moment of political economics.

Lefebvre would be the first to raise his hand and claim that he is guilty of a certain Romanticism about ancient Greece, for the image he presents is distinctly utopian. Thus, in *Introduction to Modernity* he quotes his own *The New Athens*:

Athenian democracy, besmirched by slavery, incomplete but real, the cause and effect of freedom, disappeared only with independence. Athens, as a city-state, was neither the most nor the least important power of its age. The Athenian Republic could not equal the mighty

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<sup>7</sup> Other Marxists were wont to take Lefebvre to task for his Romanticism (see CEL: 54–55).



Persia, but it outclassed the little towns and ports of Sporades and the Mediterranean. Around it were grouped many towns, created or protected by the Athenians. Right up until they ceased to exist politically they were able to be intensely active in commerce, philosophy and science. They circulated their ideas with their merchandise and their money with their logic, the money of the mind. If they were not the greatest by virtue of their power (and Alexandria, then Rome, vanquished them), they were so by virtue of their spirit. It is probably to them that we owe the (rather unclear) concepts of spiritual greatness. In so far as we are able to understand them, the Athenians' relations with one another combined a certain gentleness and practical rationality with a great deal of energy, vitality and courage; if they knew how to enjoy their life in their own homes, they were also able to defend their city, and their sometimes excessive urbanity did not restrain them from acting on occasions with regrettable violence, nor did it soften their obstinate will to power. Nevertheless their guilt and brutality fade away as soon as we fall under the spell of their social life, which successfully combined charm with the austere quest for truth. Is there no place in the modern world for the New Athens and the New Greece, a country which would be neither too large or too small, which would be able to stand on its own two feet, and where courage and sophistication would be combined? Is not our working class the most gifted in the world in terms of knowing how to get the best out of life? It is not easily fooled. The proletarians of France know that man does not live simply to get the best out of life; they know that to live one must work, and to live well one must work well. Their social practices seem to bring back the bourgeois skills of the eighteenth century: the art of happiness, an intelligent Epicureanism, an art of sensual enjoyments. They couldn't give a damn for materialist philosophy as such. They have learned their social practices with enormous good nature, reasonably—like the Greeks, without excess, without going over the top—and spontaneously. Above all, we must never burden them with heroism, or productivism, or science, or political action: that would compromise what they have achieved and held on to. For perhaps it is they who will reconstitute passionate, concrete



reason. Perhaps it is they who will rediscover the secret of a lost harmony, the secret of an education which would train individuals in the art of living and which would control technology, the secret of a moderate humanism, without megalomaniacs and without giants, one which has as its aim the fulfillment of individual life . . . (IM: 86–87; see also 226–28).

I have quoted this at length, since the contrast with his depiction of the Church could not be sharper. His own comment on this earlier image says it all: “Yes, it’s all a dream, a romantic, utopian version of that classic myth, the myth of the New Greece” (IM: 87). But he also claims that “Greece, the original source, offers the only ideal and the only idea of man’s possibilities” (IM: 226). For Lefebvre would like to hold on to the image of Athens as an image for the proletariat, something to strive for in the everyday struggles of class conflict.

In the essay contained in *Critique of Everyday Life* he calls up a slightly different image of ancient Greece, no less romantic, no less utopian (however qualified). This time it not so much Athens as the rural landscapes and villages, the undifferentiated pastoral idyll that become an ideal origin now lost before the onslaught of the Church and of capitalism. The phrases he uses are telling: we can, with the assistance of precise documents “travel back in our minds to the origins of civilization” to the “dawn of Greek civilization” and “conjure up this country life” (CEL: 201). And the assumption is that such a life has remained by and large unchanged through Greek, Roman, medieval and capitalist eras. Of course, this is not quite the case, but let us allow Lefebvre his utopian image for a moment or two (see also IM: 147–49).

Here we find peasants living in close and disciplined harmony with a natural environment (but has it not been fundamentally transformed in a Europe that has only two percent of its land surface not fundamentally altered by human action?) that keeps them at a risky subsistence level. In the context of this life, always at the mercy of a nature that would determine the extent of the last season’s crops, Lefebvre focuses on the festivals in which the people would throw all of their caution to the wind. In one festival day they would use up the carefully accumulated supplies



of food and drink, putting themselves at the mercy of a winter before whose face they engaged in an orgy of food, alcohol, and sex. With the barest nod to village idiocy (which he must have found in his own village), Lefebvre sets up an image of poor, rough, and jovial peasants for whom nature, with all of fears and desires, was essentially joyful. If there was any religion, it was inextricably tied to nature, a collection of spells and rituals and a sense of mysterious powers that bound nature and community together.

Invoking his pioneering work in the development of rural sociology, he argues for a disciplined and subtle balance of rural life, ranging from the amount of pastures, forests and arable land to the number of children that could be born in any one year. Even though he recognises that “at only very rare moments and places in history has it [peasant life] achieved a successful, happy, balanced form” (CEL: 207), the placement of such a concession after seven pages of description of this imagined rural life is more telling. For what he will narrate now, in classic Hegelian fashion, is the breakdown of the fine balance, brought about by social differentiation and inequality along with the abstractions of religion—sacred form, symbol and sign—out of the rituals first used to maintain and celebrate life.

If the development of a rural aristocracy and then a rural bourgeoisie, with the attendant rise of private property, gradually dissipated and destroyed peasant communities through the reification of social relations, then the development of social mystery, or religion, becomes the prime form of alienation through abstraction. The living relations among human beings become abstracted, replaced by the signs and symbols of organised religion (see also SM: 79–80). I cannot help but notice the deeper narrative in all of this that evokes the Fall of Genesis 2–3, one that engaged Bloch, Benjamin, and Althusser as well. Here we find human beings in an ideal state of nature, balanced and in touch with themselves and their surroundings, until that Edenic state breaks down by means of the intrusion of new and foreign beliefs and practices—except that the Genesis narrative reveals something about Lefebvre’s own argument that might be described as the flaw in the crystal, the less than perfect Golden Age



that is constitutive of that age itself. In the same way that in the midst of the garden of Eden are the two trees, one of the knowledge of good and evil and the other of life, that Adam and Eve are forbidden to touch, so also the possibility for social differentiation and the development of religion lies within the balanced rural community.

The simultaneous growth of technical progress and social differentiation is built into the very system of festivals that Lefebvre so lovingly describes. A major aspect of participation in the community, the avoidance of bad luck, the continuation of natural and human fertility involves gifts and sacrifices. Festivals ensure and assure the future, and so the generosity of the giver, the size of the gift itself, entails greater blessings. A large festival gift from a wealthy member of the community would be seen as a gift to the community itself: “Thus through their gifts to the community, the wealthy (once private property had become differentiated) could make their wealth accepted, and were able to consolidate it” (CEL: 204). Here lies the paradox of this part of the “Fall,” for in the process of strengthening the community itself the increasingly powerful landowners destroyed it.

As for the move from magic to religion, Lefebvre not only relies on an evolutionary model of religious development, valorising the early over against the later form, but he relates it directly to the emergence of social differentiation. Thus, once the social process was obscured by the rise of wealthy and powerful individuals—it now seemed as though they were responsible for the community’s well being—religion could develop out of magic, realise magic’s deeper logic and yet replace it: “The developing social mystery—the reality which escaped men’s consciousness, although they were its authors and actors—was destined to become a religious mystery; and religion now superimposed itself upon magic, but without destroying it” (CEL: 208).

At first sight, the connection between social differentiation and the abstractions of religion seems odd. For what Lefebvre apparently narrates is the gradual emergence of capitalism in Europe: social differentiation is one aspect of the commodification of commercial life



and the reification of cultural and social relations. But then the argument that “religion”—his model is, as would be expected, Roman Catholic Christianity—appears as part of the whole process of social differentiation is absurd. However, Lefebvre is a little more cagey than that, for he does not want to tie the process down so neatly. What he tries to do here is identify a more general process, heavily reliant on Hegel, who undoes the much-desired rural balance. So, social differentiation and religion emerge in ancient Greece, in tribal situations (the rise of chiefs), feudalism (kings and a highly stratified society) and capitalism.

It seems to me that he is on stronger ground with his notion of social differentiation than he is with his theory of the beginnings of religion. It would be easy to pull his argument to pieces: structured religion does not necessarily replace its forerunner, magic; there is no evolutionary path from inchoate animism through mythical heroes, polytheism and then monotheism; nor is there a path from the concrete experiences of everyday to abstractions of the great religions; religion’s social causes cannot so easily be connected with social differentiation, especially in the temporal model Lefebvre puts forward. But what is more interesting is the function of this narrative of the Fall from the utopian image of rural communities. The Fall of such a community is a necessary narrative device, both for Genesis and for Lefebvre’s essay. If we are to have any narrative at all, any history of redemption or indeed the possibility of Marxism itself, then the Fall must take place.

And the arrival of Marxism at the close of the essay carries out so many functions for Lefebvre. I have already noted the formal function of the final pages in bringing, in an ordered series of points, the rush of anger against the Church to a close. Lefebvre says as much, seeking to summarise what the “dialectical method can bring to such chaos”—the chaos in question being not merely the alienation perpetuated by the Church but also that produced by his rage, his responses and rebellions. Further, the appearance of Marxism at the end makes sense of the ten pages of utopian rural harmony with which he opens these “Notes.” The earlier reflections then become an effort to glimpse the possibilities of a social world without alienation, without antagonism and class conflict



(the negatives themselves are part of the difficulty of imaging such a world). But it becomes more than that in the final words of the essay, where Lefebvre puts Marxism squarely in the place of “religion”: attempts the extraordinarily difficult task of recreating everyday life, “life in its smallest, most everyday detail” (CEL: 226), which then allows it to “resolve the problem of life itself” (CEL: 227). Or, if I may repeat the quotation I drew a little earlier from *La Conscience mystifiée*, Marxism provides “the force of a religion . . . without being a religion.”<sup>8</sup>

We encounter, in the last breath of his reflections, the final clash of the great totalising systems:

Human culture and consciousness incorporate every conquest, every past moment of history. In contrast, religion *accumulates* all man’s helplessness. It offers a critique of life; it is itself that critique: a reactionary, destructive critique. Marxism, the consciousness of the new man and the new consciousness of the world, offers an effective, constructive critique of life. And Marxism alone! (CEL: 227).

Lefebvre reiterates his earlier argument concerning the all-consuming syncretism of what he now openly and ambiguously calls “Catholicism” (CEL: 224). Further, not only does the Church, as a movement, a social and political organism, assimilate all that comes in its path while appealing to dogma and appearing to resist change, it also permeates everyday life. This is, for Lefebvre, the location of the Church’s greatest power and also where Marxism’s hardest task lies. Lefebvre suggests that this domination of everyday life is the result of both the various rituals, monumental buildings, vast organisation and finance, state power and even the abstract theory, *and* the well-rehearsed psychological and moral technique. I am not so sure, for this smacks all too much of a sinister plot by cynical priests; but I think he is on a much better track with the suggestion that in “every act of one’s immediate life, no matter how insignificant, religion can be present” (CEL: 225).

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<sup>8</sup> Lefebvre and Guterman, *La Conscience Mystifiée*, 58





## Heresies

Here, on the question of everyday life, lies the beginnings of a philosophy of religion that is not wholly negative in Lefebvre's work. But the possibility of a more positive theory of religion in Lefebvre's work is in part due, I would suggest, to the abiding influence of certain forms of theological thought. One thinks here of the collection of heresies with which he begins to close his discussion of the "Notes Written One Sunday Afternoon." In what follows, then, I speak first of those heresies before passing on to the elements of a materialist theory of religion that I would like to retrieve from his work.

The penultimate moment of Lefebvre's Sunday notes, before the invocation of Marx, concerns his various rebellions against the Church, thoughts triggered by the Eucharist and functioning as his own way of closing the worship service. As far as he is concerned, the desire to gather his own assortment of heresies was "just another way of *perpetuating mystical themes*," that it showed all the signals of "one of the last believers" (CEL: 223). In other words, his various rebellions were part of the logic of the Church itself, for which it had a vast room full of theological terms such as apostasy, prodigal son, and the cunning of the devil. You cannot escape so easily, as Lefebvre recognises in anguish.

(The half-perceived danger in all of this is that he was merely running through the prerequisites for the priesthood itself. If I might change the traditions somewhat, one of the elements in my path to the ministry and then out was the relishing of heresies, never willing to be placated with the easy piety of the answers to my questions, the suspicion that what I was being told was theological pap. In contrast to the austere order of Reformed worship, I delighted in the lectionary, vestments, the mumbo jumbo of ancient prayers. I became an Arminian and an Erasmian, espousing free will against the predestination of Calvinism. When everyone warned me about the dangers of modern methods of biblical criticism, that they would make a ruin of my faith, I leapt at them all the more eagerly. And where did I end up for more time than I cared: at a theological college in order to train people for the ministry, which is



where such a rebellious trajectory usually leads. I told my students they had three years, perhaps the only sustained period of time of their entire lives in the Church, to forget about using the Bible for sermon fodder or being pious. Rather, here was a chance to push and challenge everything they believed.)

Lefebvre was never going to be priest, but the predilection for heresies was something he did not, despite his claims to the contrary, leave behind with a rebellious youth. In the Notes from Navarrenx he writes of his planned heresy of the Holy Ghost, “an indestructible, indigestible heresy with which to torpedo the Church” (CEL: 223). Picking up this neglected member of the Trinity, he planned to become the prophet of the Holy Ghost, fostering a cult as intense and widespread as those of Mary or Jesus. The motive? Hatred and an over-riding desire for revenge drove him. When this turned out to be a little too clerical, he reverted to what would become his favoured ancient Greece, seeking out a Dionysiac celebration of the cyclical birth and death of the cosmos, now on a vast Nietzschean scale that would in its intensity of passion far surpass anything in Christianity. Christ and Zarathustra would be absorbed into a “superhuman Celebration” (CEL: 224).

Lefebvre cannot be accused of half measures. We are supposed to believe that these heresies belong to the moment of his adolescence, but he is fudging things a little, trying to locate such temptations at a time when he could see in a glass only darkly. His own writings belie such a position, and in what follows I trace the continuous compilation of heresies, rather than the direct criticism of the Church as such that characterises the “Notes.”

Nearly all the possibilities appear in allusions and word-triggers in the central essay I have been favoring throughout this chapter. In outlining his two rebellions—the cult of the Holy Ghost and the Dionysiac Celebration—Lefebvre mentions in passing that he “studied the history of the Church” (CEL: 222). I will deliberately over-read this phrase in order to consider his time at the University of Aix-en-Provence and the teaching of the Roman Catholic modernist theologian Maurice Blondel. As for “perpetuating mystical themes” (CEL: 223), there was also a



period in which he was enamoured with mysticism itself, his close collaborator on the first translations of Marx's early writing into French, Norbert Guterman, turning later to cabbalism. The cryptic "Jansen's?" (CEL: 223) bears with it a whole regional weight from his home town, apart from the heretical history of a theological position that has most in common with that other French theologian, Jean Calvin. And then the heresy of the Holy Ghost itself has echoes of Joachim de Fiore, the twelfth-century millenarian and mystic who foresaw the inauguration of the third era of history, that of the Spirit, in 1260 CE.

## Blondel

I studied the history of the Church (CEL: 222).

Suffering from respiratory problems in a damp, cold, World-War-One Paris, Lefebvre went to study for a *Licence* in Philosophy at the Catholic University of Aix-en-Provence. It was 1918, he was seventeen, and Maurice Blondel was already 57. Although he was to live for another 31 years, Blondel already gave Lefebvre the impression of "un petit chat très vieux" (SR: 359). Blondel had a history of radical and dissident theology, having been part of the modernist movement in the Roman Catholic Church condemned by Pope Pius X in 1907. As Shields notes, Lefebvre found himself switching from the technical and engineering training of Paris to a full dose of Roman Catholic theology, albeit somewhat heretical.<sup>9</sup> What Shields does not do, frustratingly, is provide a sense of the theology Blondel was teaching.

Blondel's great interest, especially at the time Lefebvre was at Aix-en-Provence, was in the question of volition as the key to one's experience and knowledge of God. Even though he later allowed more room for abstract conceptions and methodological arguments in theology (partly to stay within the Church), especially in the rational proofs for the existence of God, he remained true to his emphasis on volition. And he had established this position in his early work and condemned work *L'Action*

<sup>9</sup> Rob Shields, *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle: Spatial Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1999), 9.



(1893),<sup>10</sup> in which he argued, through a philosophical analysis of action, that the human will at the basis of action can never attain satisfaction or completion since its desire is never fulfilled by any finite or contingent good. It is this incompleteness, the lack at the heart of the human will that points to God in a teleological fashion (the echoes of Bloch's utopian argument should not be missed here). In what might be called the argument from volition, Blondel modified the traditional arguments for the existence of God, particularly the ontological proof of Anselm (God is that than which nothing greater can be thought). Reshaping the traditional arguments concerning grace, Blondel argued that God imposes himself on the will as the first principle and the last term and we can only "opt" for him or against him. This obscure and experiential affirmation of God is the condition for any knowledge of God. Blondel pushes the paradox of determinism and free will to its extreme: while the stress on grace comes close to Calvin or Jansen, the more God imposes his grace, the more volition comes in to play.

How is Blondel's work heretical? For a time, Blondel was part of the Modernist Movement in the Roman Catholic Church at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For those unfamiliar with ecclesial history and theology, the notion of modernism within the Church strikes an odd note: is this not a question of culture, literature, architecture and so on, rather than theology? The Modernists sought to bring into the Roman Catholic Church the by now well-established directions of modern biblical studies and theology that were common in Protestant scholarship, along with a slight whiff of democratic church government. Although condemned by the wary and conservative Pius X in 1907 after the toleration of Leo XIII, with some of its leaders excommunicated like Alfred Loisy and George Tyrell, with others moving outside the orbit of the Church such as Friedrich von Hugel, and most of their works placed on the Index at some time or other, the Modernists had a profound long-term effect on the Church that would be realised

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<sup>10</sup> Maurice Blondel, *Action: Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, trans. Olivia Blanchette (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).



belatedly with Vatican II. Blondel was active before Vatican II, yet he escaped the more radical punishments of some of his collaborators by moving away from the movement itself and shifting his emphases, but he held to its basic tenets: a closer interaction between modern philosophy and the historical and social sciences, the use of historical-critical methods in biblical study, the focus on practice and experience over against the intellectualism of Scholastic theology, and a teleological reading of history and one's personal life. Although he was allowed to continue to teach, Lefebvre notes the trials Blondel continued to face at the hands of the Church authorities (see SR: 371).

Four items stand out from Blondel's work that would influence a young Lefebvre in the throes of his long exit from the Church: the emphasis on volition and its incompleteness, the importance of experience and practice, the need for action and the absolute either/or of God's demand upon us. Blondel's notion that the desire of the human will falls short of satisfaction as long it focuses on finite things echoes Ernst Bloch's argument that a fundamental utopian feature of human existence is the sense that one's life is never complete, that we wish always to do more than we have done, that we know we should reach beyond ourselves. Both are thoroughly teleological: for Blondel this desire of the will points to God, whereas for Bloch it leads to a communism as it has not yet existed. Lefebvre would shift from one position to the other, but the importance of volition, the assertion of the will, and the teleology of both his individual life and history itself in the sense of an unrealised desire for fulfillment, remained with him.

Second, for all Blondel's interest in the Scholastic proofs of God's existence, he argued that they mean nothing without the experience of God with which one begins, an almost inchoate and obscure experience that only later finds rational expression. Lefebvre was perhaps one of Blondel's most enthusiastic students in this respect, although he would shift such an experiential and often visionary mode of living and thinking away from the Church. Throughout his written work, the reader keeps coming across extraordinary experiential pieces, such as the vision of the



crucified sun (SR: 252; IM: 95–101) or his vision of nature while caught in the grip of the ocean (IM: 127–31).

Third, with the group of young *Philosophes* at the Sorbonne after his time in Aix-en-Provence (1917–19), Lefebvre was to emphasise the importance of action rather than reflection in philosophy. Railing against the dry dominance of Bergson and Brunschwig, they played pranks on and disturbed the lectures of both, drank, danced, brawled, wrote poetry, had lots of sex and published a journal, *Philosophies*, in which they fired off ideas in all sorts of directions with a distinctly romantic, messianic, and mystical tone, all with the post-war sense that the old order had nothing to say.<sup>11</sup>

But it is the absoluteness of the either/or, the great division into two mutually exclusive camps that is Blondel's strongest and final legacy on Lefebvre.<sup>12</sup> In Blondel's theology the decision for or against God was cast in terms of faith, a personal decision that each and every one of us must make, but in this respect he shows himself very much part of the institutional Church. Is not the image of the individual believer (or unbeliever) coming face to face with God in a moment of absolute choice the surest way that the institution of the Church simultaneously effaces itself and asserts its abiding presence? (For Althusser, of course, this is the prime and originating form of ideology.) It is, in other words, a decision for or against the Church, in which there is no middle ground. Blondel did take some flak from the hierarchy for a position that smacked a little too much of the Protestant insistence on the individual outside the purvey of the Church, but he is in the end a distinctly Roman Catholic philosopher. Lefebvre would carry the inseparable connection between faith and institution with him in his winding path out of the Church: a decision against God was a decision against the Church, and vice versa—either/or, all or nothing.

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<sup>11</sup> See further Shields, *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle*, 12–13.

<sup>12</sup> Lefebvre claims it was Blondel's emphasis on love (SR: 360), but he seems to have related Blondel's lectures with his failed effort seduce a young woman in the class.



## Joachim de Fiore and Mysticism

As a prophet of the Holy Ghost, I would have carried my ardent prediction into the very bosom of the Church (CEL: 223).

The study under Blondel was to move in a very different direction as well, namely the millenarian mysticism of Joachim of Fiore (or “Flora,” mystic). I am tempted to argue that Fiore’s Trinitarian reading of history had a distinct effect on Lefebvre’s predilection for the dialectic and Hegelian Marxism as a whole, and I would also be able to push this question further in light of his own application of Fiore’s distinction as a universally applicable division between the rule of Law, Experience and Spirit, or Law, Faith and Joy, or his preference for a dialectic of triplicity.<sup>13</sup> However, what is more interesting at the moment is the nature of Fiore’s reading of history.

Abbot of his own Cistercian monastery at Fiore in Calabria (receiving papal sanction in 1196 CE), Joachim’s grand periodisation moved from the *Ordo conjugatorum*, through the *Ordo clericorum* to the *Ordo monachorum or contemplativum*. The first, that of the Law, was the Old Testament era itself under the dominance of the Father, while the second was that of the Son, the New Testament period of Grace. The final era, designated by Pentecost, was to be the age of the Spirit, proceeding from the Old and New Testaments (as with the western version of the Nicene Creed).<sup>14</sup> However, Fiore argued that it would actually begin around 1260 CE, a little after his own time. This age will be, he argued, one of the liberty of the *Spiritualis Intellectus*, leading to the rise of new religious orders that would convert the world and bring in the *Ecclesia*

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<sup>13</sup> As with space (see above), or between representation, represented and representing: the whole representation, the absent ideas being represented and the sign that renders these ideas present by representing (present participle). A question worthy of a separate study in itself, namely the way such a central concept as the Trinity sets up the possibilities and boundaries of philosophical reflection simultaneous to and after the dominance of theology. See further, Shields, *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle*, 99, 109–26.

<sup>14</sup> “I believe in the Holy Ghost, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son.” The famous filioque (and the Son) clause was a major cause of division between the Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Catholic) Churches.



*Spiritualis*, the Church of the Spirit or spiritual Church.

The influence of Fiore's ideas—which were never explicitly condemned by the Roman Catholic Church—within Christianity is profound. For instance, we can see it in the reformers' notion of the universal church that includes all believers outside institutional forms. And a study still needs to be done of Fiore's influence in more recent thought, including Ernst Bloch's championing of Fiore's utopian agenda, psychoanalysis (especially Irigaray), and Lefebvre himself. His rebellious cult of the Holy Ghost (mentioned earlier) is a clear successor to Fiore's expectation of the third age. Further, in an explicit debt to Fiore, Lefebvre interpreted the process toward the communist revolution as the steps through the cycle of law, faith, and then joy. He held to an idea of the joyous revolution to the end of his life: "Between the moment of faith and that of joy there would be a place for the revolution . . . Marxism . . . was a means to pass from the reign of faith to that of joy, or if one wishes, from the reign of faith to the reign of Spirit."<sup>15</sup> Hence the continued fascination with festival, where the glimpse of revolution may already be found, the discarding of alienation in collective hilarity, excess and celebration. He was, in other words, using one tradition of theology against the Church itself, which comes down on festival with the heavy hand of repression, organisation, and boredom.

And then there was the mysticism, part of the attraction to Fiore and in many respects a pressure-chamber on his way out of the Church and to Marxism. Not the first or last of a great line of mystic millenarians, Fiore was merely one of the most influential. For all Lefebvre's efforts to cover his tracks, claiming that by the time some of essays were published in 1927 he had moved beyond the mystical texts written in the mid 1920s for the journal *Philosophies* (1924–25) and its brief successor *L'Esprit* (two issues in 1926–27), mysticism and a closely associated Romanticism remained an inescapable part of his Marxism, which never relinquished the desire for a utopia of joy and Spirit. Allied to Blondel's focus on experience and volition, the encounter with God before any rational explication, Lefebvre's mystic

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Lefebvre, 1987, cited in Shields, *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle*, 32.





writings<sup>16</sup> drew not only from Fiore but also Pascal and Nietzsche, whom he studied at Aix-en-Provence and the Sorbonne. If the cult of the Holy Ghost was indebted to Fiore, the other great Dionysiac rebellion of the “Notes Written One Sunday” refers to this Nietzschean inspired mysticism.

### Jansen and the Albigensians

Jansen’s? Too dry, too terribly eighteenth-century petty bourgeois, and as far as boredom goes, his *Augustinus* beats even the *Summa Theologiae* (CEL: 223).

Lefebvre’s perpetual mention and the dismissal of the seventeenth century heretic Cornelius Otto Jansen (1585–1638), teacher at Louvain and Bishop of Ypres, strike curious notes in his work. In his autobiography, *Le Somme et le Reste* of 1959—an almost inescapable although problematic reference point—he places his mother in the ranks of the Jansenists. While he found his mother’s mystical passion something that stayed with him, he did his best to dispense with the rigorous determinism and Puritanism of Jansen’s predestination (see SR: 251, 259–66). I must confess a greater fascination with Jansen, mainly due to the overlaps with Calvinism, which in itself provides in theological terms the various elements of the materialist determinism of one’s historical and social context.

Lefebvre, on the other hand, can hardly be described as a Jansenist, given his emphasis on joy, celebration, and volition. For the Jansenists, classically following the five prepositions drawn from Jansen’s *Augustinus* (1640 CE), held that God’s grace itself is irresistible and that this grace was absolutely necessary in order to follow God’s commandments, that no-one, in other words, could do any good without grace. Further, in light of God’s irresistible grace, human beings are part of the larger scheme of predestination in which God not only determines one’s

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<sup>16</sup> These were published in *L’Esprit*: Henri Lefebvre, “Description de ces Temps. Misère de M. Jacques Maritain,” *L’Esprit* 1 (May 1926): 258–71; Henri Lefebvre, “La Pensée et L’esprit,” *L’Esprit* 1 (May 1926): 21–69; Henri Lefebvre, “Notes pour le Procès de la Chrétienté,” *L’Esprit* 2 (May 1927): 121–38; Henri Lefebvre, “Reconnaissance de l’unique,” *L’Esprit* 2 (May 1927): 5–37.



everyday life but also those who will be saved. Yet, the Jansenists were no blockheads: they held to the paradox of free will and grace, arguing not only that God's grace was not coercive, but that there was a natural as well as a supernatural determinism. I have used the terms "determinism" and "predestination" interchangeably, but the Jansenists as well as the Calvinists after them carefully distinguished between the fatalism inherent in determinism, which is more of a pagan notion deriving from ancient Greece and Rome, and predestination proper that provides hope and an incentive to action rather than the despair of fatalism. Like the Calvinists, Jansenism held to a stern moral code that was one's right and proper response to God's grace.

Never quite exterminated, in part due to the tolerance of the Dutch (and the affinity with Calvinism), the Jansenists were hounded and persecuted by the Roman Catholic Church. A succession of popes and statements, from Innocent X in 1653 to the papal bull "Unigenitus" in 1713, sought to overcome the Jansenist evasions. Jansenism, especially its wide influence through the sisters Jacqueline and Agnès Arnauld, successive abbesses of the Convent of Port-Royal, and their brother Antoine Arnauld, major theologian of Jansenism after Saint Cyrian, has its own place in Marxist criticism through the work of Lucien Goldmann.<sup>17</sup>

Hardly Lefebvre's scene, yet I wonder whether his own dismissal is a little too hasty. For Jansen and Saint Cyrian were from his own region in the south of France, with its long history of refusing the external power of Rome, let alone more local French politics. Thus, in his narrative of the heavy suppression of the Albigensian heresy in the western Pyrenées, he writes that at the moment of the apparent success of the Inquisition, when Louis XIII was able to tour a subjugated countryside in 1620: "All this took place between 1610 and 1620. It was not without its consequences, nor its backlash. While Louis XIII was meandering majestically from town to town, two men met in nearby Bayonne: Jansenius and

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<sup>17</sup> Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, trans. Philip Thody (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).



Saint Cyrian. . .” (IM: 60). For all his claims about the lack of fit between Jansenist thought and his own, I cannot help but notice that in his own way he joins this long line of non-conforming, rebellious and independent southerners.

Lefebvre’s insurrectionary heritage is long, but there is more here than mere regional identification. Let us pick up the comment I made earlier concerning Calvinism and Marxism: using the only language available, that of Christian theology, the Jansenists, like the Calvinists, were able to give voice to a coherent notion of a determination by forces outside the apparent freedom of the human will. In this respect, a deep affinity opens up between Marxism’s exploration of the paradox of free will, or human agency, and the determination of human action by social, economic and political factors. Marx would of course argue for a dialectic, which Lefebvre himself championed throughout his life, in which the political and economic elements, as well as those of the nature, have been shaped by human beings.

I want to take this one step further and pick up Lefebvre’s comments on the Albigensians. As a French branch of the Cathari (the “pure”), who also appeared in Germany and Italy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, they had the closest affinities with the Gnostics and Manichaeans. Rousing the worst of the Church’s anger, they found themselves face to face with a brutal Crusade (Innocent III), and those who escaped the Crusade ran straight into a less than friendly Inquisition. The Albigensians held to a strict dualism: all matter was evil, and therefore Christ did not have a real body. He was in fact an angel with a phantom body, who neither suffered nor rose from the dead. Further, the Sacraments were of evil matter, celebrating the body of one who did not have a body. All of this required a rigorous moral code, in which there was to be no marriage or the use of animal products. The Albigensians were not entirely unpractical, realising the need for at least some children in order to keep the group alive, so they distinguished in good dualist fashion between the “perfect,” who followed all of the moral laws, and the ordinary believers who married and led what were felt to be relatively normal lives. The difference between them was the



*consolamentum*, the baptism of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands: the perfect had already received the *consolamentum*, whereas the believers would receive it when death seemed imminent.

For Lefebvre, the beliefs of his Albigensian ancestors, no matter how demanding or dehumanised, showed up the uncomfortable truth of Christianity:

It was perfectly logical, perfectly coherent, the perfect theory of a perfect ontology. It challenged official Christianity by showing it its consequences and by refusing the compromises which were essential for the Church to function as a social form. Official Christianity understood the challenge, and made it clear in no uncertain terms that it had understood it (IM: 60).

This is an almost Lacanian point, namely, that the apparent extreme of the Albigensians shows Christianity the unbearable truth at the heart of its own position. Shorn of the compromises and accommodations made by Christian theology, the balance of paradoxes, the muted dualism between the devil and God, Albigensianism presented a radical dualism that did not shy from the consequences. Not only was Christianity illogical and untenable, but the dumping of all that it opposed, all that was undesirable, on the devil, is the fact that the Church itself embodies all of the devil's vices; hence the persecution.

## The Devil

I would write a vast, serious and well-documented opus several volumes long, entitled *The Metamorphoses of the Devil* (IM: 56).

The Albigensians did indeed leave their mark on Lefebvre's thought in a rather direct fashion. Having explored all of the existing heresies in an obverse ecumenism, he develops one or two of his own. Perhaps the most entertaining of these is the short essay in *Introduction to Modernity* called "Metamorphoses of the Devil" (IM: 56–64). Here of course the stark dualism of the Albigensians turns up, but the most extraordinary section of the essay comes at its close, in the short science fiction story in which the spaceship *Teilhard de Chardin* comes across the planet Omega. Here God has been successful, unlike the situation



on so many other planets. In the sketch of a history of this planet, it turns out that God has eschewed immortality and omniscience. He/she is located somewhere between the finite and the infinite, being merely very powerful.

On this planet God embodies all that Lefebvre seeks: eternal youthfulness (he merely incarnates himself as yet another young person when he grows old); God is full of the joy and zest of life; all the women and men love him, “but in a nicer way, without being too pious about it” (IM: 63); God is both male and female, for when the planet’s primary moon passes by everyone changes sex; and God is a revolutionary, rather than the reactionary he became on earth. In fact, it is the devil who is the reactionary, the leader of the conservatives—although the story has its own series of complex twists. In a nutshell, although God wins the revolution against the priests, landowners, aristocrats, capitalists, and so forth, he faces a whole new batch of problems with the promise of immortality. In more detail: those in power, the Party, had ensured that they achieved immortality first, and so are able to stay in power forever. Ensnared in their positions, the devil became their champion and, in the war between immortals and mortals, God manages victory only by the withering away of the state, that is, by instituting communism, which really means immortality for everyone. The devil comes to a grisly end, committing suicide in a duel with God, but not before God has reluctantly been forced to put together an army, a police force, a church, and a state.

I must admit that the more I read this story, the more puzzled I am. The immediate point is the way the creative heresy of the Albigensians underwent its own metamorphosis in Lefebvre’s thought. The first time I read the story, it seemed to me that the inversion of the roles of the devil and God enacts a further inversion, for by the close of the story God has metamorphosed into the devil, the latter’s suicide marking the transition. But then, on a later reading in the context of the essay as a whole, Lefebvre’s championing of the devil over against the Church as the heresy of all heresies suggests an awareness despite himself of Bloch’s beloved point: that there is indeed a subversive current within



Christianity, that the rebellion against God comes out of the same material that venerates him. On this level, the story becomes a wish fulfillment, for God is in fact not on the side of the church at all. That is where the devil has his home.

## On Religion: Reading Lefebvre Against Himself

More than a mere predilection for heresies (and he would suffer from the PCF for that), the influence of Maurice Blondel, Joachim de Fiore, and Cornelius Otto Jansen seems to have been stronger than Lefebvre cared to imagine. And that influence is the first opening of a more positive theory of religion in his work, despite his own polemic. As with my discussion of a materialist philosophy of religion in Althusser's writings, the strengths and weaknesses of such a theory are very much tied up with the ecclesial form of Lefebvre's experiences and reflections concerning religion, as well as the ambiguous catholicity that such reflections exhibit. Such a theory will require reading Lefebvre against himself, exploiting certain contradictions that are more evident in a writer whose work characteristically throws out so many ideas without developing all of them. Yet, for a resolutely dialectic thinker like Lefebvre, the focus on contradictions is to make use of the method he himself favours so much.

Lefebvre's ostensible theory of religion can be summed up quite easily: religion superimposes itself on a much more vital magic and squeezes out its life; religion is infinitely syncretistic, absorbing and transforming a myriad of beliefs, myths and practices as it persists through eras in which everything else seems to change; it is fundamentally alienating, a prime cause and effect of the groveling status in which human beings find themselves; and religion is remarkably tenacious and pervasive precisely through the hold it has on everyday life. In his own words, "religion is nothing but a direct, immediate, negative, destructive, incessant, and skilful criticism of life—skilful enough to give itself the appearance of not being what it really is" (CEL: 252; see also SM: 3–4, 10). For Lefebvre, such religion



may be characterised as the “over-repressive society,” and where Roman Catholicism slips up on its repressive task, Protestantism fills its shoes so much more efficiently (ELMW: 145–47).

All the same, Lefebvre is a dialectical thinker, and there are moments where he allows room for a more dialectical theory of religion, perhaps despite himself. In the long ‘Foreword’ to the *Critique of Everyday Life*, he writes: Thus religions, theological or metaphysical projects, were *authentic* attempts to reconcile man with himself, the human with nature, the individual with the social. They achieved both their internal coherence and their entry into life from these attempts, in the form of actions, and the search for a style. Religious fervour and belief in a God gave symbolic expression to the unity of the elements of the human, and projected this unity outside man.

In fact, however, at the very moment ideology was creating this unity by becoming a coherent doctrine and discovering a style of living, it was also perpetuating the inner division, in the form of good and evil, sin and salvation, God and the Devil. Religion as institution maintained a social unity by separating the sacred and the profane, and by oppression (CEL: 73).

I shall pick up on this dialectic in what follows, emphasising both sides of the contradictions he traces: the authentic and the oppressive, the genuine effort at reconciliation between human being and nature, individual and society, as well as the perpetuation of such divisions in theological categories such as sin and salvation. In many respects, Lefebvre comes close to Lévi-Strauss’s influential theory, itself inspired by Marx, in which various cultural products, be they religion, literature or whatever, function as symbolic resolutions of real social contradictions. Further, the effort at resolving the contradiction on the symbolic level—God, art, a piece of literature, a philosophical system, and so on—actually manifests the effort at resolution in a whole series of new tensions, the ones Lefebvre identifies as the central contradictions of theology itself. But in doing so, he unwittingly produces a theory of religion, and indeed the beginnings of a materialist theology that I will pursue in the conclusion



to this book, that sees it as more than a contributor to human alienation.

It seems to me that there are three areas of Lefebvre's thoughts on the Church that do not enlist entirely on the side of the forces of oppression and alienation. The first is the question of everyday life, the second may be found in another profoundly original and influential notion, namely the production of space, and the third may be located in his anger at women on their own, precisely within the church.

### Everyday Life

At one level, the whole of the "Notes Written One Sunday" comprises an effort at understanding the role of religion not only in his own life, not only in the life of rural France, but its permeation of everyday life, the mundane quotidian events and acts of life. And I cannot help but agree with him that in many respects this permeation and determination of everyday life is dehumanising, that the various forms of Christianity consistently emphasise the sinfulness of human beings (only rare strains argue for an inherently good human nature), the need for confession, whether to a priest or directly to God, the inability to approach God without that prior moment of confession of guilt and request for forgiveness, and, in the Calvinism I know so well, the complete inability of human beings to do anything good on their own, their total depravity and utter reliance on God's grace, who himself does not need to do anything for us, but chooses to do so out of grace (but this "heresy" is characteristic of the Jansenism that fascinated Lefebvre).

The construction of everyday life in religious terms takes place for Lefebvre at a number of levels. On a macro-level, there is the global reach of a structure that determines so many of the contexts in which human beings live. At a micro-level, the Church's rituals and beliefs are internalised into the fabric of the human body and mind so as to be unnoticeable. Further, the model of the concerned benefactor, the one in whom you may confide your deepest secrets and concerns, is in so many ways based on the figure of the "the priest [or minister] who listens, understands, advises, reprimands or pardons"(CEL: 225). At yet





another level, he identifies the perpetual guidance of behaviour by moral codes of which the Church held sole copyright, the suggestion as to how to behave at liminal moments of life and death. In short, at every moment of the day it provides “an attitude, a way to behave . . . a ceremonial, the impression of doing something” (CEL: 226).

Yet, even though the insight concerning everyday life and religion was first enabled by the specificity of the Roman Catholic Church—he might have added specific instances from birth to death in which the Church holds onto its own (school, sport, welfare for the down and out, links with the most wayward apostates)—it is also the source of the major shortcoming of his assessment of the Church’s role in everyday life. He consistently presents the domination of everyday life as an imposition from outside, as the external institution insinuating its codes of behavior and interaction on human beings themselves. The Church, he writes in a telling phrase, “*penetrates everyday life*” (CEL: 225). Apart from the obvious point that human beings themselves make the Church what it is, the persistence in seeing the Church as somehow external is not only for the purposes of political opposition and denunciation, but also because of the nature of the Roman Catholic Church. Particularly in France, with its long opposition to the dominance of Rome, the conflicts over ultramontanism in ecclesiology and theology, to the extent of rival popes resident in France for a time, the Roman Catholic Church is always something outside that imposes itself on the local parish and one’s everyday life. All of which tends to the position with which I have been less than impressed (following Althusser), namely, the cadre of priests, either cynical or not, manipulating the faithful for the sake of the institution.

However, a couple of moments may be discerned when the picture of an alien invasion of everyday life slips.

The ritual gesture when a funeral procession goes by, words of insult, an “A-Dieu” when we part, a wish, a propitious phrase of greeting or thanks—*all such everyday attitudes still come down to us from magic and religion; they are really religious, or potentially so*. And this is where in the end the secret of religion’s strength lies.



In this way the illusion by which religion deceives us (that vain and ever-broken promise of community, of the power to act) *tends to be born again with every action in our everyday lives. Exactly as, on another level, economic fetishism is reanimated* every single time an individual, unaware of the social structure, uses a coin or a note to buy the product of human labour, transformed into a commodity (CEL: 226; italics mine).

To my mind, here lies the most intriguing suggestion as to the way in which religion remains so much at the centre of every life. As for the first part I have italicised, the semi-colon performs a curious function. To the left of the semi-colon: after a list of everyday acts, some of them admittedly rather Roman Catholic and French, Lefebvre begins by saying that they “come down to us,” which I will read as “derived from,” magic and religion. Now, earlier he had valorised magic over against religion, the latter superimposing its stifling and alienating beliefs and practices over a much more vital magic. Here they seem to operate on a much more level plain. And at this level, there is nothing inherently negative about the statement that so much of our everyday life is inescapably religious and magical, that it derives from long and half-forgotten religious patterns and practices. I will jump forward for a moment, for in the final sentence of the first section I have quoted, Lefebvre writes: “And this is where in the end the secret of religion’s strength lies” (CEL: 226). More so than the well-known arguments concerning the modern institutions of hospitals, schools, welfare, or even the originary moment and enabling power of theology for the sciences and humanities, or more specifically the possibility of any form of literary criticism without biblical criticism. Rather, for Lefebvre, it is in the practices of everyday life that religion is at its strongest.

But what of the right-hand side of the semi-colon? Here Lefebvre imperceptibly flicks a switch that suddenly materialises us on the other side of his argument. Religion is no longer imposed, brutally or subtly, from outside, as most of the essay bitterly argues. Rather, these actions are “religious, or potentially so” (CEL: 226). It is the “potentially so” that intrigues me, for now we no longer have everyday actions derived from



religion, but actions that are potentially religious. In other words, we are back with the argument concerning magic, namely, that certain acts took on magical significance in the various interplays of human beings within nature. The difference in this quotation is that Lefebvre speaks of religion, not magic. A slip? If so, it is a significant one. For the implication is that as long as human beings interact with each other and with nature there will never be a moment when a certain act—a greeting or curse or wish or hope—will not be potentially religious, will not give itself out into some form of religious observance or ritual, however small or insignificant.

The danger of such an argument is that it can end up with the position that human beings are inherently religious or spiritual (something wheeled out with self-justifying regularity in religious institutions, books on religion in general, or university religion programs). For the sake of opposing such a position, it seems to me that human beings are inherently non-religious, but this gets us little further. There is much more going on here, and Lefebvre has only hinted at it with his “potentially so.” But in order to see what he touches in passing I need to look at the second section I have quoted, particularly the comparison with economic fetishism.

In extricating the economic comparison I ignore, quite deliberately, the negative statements concerning illusion, deception, and broken promises. What interests me is the notion, or rather figure, of reanimation and being born-again. Religion—Lefebvre writes “illusion of religion” but I will deliberately misread him in order to get at the other sense that lies within this passage—“tends to be born again with every action in our everyday lives” (CEL: 226). His own language enacts the point, since the notion of being born again cannot avoid the reported speech of Jesus to Nicodemus in the text of John 3:3: “Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” The sense is different from John 3, where the denial of the maternal body is the necessary step to a new life with God, for in Lefebvre’s usage you cannot help but recreate religion with each action of your daily life. No matter how dead, forgotten or rejected religion may be, individually or collectively, it is reborn a million times a day.

Apart from suggesting some hidden but tireless ability to resuscitate



or resurrect itself, Lefebvre has not indicated why religion tends to be reborn. This is where the economic comparison comes in: on each occasion a person purchases a commodity with money “economic fetishism is reanimated” (CEL: 226). This time Lefebvre replaces “born again” with “reanimated,” evoking the central Christian category of resurrection, if it has not already raised itself. Now we find both religion and commodity fetishism—ever connected since Marx’s creative deployment of fetishism from the realm of religion—resurrected countless times a day. The connection, of course, is that both religion and economic fetishism (the term fetish itself comes from the study of religions) are forms of alienation in Lefebvre’s work, but one would hardly argue that economic fetishism is reanimated due to some innate tendency of the economy or of commodities themselves. Rather, the very possibility of economic fetishism relies on the existence of a distinct system of political economics with its attendant pattern of social and cultural interaction. This context is the import of the phrase “unaware of the social structure” (CEL: 226). I do not want to spend too much time in the theory of reification (Lukács), especially the notion that reification saturates human life under capitalism, or with the metaphorisation of the market as a constitutive feature of the same economic system (Jameson), but the point is that the very ways in which we think, act and interact cannot operate without such patterns, so much so that it is impossible to imagine otherwise. So also with religion (with the full force of Lefebvre’s “exactly as”), which now becomes a distinct cultural, institutional, social and so often economic form. Except that to make such distinctions, as well as those like psychological, intellectual, philosophical, judicial, and political are part of a reified pattern of thinking foreign to the eras in which religion itself was dominant. In other words, at certain times (I think here of the debated Asiatic mode of production, or feudalism) religion is the language of human culture without which human beings would not have been able to interact with one another, let alone think or exist.<sup>18</sup> Only in this way, it seems to me,

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<sup>18</sup> Or, as he will put it elsewhere: “Theological faith is dead, metaphysical reason is dead. And yet they live on, they take on new life—insanely, absurdly—because the situation and the



can Lefebvre's argument concerning the strength and power of religion in everyday life be understood. No wonder, then, that it persists at the level of the quotidian.

## Space

The second realm for a philosophy of religion that is not wholly negative reads Lefebvre against himself yet again. Rather than teasing out hints and passing comments I want to revisit the small church, sitting outside for a moment to ponder his book *The Production of Space* before passing over the threshold again to consider the feminised space of the church building.

But before I do, let me turn to Plato and Irigaray in order to explore Lefebvre's image of the "crucified sun." For Lefebvre the strongest image of the destructive and stifling nature of religion comes with this famous crucified sun. It is of course the Celtic cross, with its circle superimposed over the Christian cross, still found in Celtic regions of France and Scotland. Still in his teens, Lefebvre relates in the ever-present autobiographical tenor of his writing how he was sitting beneath such a cross at one of the many cross-roads in the Pyrenées, when the vision struck him: "Abruptly I rose to my feet and looked at the cross above my head: 'They have crucified the sun! They have crucified the sun!' And in horror I escaped from that place, from that thing" (SR: 252). Reading this experience as a revelation of the repressive effect of Christianity on all that was enjoyable in life, especially on a personal level, Lefebvre sought to unshackle the sun from its burden, remove the repressions and hold Christianity responsible. For Lefebvre, the sun was the symbol of pre-Christian, pagan religious and social life, the free and spontaneous life full of *bonhomie* that was systematically suppressed by Christianity (see SR: 252–53; IM: 95–101). His own kin, the people of that region, had committed the unforgivable crime of crucifying the sun instead of the son of God, for abolishing the vital and ancient magic of

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human conflicts from which they were born have not been resolved. Now these conflicts are not in the realm of thought alone, but in everyday life" (CEL: 141).



life in place of the devotions, the bigotries, the pruderies, the unhealthy loathing of all things sexual that dominated his youth. “I would like to call,” he goes on to write, “an encounter like this a ‘moment.’ It has affected my entire life . . . From that day forward, or rather, from that crucial moment, I began to put Christianity on trial” (SR: 253.) Although he states that the crucified sun enabled him to transform his hatred for his home into the pioneering work of rural sociology, so that he would eventually return there in the last years of his life, the complexities of that hatred and fascination show up in the “Notes Written One Sunday” with its mix of passion and careful argument.

What Lefebvre would like to do, then, is release the sun from its shackles, resurrect it, if you like, on the other side of the grave; hence the dark and dank village church from which the sun has been banished. There is, however, another logic to this desire, and in order to trace it I must go back to Plato’s *Republic*, especially the famous story of the cave, and then stop by Irigaray.

One of a series of stories Plato brings forth to indicate the role of philosophers in the ideal *Republic*, the narrative of the cave operates at a number of levels.<sup>19</sup> There is, to begin with, the situation of ordinary human beings in the cave. They sit, chained, facing the wall of the cave, while behind them is a screen they cannot see. Behind the screen itself is a fire, and between the fire and the screen walk human figures carrying on various tasks. These figures are then projected on the wall of the cave the bound men face. In this troglodyte picture theatre, the shadows—on a wall projected through a screen behind the chained men by a fire—the men take to be ‘reality’. In other words, there are at least three removes from the “reality” of the figures themselves. The first step towards the emancipation of these “prisoners” is the release from the chains that keep them bound and facing the cave wall. They can then, in this second level, see that what they took for “reality” is but a projection of the screen behind them. But Plato has a number of other levels lined up before

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<sup>19</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), Book VII, I–II, 118–29.



the men who were once chained can walk upright and look directly into the sun in order to see the truth. When these moles finally make it out of the cave to the surface, under guidance, they can at first barely put up with the harsh light of the sun, of which the fire down below was a poor copy. But even this is not yet the full reality, which they will see only when they turn their faces directly to the sun in all its brightness and there find truth. Some of those who reach this point opt to return to the cave in order to guide the unfortunates still enchained into the light. These returnees are the only ones qualified and able to lead other men, especially those in the ideal Republic.

The step from cave to village church is but a small one: the naked light bulb with its feeble light becomes fire, and the worshippers the deluded unfortunates who think they know the truth. Lefebvre would like to lead them out, away from the dark church and into the sun outside. And the truth to be found there is not merely the joyous festivity of rural life but the ideal of Athens itself.

The problem with Plato's myth is that the cave itself is far more fascinating than the sun to which he would direct our gaze. Initially I draw upon Irigaray's argument that it functions as a metaphor for the dark and hidden space of the womb. If the narrative as a whole is a model of both knowledge and government, the cave marks for Irigaray the unacknowledged (for men) place of the mother's body in the production of those items. It is, in other words, the means by which Plato both effaces and appropriates the role of women and women's bodies in the search for origins.

We can move beyond Irigaray here, via a tension within Lefebvre's own work: while he wishes to move out of the dark cave and into the sun of joyous festivity, this image runs up against his famous and well-worked analysis of space. He develops a dialectic of spatial practice, representations of space, and spaces of representation that calls for another look through the darkened doorway of the village church. Briefly put, his dialectic of space makes the following distinctions:

*Spatial practice*, embracing production and reproduction, and the



particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation. Spatial practice ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion. In terms of social space, and of each member of a given society's relationship to that space, this cohesion implies a guaranteed level of *competence* and a specific level of *performance*. This is space perceived (*perçu*) in the common sense mode.

*Representations of space (représentations de l'espace)*: the discourses on space, the realms of analysis, design and planning, which are tied to the relations of production and to the "order" which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to "frontal" relations. In other words, the conception of space (*l'espace conçu*).

*Spaces of representation (espaces de la représentation)*: the deeper presuppositions behind plans and definitions. Coded, recoded and decoded, these spaces embody complex symbolisms, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art. It provides partially concealed criticism of social orders and the categories of social thought, and may happen through bodies, aesthetics, gender, and so on. As the third part of a dialectic it offers, as lived space (*l'espace vécu*), as historical sediments or glimpses of the new, utopian possibilities of a new spatialisation of social life (see PoS: 33, 245).

Given Lefebvre's hostility to the Church, one would expect the village church to fall into the first and second categories. But then, the fact that he valorises the sun over against the cross suggest otherwise. Is not the sun a representation of space, overt and frontal, clear as the light of day? This would render the church itself a space of representation. But before we enter the church itself, I want to emphasise a couple of points from this schema. Lefebvre's emphasis on production, particularly the categories of modes and relations of production (in this respect his Marxism is quite orthodox) in the first two categories, comes now, some thirty years after it was first published, as a useful counter to the troubled reign of constructionism.

Second, the spatial practice of which Lefebvre speaks in the first category, and the space that is produced, refers primarily to social space,





the space created by humans in their interaction with nature, each other and former modes of production. Social space appears in relation to, and over against, physical or natural space, the space of a nature in which human beings increasingly have the upper hand. Since capitalism is now rampant, Lefebvre, while admitting that natural space remains the point of departure for considerations of space and the social process, argues that social space under capitalism now has nature at its mercy: everyone wants to preserve nature, yet everything now seeks to undermine such a desire. Natural space for Lefebvre disappears rapidly over the horizon, for the very “nature” upon which we now look has been produced by human beings (see PoS: 30–31).

Third, there is a final distinction between the categories of space listed above that becomes most important for my rereading of the church building: that between frontal and hidden, the overt and the covert relations of production. For this is the key to his distinction—an odd one on first reading—between the representations of space and spaces of representation. Not only does each mode of production produce specific types of social space (as well as all sorts of other forms from other modes that are subsumed as sub-variants), but it also has a specific type of relations of production (the organisation of human resources in terms of class, division of labour, and so on). The issue here is how those relations of production operate spatially. In order to trace this, Lefebvre invokes all the complexity of his dialectical materialism. Under capitalism, he identifies three types of interaction between reproduction and the social relations of production: biological reproduction, the reproduction of labour power, and the reproduction of the social relations of production. Each of these three interacting layers is displayed symbolically, simultaneously exhibited and displaced, that is, concealed. Such a symbolic system works with relations of production that are both out there and not, in the forefront and clandestine, explicit and repressed. The former, overt type appears in the forms of monuments, public art and buildings, especially those of state and business: this is the realm of the representation of space, the frontal, obvious node of the relations of production. The more covert and clandestine version, the shadowy



realm of spaces of representation, is interested in what is hidden, closed over, spaces that represent in wayward and diverse fashions. The notion of covert and overt, of hidden and clear, comes of course from the Marxist perception of class conflict as crucial to historical processes. And it is not for nothing that Lefebvre locates the opposition in the realm of relations of production, determined as they are by class and class conflict. The frontal class, the one of monuments and impressive buildings and the clear marks of power, stands over against that class which is repressed, beaten down and exploited. Lefebvre's innovation is to widen this to the symbolic field of relation of production, of class relations.

Lefebvre's oft-repeated example is one he in fact loathed—the bourgeois family home. The overt dimension of the house, facing the street (and do not all houses have to face the street for some inexplicable reason?), is its sitting room or formal lounge room, where considerable expense is outlaid: lounges and tables and exquisite chairs, with expensive curtains and pieces of art either on the walls or standing. The public realm of the bourgeois house is one of decor, money, and repression. Perhaps the only other room allowed such visual presence is the formal dining room, usually leading off from the lounge room. But there is another realm of such boxes-for-living-in that marks a whole series of repressions: the preparation of food takes place out of sight, as do toilet functions, both evacuating and washing. If these are relegated to the back of the house, the most hidden is sex itself, restricted to night time in the parents' bedroom, with a locked door and when the children are asleep, or, if older, out of the house.

But Lefebvre returns to a different space, one with a far longer history than the bourgeois box for living, back into feudalism and the Ancient mode of production. It turns out that the long description of an idealised Greece and the rural rhythms at the beginning of the essay fall by and large into the category of spatial practice, although with a distinct dose of natural space. The peasant community, in its symbiotic relationship with the land, is after all a distinct social formation with its



careful arrangement of space, tasks, and so on. All of the various items Lefebvre lists belong to the commonsense understanding of space: pasture, arable lands and forest; use of the arable land in cycles of crops and fallow periods; the paths and roads of the village and its community; scattered houses and then a cluster around the village church; the balance between animal and human populations, and the regulation of births in light of this. It is, in other words, a social formation where natural space has not been obliterated.

But what of the church itself, particularly the village church in Navarrenx? Initially, it is a hub of the village, part of the perceived spatial practice. Yet it is also central to the representation of space, or at least Lefebvre would like to keep it in this realm (see PoS: 45). The overt patterns of its architecture, however modest, the fact that it is there as part of a much larger global network of the Roman Catholic Church, its inseparable relationship to a whole set of codes and knowledge (theology, doctrine and, the Bible), and its every corner overloaded with signs—all of these locate it squarely in the representation of space. Lefebvre identifies the church building's own claims to its place within a vast network: the evocation of the cosmos, the holy family of the Virgin, the son, Joseph and God himself, the connection between heaven, earth and the realm of the dead, the mass with its overdone symbolism, and the ability to say everything about human life, history, and the universe. In the end, the surest mark of its frontal spatial control is the overwhelming alienation that Lefebvre reads everywhere in the building, its people and its rituals. As far as he is concerned, the order imposed by the church, which stands in as the local manifestation of the (capital C) Church, is dehumanising, crushing the symbiosis with nature that he at least finds in the magic of his ideal rural community.

Yet, when we enter the church, after hesitating on the threshold, a somewhat different picture emerges. In fact, the preceding description is characteristic more of the cathedral than a small village church (see PoS: 257–61, 266–67, 369). By contrast, the interior of the village church is “an empty, echoing space, with hidden recesses crammed with hundreds



of objects” (CEL: 213). “Small, dark, mysterious, a bit like a cave” (CEL: 214), full of the smell of damp and incense. Almost to his relief, in a deeper recess he finds statuettes of “the little patron saints of cattle and sheep” (CEL: 214), St Blasius and St Roch, whom the crafty locals have enlisted to their aid simultaneously. Even the mass is as simple as possible, “reduced to its bare essentials, with no grand organ, canon’s kiss or plumed verger” (CEL: 219). Lefebvre himself, as I noted earlier, argues that the strength of Roman Catholicism lies in the ability to link these mundane, everyday realities with the transcendent power of God. But the description of the dark, cave-like interior of the church pulls in another direction that he cannot contain, despite his effort to describe it elsewhere as cryptic space, as the control of the Church over death (see PoS: 254–56). And that is the covert, clandestine dimension of the spaces of representation. Lefebvre’s description slips over into an underground space, dimly lit with filtered light, damp, and recessed. Historical sediments clutter every turn and corner. Above all, as part of the village, it is integral to the lived space of the peasants who attend the church. Even those who do not attend count in some way: “The murmur of a threshing machine can be heard getting slowly louder, suddenly cutting out and then starting again. The godless are working on this holy day” (CEL: 218).

But if this is indeed a space of representation, the realm of the covert and hidden, is it not also a source for Lefebvre of possible subversion and revolution? Clandestine and underground, critical of social order, the possibility emerges that the space of this small village church may also be one of a more critical and political form of Christianity. Lefebvre, of course, does not make this point, being tied to a rather conventional form of the Marxist criticism of religion. Repressive, alienating, the prime form of ideology as mystification, he does not entertain any other possibility. And yet his own theory of space points in another direction.





## Women

Despite Lefebvre's own best intentions, the polemic against the Church cannot efface this other, lived dimension of the village church. It remains to be seen whether I can open up this break in his criticism of religion to locate a critique of existing social relations and the possibilities of utopian re-spatialisation. But first: the interior of the church building is both sexualised and feminised in Lefebvre's text. One cannot help but notice the male sexual image of penetration that runs through the passage: he delays on entry, only to increase the pleasure of the anticipated penetration, knowing full well the fear, attraction and enticement of the interior. The small, dark, moist church full of musty smells functions at one level as vagina and womb, whose interiors his own penis had at so many moments come to know very well (and I speak here of the church at Navarrenx and the myriad women with whom he had sex). But rather than stay at the level of crude allegory, or even read it as a polemic against the Roman Catholic Church's suppression of the pleasure of sex (the orgiastic pleasures of food, drink, and sex of the pre-Christian rural festivals have been sucked dry by the Church), I want to focus on the possibility that the representation of space is both bodied and gendered, specifically in terms of women.

Along with an effeminate priest and the people who enter the church for worship, Lefebvre offers detailed descriptions of two, the widow and the devout young girl. The priest himself, transformed in the mass into an assured representative of the Church, is in his everyday life "under his sister's thumb" (CEL: 222). A local, he has a "slight figure," "a pale long face"; he is "a shy man, with little authority in the village" (CEL: 222). It turns out that the majority of worshippers are women, as one will find in almost any country church, Roman Catholic or otherwise: "old women . . . , sly, impatient urchins, shopkeepers daughters who have come to show off their Sunday dresses, one or two men" (CEL: 218–19). Domestically, most of the women have made great compromises with their men, from which Sunday worship then becomes a chance for women to be among themselves, scorned and misunderstood by



the men. Few men attend church, and when they do they sit in a small group at the back of the church: “On one side the guild of women. On the other, farther back, nearer the door, the men. They are the last to come and the first to leave” (CEL: 219). Religion then becomes very much a woman’s realm, to the annoyance of the men who continue to run the show.

The annoyance is also Lefebvre’s. For some reason the widow in black and the earnest young girl ignite his fury. The black widow arrives at worship first on the Sunday morning:

Across the cold paving glides a black shape, the folds in its dress completely immobile. A widow! It’s a widow! Everything about her signals it. An unspeakably insipid, unspeakably dreary placidity fills her chubby face, settles at the bottom of her faded cheeks. Fat and stiff, she glides noiselessly. *Surely nothing had ever disturbed this stagnating placidity. Surely she was born a widow.* They say she is very good to the church; she comes to sweep it, tending to the decorations, replacing the dying flowers with armfuls of fresh ones; she is intoxicated with her own humility and self-effacement; she picks up the rubbish with her bare hands; she is the handmaiden of this holy house—but under her falsely pious modesty what pride lies hidden! (CEL: 218; italics mine)

The obvious point is that the whole description is meant to be read as a profound sign of the alienation produced by the Church, but is the name-calling needed? Unspeakably insipid, dreary placidity, chubby face, faded cheeks, fat, stiff, and stagnating: there is an overload here that goes well beyond the point he wants to make. At one level, it is another outburst of the anger that I traced earlier, where Lefebvre forgets the argument for the sake of some ulcer-relieving bile. But the italicised words suggest that something else is going on here, and that relates to my observation about the sexualisation of the space of the small village church, rendering it a vaginal and womblike interior. For Lefebvre the problem with the widow is that she is unavailable sexually. In fact, she never was: she has always been a widow, for nothing has had the chance to “disturb” her placidity. So impenetrable, so inaccessible, gliding along



ghostlike, he cannot even identify her gender when she first appears.

From what does Lefebvre recoil? Is she repulsive sexually? Is it her false humility? Is the Church's repression of sex at fault? Or is it her inability even to become aroused and enjoy sex (note the repeated "placidity")? The answer to all of these questions is affirmative, but I would also suggest that it is the woman who negates any interaction with men, that she somehow remains outside the reach of a man like Lefebvre. All he can do then is cast her in a characteristic role of the dried-up widow who has nothing better to do than tend to the church.

Lefebvre's description of the widow suggests a bodily resistance to the overt, controlling codes characteristic of the representations of space, whether these are the codes of the Church itself or the sexual codes of someone like Lefebvre himself. In other words, the widow will not give up everything to the harsh light of day. But note also the tasks she undertakes: sweeping, decorating, tending flowers, and picking up rubbish. All are extensions of domestic tasks, the ones that women find themselves doing in the radical compromise of domestic space. For all Lefebvre's disdain, these domestic tasks might be read as an extension of domestic space into the village church itself, or the rendering of the church as a feminised domestic realm. In the end, the result is the same.

What Lefebvre has picked up is not only that the dominant numbers of worshippers at Christian churches are older women (it matters not what denomination), but also that invariably there will be at least one woman who is, as they used to say, married to the church. A few individuals come to my mind, spinsters or widows who lived next to or close to the church itself. One found that her one chance of marriage disappeared with World War II, another was the key warden and was a member of all the committees, and yet another devoted her life to the succession of male ministers. Protestant churches generally have no safety valve of the female orders of religious for women like this, but there was always an apprehension on the part of the clergy, often disdainful and sometimes aggressive, that such women expressed the truth of the various women's organisations, namely, that they preferred each other's company to that of the men.



Lefebvre's annoyance extends to another woman, this time one who is young and devout:

How many people here are genuine believers, not satisfied with gestures but ardently grasping their faith as an object? This young girl, perhaps, her whole body tensed and bent forward on her chair, gazing spellbound on the great Christ, his pink body stained with the blood of his wounds? There is something distraught about her eyes which contrasts with the peacefulness, the already unutterably bored peacefulness, of her face. *Someone else cut out to be a widow, or an eternal virgin?* With what sacrifices is she purchasing this peace of the true believer, innocently confident in an earthly and heavenly future, a little soul in the arms of the Father, a little lamb beneath the shepherd's crook? Contemptible, unfought-for peace; whatever deprivations and conflicts may exist, they are placidly ignored, disdained; childishness is prolonged, cultivated even—a premature annihilation; I recognize you, despicable peace of my childhood! (CEL: 219; italics mine)

This time Lefebvre holds the venom until he has finished describing the young virgin, launching into a tirade on the false peace fostered by the Church and the emotional trap of the dialectic of faith and anguish. In some respects the image is a little more sympathetic. Is it because he has been there, experienced this “peace,” this faith and devotion, only to face interminable anguish as he rejected his faith? He gives the impression of depicting something sincere for the young woman, no matter how empty he might feel it to be, in contrast to the obviously false humility of the widow. The only passion she can experience is her devotion to Christ. Even so, the young woman is the flip side of old repulsive black widow: she is a widow in training, or rather, an eternal virgin. He has given us the two images of the virgin one after the other, the one past sex and the other forever denying sex. In both cases, these women are not available for men. Their interest and attention lie elsewhere.

The obvious move to make here is to Mary herself, Virgin and Mother all rolled into one. But let me contrast the depiction of the young woman, which even with its hint of sympathy finds her





unacceptable, to a comparable passage on Kierkegaard a little earlier in the book. Here he reads the anxiety of Kierkegaard's *Journal*, the trap of the individual bourgeois life and its dead-ends, the apparent unity that faith provides only to ensnare him all the more in anxiety, as the "conflict between everyday life as it is—as it has been made by the bourgeoisie—and the life which a human being actually demands, begs for, cries out for with all his strength" (CEL: 140). Kierkegaard's faith, no matter how futile and absurd, becomes a protest against the reality of life in capitalist society, specifically on the level of everyday life. Because the human conflicts to which faith is an attempted answer have not been resolved, faith continues to be a solution, no matter how dead. Lefebvre is reading Kierkegaard in terms of Marx's famous description of religion not merely as the opiate of the people, but also as the protest against the very conditions of exploitation and alienation for which religious faith is an attempted resolution.<sup>20</sup> But Lefebvre also reads Marx in light of Kierkegaard, who now provides a much fuller and specific explication of Marx's cryptic comments.

The question, however, is why Kierkegaard, unnamed until Lefebvre has finished outlining his image of the angst-ridden young man, may provide a distinct role for religious faith as a protest and criticism of bourgeois everyday life, and why the fervent young woman in church does not. There is no analysis of her situation in life, the limited options open to a young woman in a rural community, the undesirable path to housekeeper and servant of a man, for which religious faith and devotion and virginity become the only alternative, however problematic they might be.

Let me return to Mary for a few moments before seeing where the women in the church leave Lefebvre. The lines devoted to Mary, as he faces the image of the Madonna on the right side of the high altar, are almost empty of the venom that pours through the rest of the text. He notes the double-bind that devotion to Mary produces for the Church

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<sup>20</sup> Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 [1844]), 3:175–87.



hierarchy: “Great goddess in the process of formation (or revival), but reduced by a prudent theology to the rank of mediator, it is she who attracts the most wishes, the most support, the most prayers” (CEL: 215). Object of the most intense piety and extra-terrestrial communication, she must be locked carefully in place, a display cabinet slightly to the side of the main show lest she threaten the established hierarchy itself. Yet, I do not want to run too far down the common path that sees Mary as both a safety valve and potential for subversion within the Roman Catholic Church. This is of course true and yet does not get us much further than advocating a reform agenda that allows Marian devotion its proper place as the focus for the piety of women who have no other options. (Apart from this, my Calvinist heritage produces a visceral recoil at the barely contained polytheism and/or idolatry of the whole Marian cult. About as far as you can get from the austere focus on the “word” alone, beyond any iconography, is the well-known statue that I encountered to my horror for the first time in my teens; Mary holds a rather precocious-looking Jesus, the one performing open heart surgery on himself, with her foot bearing down on a meek, unthreatening snake.)

What Mary does do, in cohort with the black widow and the young devotee, is ensure that Lefebvre’s village church is an ambiguously feminised space. And it seems to me that there is a good dose of his third spatial category in this building, the space of representation with its clandestine critique of the more blatant effort at control and clear direction (the representation of space) that one would expect with a church building. That critique is both bodied and gendered, and, although heavy with the sedimentation of the past, it also offers a glimpse of a possible re-spatialisation that relies on the notion of women among themselves, ranks closed.

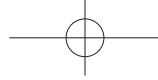
## Conclusion

All of the above is a somewhat long way to show how Lefebvre’s own writing, when read against itself, allows the possibility for a more



positive role for religion. Not that I want to argue, *pace* Irigaray, for a recovered spirituality from and for women, a recuperation of goddesses and what not. This is an even more spectacular cul-de-sac than what is already in place. Rather, if we follow Lefebvre's heavily influential analysis of space and the valorisation of the third category, spaces of representation, as the locus of revolutionary promise and activity, then the village church in Navarrenx becomes one such space. Or, to move from the particular to the general, Christianity may well contain within it an inadvertent subversive and revolutionary potential. As we will find in a later chapter, Slavoj Žižek agrees in his own way, and as I have traced in an earlier chapter, so also does Ernst Bloch. But unlike Žižek or Bloch with their focus on the Bible, the argument I have prised out of Lefebvre comes quite specifically through Roman Catholicism, with hardly a nod to the Bible. And that specificity shows up all the more sharply for me in the foreignness of virtually every moment of his existential tour of the church. Contrary to Lefebvre's assumption that such a tour provides a paradigmatic case of a church building, it is its indelibly Roman Catholic nature that opens out into a space of representation.

But let me return to the strategy of such a space of representation, the search for a utopian spatialisation in a dialectic switchback from historical sediment to a glance of the new. I have suggested that this is what is happening with his description of the church building: despite the overwhelming polemic, the church emerges as a space of representation in which the ridiculed turns out to have some promise. But is this not the method of reading upon which his whole effort to recover an earlier image of rural harmony relies? In other words, I have merely followed Lefebvre's own approach within the essay itself.





## Chapter Five

### The Ecumenism of Antonio Gramsci

. . . both the Party and Religion are forms of world outlook. . . (FSPN: 115; Q8§131ii).

Inexorably we draw closer to Rome, crossing not Lefebvre's Pyrenées to Spain, but the Alps to Italy. If the mountains seemed to block the specificity of the Roman Catholic Church for Althusser and Lefebvre, then Gramsci's nearness to the Papal See brings out such specificity all the more sharply. The more its immediate power becomes apparent, the less universal it appears to be. And so, it will turn out that Antonio Gramsci is, at least on a first hearing, much more responsive to the peculiar and particular nature of the Roman Catholic Church. He prints the word "Roman" much more heavily than he does "Catholic."

Gramsci's catholicity, therefore, manifests itself not in the unwitting universality of his thought, as I have argued with Lefebvre and Althusser, as well as its distinctly Catholic flavour, but in the deep ecumenism of his thought. I take ecumenism here, appropriately, in a sense that begins with the ecumenical movement, but then includes the deeper sense of the Greek word *oecumene*, the whole world itself. In this sense Gramsci is thoroughly ecumenical, whether that lies in his fascination with the ecumenical movement, his insatiable curiosity in an effort to understand the complexities of a whole range of questions from the running of meetings to translation theory, the refusal of polemics, his interest in the Roman Catholic Church as a model of a global political organisation, the role of the intellectuals in the Church, the fascination with the Protestants



and their Reformation, and the interest in “other religions.” In the end ecumenism in this chapter signals Gramsci’s deep desire to draw lessons for communism from religion and the Church. I will argue that, in Gramsci’s hands, ecumenism is a far more useful notion than the often unwitting universalism of Althusser and Lefebvre.

Wide is Gramsci’s scope, and I am not fool enough to argue that all, or even most, of Gramsci’s well-known and even less well-known concepts rely on the Roman Catholic Church and its influence. Yet, there is a peculiar stamp that the Church leaves at various places in his writings as he seeks out possibilities for communism and the party, particularly in the four areas on which I shall focus in this chapter, namely ecumenism, the politics of a global Church, the intellectual, and finally the possibilities for communist change which he draws from the moral and intellectual reform of the Reformation. Apart from these influences, I enter a strange world in these texts. My northern European Calvinist heritage, full as it still is with Geneva, Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the Synod of Dort, John Knox and the rest of that motley crew, is still struck by the intimate detail of Italian life that was so heavily determined by the actions of the Pope and the various machinations of the Vatican. I know Roman Catholics, even those chronically ex-Catholics in Australia, for whom the various popes were and are part of everyday speech, the institutions they attended in their youth invariably named after one or another pontiff. And Gramsci too, can speak of a Leo XIII, Pius IX or X or XI, Benedict XV or Gregory XVI, as though everybody simply knew these facts, as though their reigns as pope were everyday knowledge. So too the encyclicals—*Mirari vos* (1832), *Singulari nos* (1834), *Rerum Novarum* (1891), *Syllabus Errorum* (1864) and so on—seem to be documents that anyone with a brain and an interest in politics, society, and intellectual developments had studied and absorbed. Gramsci knows them all too well, as his discussion of *Mirari Vos*, the *Syllabus* and its associated *Quanta Cura* (1964), as well as *Pascendi* (1907) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) shows. His assumed knowledge has required on my part an immersion into the intricacies of Italian religious politics.



After the detail of my engagement with the texts of Althusser and Lefebvre, who for all their differences, share an ambiguous, passionate relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, Gramsci's writings on this Church seem almost completely free of the polemic to which I have become so accustomed. Apart from the occasional wry comment, and a few attacks,<sup>1</sup> Gramsci offers a measured and detailed analysis, seeking not only to understand the intricate web of political, social, moral, and theological questions of the Church's inescapable place in Italian society, but also to retrieve what he can for communism itself. Partly this is due to his unflagging curiosity. Time and again he will note that a book or article, the latter most often drawn from the Jesuit journal *Civiltà Cattolica* or *Nuova Antologia*, is "most important," or "indispensable," requiring further study and research (a utopian gesture in prison, where

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<sup>1</sup> I found only five: "Catholicism has been reduced to a large extent to the superstition held by the peasantry, the infirm, the elderly and women. What does the Church count for today in philosophy? In what state is Thomism the predominant philosophy among intellectuals? And socially speaking, where does the Church use its authority to command and direct social activities" (FSPN: 44; Q14§55)? And then there is: "One of the most important measures that the church has devised to strengthen itself in the modern age is the *obligation* imposed on families to have their children receive first communion at *the age of seven*. It is easy to understand the psychological impact that the ceremonial trappings of the first communion must have on seven-year-old children—both as an individual family event and as a collective event—and what a source of terror and therefore of attachment to the church it becomes. It 'compromises' the mind of the child as soon as it is capable of reflection. It is understandable, then, that this measure has been resisted by families worried about the deleterious effects of this precocious mysticism on a child's mind; one can also see why the church has been fighting to overcome this opposition" (PN 2: 316–17; Q5§58; but compare LFP 2: 49). Thirdly: "A critical-literary examination of the papal encyclicals. Ninety per cent of them consist of a mish-mash of vague, generic quotations whose aim seems to be to establish on each and every occasion the continuity of ecclesiastical doctrine from the gospels down to the current time. The Vatican must keep a formidable file of quotations on all arguments, so when an encyclical has to be compiled, a start is made by measuring out the necessary doses—so many quotations from the Gospels, so many from the Fathers of the Church, so many from previous encyclicals" (FSPN: 100–101; Q6§163). Fourth: "the value of Catholic 'social thought' is purely academic: it should be studied and analyzed as an ingredient of an ideological opiate aimed at maintaining certain religious kinds of moods of passive expectation" (PN 2: 274; Q5§7). Finally: "Religious sentiment is entirely built up from these vague aspirations, these instinctive, inner reasonings, which have no outlet. And some trace, some quiver of this sentiment lurks within the blood of each one of us, even those who have best succeeded in dominating these inferior manifestations of the self—inferior because they are purely instinctive, mere uncontrolled impulses" (PPW: 14).



bad health, poor food, and inadequate clothes held out little hope for further study). But he was also interested because in some of its key areas, such as Catholic Action or the ‘caste’ intellectuals or the internal struggles of integralists, modernists, and Jesuits, the Roman Catholic Church revealed features crucial for the consideration of any global organisation that had an agenda distinct from any other political and ideological group within capitalism.

I focus on four areas of Gramsci’s writings in this chapter. First, in the face of the “scientific atheism” espoused by the communist party, not only in Italy but also through the influential role of the Soviet Union, Gramsci’s interest in the ecumenical movement itself, the question of conversion, proselytisation, and a definition of religion itself, all speak most directly to what I have termed his ecumenism.

Further, it seems to me that his reflections on the institutional structure of the Roman Catholic Church, its political status and machinations, concordats, internal debates, Catholic Action and the complexities of events in which the Church as the first global movement was a crucial player—all of these resemble the type of complex analysis we find in Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. In short, the Roman Catholic Church in Italy shows in relief the intricacies of the Church as a temporal and political institution. For the sheer contrast with Althusser and Lefebvre, I will trace the way Gramsci’s various analyses work themselves out, all the while with an eye on my over-riding question of a Marxist theory and analysis of religion.

Third, a reading of these texts on the Roman Catholic Church skews at least one of Gramsci’s key notions, namely, the organic or democratic intellectual. His interest in the clergy, the variations from region to region, the transitions from the clergy as a medieval class to a “caste” of intellectuals, their moral and intellectual work to further the cause of the Church, constitutes a major slice of what he comes to describe as the organic intellectual.

Finally, another notion that takes on a completely different colour is that of moral and political reform, a central feature of the program





for a communist revolution—except that his model for such reform is the Protestant Reformation itself. In fact, I want to register my profound surprise to find the reformers Luther and Calvin championed by Gramsci, even with all the appropriate qualifications and safety checks. And I am going to insist on this shock, since it is an extremely ecclesiastical model of social and political change for all its analogical character. In brief, Gramsci argues that the large-scale transformation the reformers wrought in Northern Europe, in terms of culture, politics, economics, and social organisation provides a paradigm for communist revolution in Italy and elsewhere. It is one of the only models for social change that worked its way through all levels of society. For Gramsci, Machiavelli becomes the “Italian Luther,” the one whose program would have led to a comparable Reformation in the peculiarities of the Italian situation had it been realised. Not only this: Machiavelli, particularly with his notion of the “New Prince,” becomes the source of possibilities for the Italian Communist Party.

Gramsci’s writings on “religion,” then, are not only thoroughly ecclesial, but they exhibit the depth of the catholicity, understood here in terms of ecumenism, of his politics and thought. They function as an extraordinary example of what a more developed Marxist analysis of religion might look like. The catch is that his reflections come in various snippets and scraps, paragraphs scattered in the notebooks that even in a thematic arrangement jump about like an over-responsive road bicycle. They run in different directions, overlay each other, tersely note a thought to be developed, comment on a series of articles in *Civiltà Cattolica*, appear to contradict until a deeper line of thought emerges. An entirely different study would trace the complex architecture of the notebooks themselves, resisting the urge to “complete” a task to which the notes seem to point.<sup>2</sup> But that is not my undertaking here. Rather, I read closely those paragraphs that deal with “religion,” that is, the Church, in *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (FSPN), where

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<sup>2</sup> See now Peter Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* (Historical Materialism Book Series, Leiden: Brill, 2009).



Derek Boothman has conveniently gathered all of the relevant texts from the *Quaderni del carcere* on the question of “religion.” There will of course be other texts outside the Prison Notebooks, and I will also refer to the translation and edition of notebooks one to eight by Joseph Buttigieg (PN 1, 2 and 3).

## Ecumenism

I begin with Gramsci’s more overt ecumenism, understood for the moment in its conventional sense, namely the coalition of the various Protestant and Orthodox Christian Churches in what has become known as the ecumenical movement. In characteristic fashion, he writes: “The question of the unity of the Christian churches is a formidable postwar phenomenon that merits maximum attention and careful study” (PN 2: 282; Q5§17). Gramsci is drawn by this movement, embodied most clearly now in the World Council of Churches, partly because it seeks to overcome the tendency of Protestantism to splinter rather than remain one diverse Church, and partly because the Roman Catholics—supposedly the one “catholic” Church—studiously avoided the ecumenical movement. The paradox that emerges in such a refusal is that the whole notion of “catholic” becomes a means of exclusion.

Gramsci does not come at the problem of the paradox of “Catholicism” in precisely this fashion, but this is how I read his comments on the threat that the Roman Catholic Church saw in the ecumenical movement. Apart from the designation of Protestantism as one of the errors of the modern world in the *Syllabus Errorum*, the alliance of Protestant and Orthodox Churches was perceived as an effort to produce a united front in order to “lay siege to Catholicism in order to make it renounce its primacy” (PN 2: 282; Q5§17).<sup>3</sup> And it is this unity

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<sup>3</sup> We might read Gramsci’s comment on Henri Massis in a similar light. In a way comparable to the threat of the ecumenical movement, Massis saw the combined intellectual and cultural traditions from India, Africa and so on as a threat to European Roman Catholic culture and society: “I had great intellectual disappointment with the highly touted book by Henri Massis, *Défense de l’Occident*; I think that either Filippo Crispolti or Egilberto Martire would have written a sparer



that threatens the ability of Rome to absorb heretics and schismatics. In response, the Roman Catholics organised in September 1928 a social week (first begun in France and then spread to other countries) in Milan on the theme of “True Religious Unity.” Herein is the profound contradiction of “catholicism,” for the claim to be a universal Church involves the claim to be the only Church. Indeed, within the Roman Catholic Church the traditional category of an ecumenical council, which may only be called by the pope, is restricted to that Church alone. Instead of the Protestant doctrine that the universal Church is an invisible entity made up of all believers, the Roman Catholic position is inextricably tied to the earth-based institution. Yet this internal consistency of the Roman Catholics—there can be only one “Catholic” Church—leads to the paradox that the notion of “catholicity” can operate only by exclusion. Here the idea of a singular institution runs up against an inclusive one, and this goes back to the first assertion by the Church in Rome to be the “Catholic” Church in the early years of the Common Era. Not only was this claim made in response to the Orthodox Churches who had broken away, but also to exclude various sundry groups such as the Donatists, Gnostics, and Manichaeans, to whom Augustine belonged before he came to champion the “Catholic” Church over against his former mentors. The Roman Catholics are trapped: they cannot agree to enter the ecumenical movement on equal terms with the other churches, for this would require relinquishing their claim to be the only viable Christian Church. And yet, by not entering, they not only leave themselves open to the reproach of the churches in the ecumenical movement that Rome is not interested in Christian unity, but also that they are in fact an exclusive institution (see PN 2: 386–87; Q5§134).

Does Gramsci sidestep such a paradox in his own reflections, both

book if the subject had occurred to them. What makes me laugh is the fact that this eminent Massis, who is dreadfully afraid that Tagore’s or Gandhi’s Asiatic ideology might destroy French Catholic rationalism, does not realize that Paris has already become a semicolony of Senegalese intellectualism and that in France the number of half-breeds increases by leaps and bounds. One might, just for a laugh, maintain that, if Germany is the extreme outcrop of ideological Asianism, France is the beginning of darkest Africa and the jazz band is the first molecule of a new Euro-African civilization!” (PN1: 127–28).



on the Christian Churches and communism itself? The trick here is to avoid the position of a singular party to the exclusion of others with whom one may share certain positions. Gramsci was given, before his imprisonment, to his own battles with various forms of the Left before the establishment of the Italian Communist Party, but I want to argue that he was continually seeking in the Prison Notebooks for various lessons and possible forms of allegiance. The distinct contrast with both Althusser and Lefebvre, who could barely contain their disdain for the Church, is that Gramsci by and large resists, or rather does not feel the need, for polemic and rejection. As I have indicated above, I want to designate this largeness of vision Gramsci's own *ecumenism*, reminiscent but much deeper than Althusser's early efforts to seek an alliance between the Church and communism. For Gramsci, the value of ecumenism is that it showed up both the limits and the possibilities for the various communist parties.

The first step in such an exploration of the ecumenical movement is to locate an alternative notion of "Catholicism" that is inclusive rather than exclusive, one that enables an alliance politics and the establishment of a federation which grants equal rights to all. And Gramsci finds it in the position of Nathan Söderblom, the Swedish Lutheran bishop, scholar of comparative religion, winner of the Nobel Peace prize, and one of the founders of the ecumenical movement. For Söderblom the mark of an "evangelical Catholicism" is the "direct attachment to Christ" and nothing more (PN 2: 132; Q3§164). Gramsci notes that the former Roman Catholic, Professor Friedrich Heiler, comes to the same conclusion, commenting cryptically that "the pan-Christians have had some success" (PN 2: 132; Q3§164; see PN 1: 354–55; Q2§135).

Taught by a generation that actually held the ecumenical movement to be one of this century's great achievements, I remember Söderblom's name intoned with the respect due to mythical forebears. For Gramsci, however, it is less Söderblom than the movement itself that draws him in. But we need to push Gramsci a little, searching for the implications of his cryptic comments concerning the ecumenical movement. Although



one would want to question the particular content of Söderblom's statement, especially in light of an unflinching suspicion of redeemer or saviour figures that I have acquired over the last few years (see the chapter of Adorno later in this book), the success of his position is that it reconfigures the correlation of catholicity and singularity. The singular institution of the Church now becomes an inclusive unity, still held together by a singular statement and singular figure. In one respect the boundaries have of course been moved (Jews and Muslims, for instance, would have a hard time being accepted, although one can imagine a limited valorisation of Jesus Christ being sufficient), but in terms of Christianity itself, the definition of catholicity is no longer a strategy of exclusion but inclusion.

Gramsci's fascination is not merely due to his soft spot for the Protestants, but rather to the profound political implications. Here we have for the first time a challenge to the oldest globalising movement in human history, precisely by those churches that broke away and were excluded from that global "Catholic" Church. How is it, I can sense Gramsci asking, that a comparable politics might be developed? Not merely a common front of Left parties, but a communist party that in terms of its own universalising logic is able to hand out the membership card to as many as possible.

Another factor entices Gramsci as well, namely the tendency for the Protestants in particular to scission and splintering. At first reading, this seems to be a mere reiteration of the Roman Catholic criticism of Protestantism—that it cannot be the true Church since it keeps breaking up and forming ever new denominations. And yet I suspect that Gramsci's interest is also very much a political one. Given that the Left exhibits many of the same tendencies to fragment—into Leninists, Trotskyites, International Socialists, Socialist Alternative, Maoism, anarchists, Food not Bombs, and so on (I merely reiterate here the various groups that place notices on the boards in my local university)—the question then becomes one of alliance politics. Does the ecumenical movement provide an alternative model from the "massive organization and centralization and the fact that it has a single command" (PN 2: 386; Q5§134) of



the Roman Catholic Church? Instead of dispersing and absorbing the sundry heretics and schismatics, is there room for a variety of positions, operating on equal terms, without any one of them seeking to soak up and dominate the others?

Am I pushing the analogy too far, beyond Gramsci's own interest in a comprehensive analysis of capitalism, from economics to education? Of course not, since for Gramsci "both the Party and Religion are forms of worldview" (PN 3: 311; Q8§131).<sup>4</sup> And the relation is not merely analogical, but symbiotic. Is it possible, he queries, whether "there exists a relationship—and what would such a relationship be?—between the religious unity of a country and the multiplicity of parties and, vice versa, between the relative unity of parties and the multiplicity of churches and religious sects" (PN 3: 311; Q8§131)? In a move that he will make time and again, he turns to the United States as a direct contrast with the religious unity of Italy or France: political unity in the USA, or at least the restriction to a couple of parties, produces a plethora of churches and sects, even down to the truly American religious groups such as the Mormons and Christian Scientists. He draws nigh to a politico-religious version of the return of the repressed: unity can never be more than apparent, for the "bizarre kaleidoscope of currents" (PN 3: 311; Q8§131) characteristic of any organic or systematic world outlook will manifest itself in religious form if repressed in political unity, or in myriad political parties under a monolithic religious entity such as the Roman Catholic Church. At this level the ecumenical movement, with its combination of Protestant and Orthodox churches, holds out an alternative model of unity in diversity that presents a common front without denying the integrity of each member.

Ecumenism as a distinctly Christian phenomenon remains Gramsci's forte,

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<sup>4</sup> Thus, both Protestants and Roman Catholics express a deeper truth despite themselves in the constant process of counter accusation. For instance, in the context of the missionary battle in South America: "Catholics, of course, portray Protestant missions as the vanguard of economic and political penetration by the United States, and they fight it by arousing national sentiment. Protestants reproach Catholics for the same thing: they portray the pope and the church as worldly powers hiding under the mantle of religion, etc." (PN 3: 138; Q6§190).



but his lines of inquiry do run to the ragged edges of Christendom in both territorial (India, China, and so on) and religious (Judaism, Hinduism, Islam) directions. Here he is on less sure footing, reliant on scattered pieces in the journals *Civiltà Cattolica* and *Nuova Antologia*. Inevitably the questions with which he deals, the items he chooses to note, relate to Christianity in some way or another, whether in terms of the conflicts between Roman Catholics and Protestants in the mission fields, or in the problems of proselytising in India. Out of his diverse notes I will take up two lines or themes in which the notion of ecumenism takes on a slightly different hue: the question of conversion and definitions of religion.<sup>5</sup>

In my earlier discussion of Gramsci's fascination with the ecumenical movement I picked up various facets—overcoming fragmentation, the challenge to the Roman Catholic Church, bypassing the paradox of “catholicity” by redefining the term—but I have held off on one item, namely the renewed ability of the ecumenical movement for proselytising. This question also emerges in his various notes on religion in countries such as India or China. Both situations, the ecumenical movement and the encounters between different religious systems outside Europe, turn on the issue of conversion.

Let me begin with the material from India. Gramsci cites briefly the examples of Upadhyaya Brahmabandhav and Sadhu Sundar Singh, the former a Roman Catholic convert, the latter a Protestant. The Christian missions in India were never particularly successful, compared with Korea, Africa or the Pacific Islands. Both Brahmabandhav and Singh come under the criticism of the Vatican. In Brahmabandhav's case it was not so much his homeopathic approach, the desire to transform various aspects of Hinduism from within in order to render it Roman Catholic as his nationalistic fervour that drew Rome's ire. Singh, a follower of Gandhi, committed the cardinal sin of converting not to Roman Catholicism but

<sup>5</sup> Other materials, such as the long note on China (PN 2: 285–92; Q5§23) touch on religion only obliquely, as do the notes on Japan (PN 2: 305–8; Q5§50) and Islam (PN 2: 344–46; Q5§90) that list information on Japanese and Islamic religion and culture for the purpose of understanding intellectuals.



to Protestantism. These details on Singh are not provided by Gramsci, for he merely notes Singh's name and the articles of *Civiltà Cattolica* that deal with him. Already my own comments on these two exceed those of Gramsci, so the question is not the analysis that Gramsci himself provides, but why he notes precisely these men and the issue of conversion. It seems that the issue and process of conversion itself, from one comprehensive and vastly different belief system to another, is what draws him in.

However, Gramsci does not leave us to guess concerning his interest in proselytizing. The cryptic notes on Brahmabandhav and Singh, stripped of any analysis, come up against the more sustained consideration of the conversion of intellectuals in India. As we shall see a little later in this chapter, Gramsci's key category of the intellectuals cannot be understood without their role as religious professionals in the various religious traditions. In this case the problem lies in the resistance of Indian intellectuals to Christianity. Conversion has been limited to the lower castes, he observes (see PN 3: 207; Q7§71), but as far as the Roman Catholics are concerned this process does not come at the heart of the matter. Such conversion is molecular and piecemeal; what the pope wants is mass conversion and in order to do so the intellectuals need to be won over first.

In the immediacy of his reflections on conversions in India, Gramsci is quite enamoured with the pope's astuteness in such matters and the methods the Jesuits undertake in order to understand Indian society and religion and so convert it wholesale. I will return to the question of individual or molecular conversion in a moment, but what Gramsci has done here is pick up the constitutive feature of the Roman Catholic approach to conversion and the Christian life.

The aim of such a practice in missionary activity is at one with the raising of children in Roman Catholic societies. If every aspect of one's life is saturated with the myths, language, and synaptic patterns of Roman Catholicism, then one has no option but to believe. No other world is possible. Characteristic not merely of the world in which Christianity was the unquestioned cultural dominant, which Gramsci will





mark as having passed with 1848 and the need for the Roman Catholic Church to establish its own political party to look out for its own interests, this social, cultural, and religious saturation and envelopment remains part of the agenda of Roman Catholics today with their schools, sporting, and cultural organisations and so forth. One can still grow up without knowing anyone but another Roman Catholic. Not to mention the continued policy against contraceptives and abortion which is explicitly acknowledged as a means to ensure that the number of Roman Catholics at least remains the same. Any family can assume that one or two will fall by the wayside, become apostates, but there will still be a greater number who remain within the fold: a little like spreading one's investments.

Transferred to an environment in which such a comprehensive envelope does not surround each person from the moment of birth, the deeper logic remains the same except that it now takes a step back. Missionary activity becomes a process of transforming the entire social and cultural environment into a Roman Catholic one. For this reason the Jesuits seek “an exact knowledge of the ideologies and ways of thinking of these [Indian] intellectuals, in order to arrive at a better understanding of the organization of cultural and moral hegemony and thus be able to destroy it or assimilate it” (PN 3: 207; Q7§71). Theirs is not merely an abstract intellectual exercise but one with “concrete practical purposes”(PN 3: 207; Q7§71).

The model Gramsci explores here is collective, although with a twist. In the end it is a trickle-down notion of conversion, one that relies on the leadership of intellectuals. Again I need to ask, what is the importance of proselytising and conversion for Gramsci? By now it should be rather transparent: how can the communist movement itself enhance its own distinctly political form of proselytising? Here the analogy between Marxism and Christianity, or between religion and communism more broadly, works to the favour rather than detriment of both. For does not Marxism seek to attract members to a superior political program? Does not a form of political “conversion” take place?



And his language indicates the distinctly political interest he has in the missionary activities of the Jesuits in India. Apart from the need to understand the structure of the “cultural and moral hegemony” of Indian society in order to transform it, the pope himself becomes an astute operator of the machinery of conversion:

The pope understands the processes of cultural reform of the popular-peasant masses better than many members of the secular Left. He knows that a great mass cannot be converted molecularly; in order to hasten the process, one has to win over the natural leaders of the great masses, that is, the intellectuals, or, one needs to form groups of intellectuals of a new type that would make it possible to create indigenous bishops (PN 3: 207; Q7§71).

Without trying too hard, we can see here what is by now Gramsci's classic formation of the role of the organic or democratic intellectuals as well as the Party in the revolutionary process. Except that the shock lies with his identification of the pope as a much more knowing agent in such a process than “many members of the secular Left.” Not that he imposes this strategy on an unwitting pope; rather, it is from the Roman Catholics, past masters at mass conversions and comprehensive programs of conversion, that he wishes to gain some experience.

Is the pope then an unwitting revolutionary? Hardly; instead, it is the lesson to be learned from the first truly global organisation that pushes Gramsci this far. If this is the sum of all that Gramsci can say concerning conversion, then he is indeed guilty of a far-reaching “catholicity” that merely extends the specific sense of “catholic” in Roman Catholicism: the unwitting assumption that the ways of this Church are indeed universal in a monolithic sense that brooks no alternative.

Gramsci does in fact explore another model of conversion from the ecumenical movement itself, but before I come to that I want to comment on the Indian situation that elicits his comments in the first place and then consider the neglected element of molecular conversion. On the first point I have the advantage of hindsight: the majority of Christians today in India are from the lower castes, especially that of the



*dalits*, or indigenous people. But the point lies within Gramsci's own text when he notes that the majority of converts are among the lower castes. He writes this off as too molecular, but the appeal of Christianity in India is that it has enabled the *dalits* to step out of the caste system, at least in religious terms. The edge of many Christian missions with which the Brahmins were not enamoured was the biblical text: in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female" (Galations 3:28). While the passage has its own problems, the use of it in India as an anti-caste message resonated most strongly with the *dalits* and other lower castes. Given the sheer population of India, even the relatively small percentage of Christians makes the Christian Church, in all its branches, one of the largest in the world. What Gramsci does not consider is the possibility that such a moral and intellectual reform can take place from the masses themselves, from the bottom up, if I may use a spatial metaphor for a moment.

However, the other element that he neglects is the question of molecular conversion. Indeed, for me the immediate model of conversion that comes to mind is the thoroughly individualised one of personal transformation and commitment. Brought up in a Protestant tradition that valorises individual and conscious commitment, the right of everyone to read the Bible on his or her own, the need for a personal life with god, conversion is inescapably personal—albeit always within the context of the community of the faithful. The catch with such an individual notion of conversion, characteristic of certain types of Protestantism, is that it denies the other dimension that I have considered above with regard to the Roman Catholics: the absence of any definable moment of conversion, the sense that one has always been a believer in some way or another.

Yet, all I have done is set up two ideal types, the shock of personal conversion and the collective sense of always having believed, for it will turn out that the personal moment of conversion felt by endless numbers of people is part of the ideological structure of what it means to have faith. That moment has itself been set up, replete with its recognisable patterns of experience and verbal narration, by a long process of formation.



Conversion is therefore a collective experience, one that is part of the social and cultural makeup of the churches themselves.

But what happens when there is no cultural dominant of religion, no long tradition, no institutional and cultural matrix for such commitment, formalised and ritualised at the moment of confession and confirmation? The question is no different for the communist party seeking to win “converts” or for a religious body such as the Christian Church. Here one may impose the structures in the anticipation that these will eventually condition belief, beginning with winning over the intellectuals and engaging in mass initiations (the Roman Catholic missionary approach), or seek to win “souls” through individual commitment after being exposed to the gospel (the preferred Protestant method). In a future communist society one would expect the cultural and political pervasiveness of communism to make commitment easier, but in the situation of urging people to switch allegiance—for conversion, or metanoia, is in the end a switch from one belief system to another—how is the communist party to proceed?

Thus far I have concerned myself with Gramsci’s deliberations on the Roman Catholic model in India. But there is alternative at which he hints, and here I return to the other dimension of his interest in conversion or proselytising, namely the ecumenical movement itself.

The aim of the movement is not merely unity, he suggests, but also the acquisition of a “proselytising force” (PN 2: 386; Q5§134) that was characteristic only of the English and American Churches (see also PN 1: 354–55; Q2§135). As one of the few expansionist religions in the world, including Buddhism and Islam, Christianity is normally characterised by the removal of ethnic, linguistic, and geographical boundaries to membership. The bar is set quite low, allowing in anyone who confesses belief in Jesus Christ. Yet, Gramsci’s point is quite astute, for in the vast missionary effort of the colonial era, it was only the various Roman Catholic countries such as Spain and France, along with the English and then American Protestants who consistently sent out missionaries to the colonies. There were exceptions, such as the Lutheran missions in central



Australia, but along with the obligatory missionaries sent by individual Protestant denominations—I can cite Presbyterians, Methodists, Anglicans, and Baptists in Australia—the first properly ecumenical bodies were the missionary organisations themselves. Gramsci does not make this point, but the role of the London Missionary Society, for instance, throughout the globe marks it as one of the first “para-church” organisations. Drawing missionaries from all of the Protestant Churches in England, Scotland, and Wales, as well as the various administrators of the organisation itself, it provided a model of the ecumenical movement to come. What Gramsci was not able to foresee was the shift that the ecumenical movement would enact between the older colonial centres and the targets of missionary activity themselves. It would only be a matter of time before these countries too would become members of the World Council of Churches, eventually to reset its whole agenda, call for a moratorium on proselytising itself, and find that there were more Christians in what has been called the Third World than in the colonial centres.

But how does the ecumenical movement, a union of Protestant and Orthodox churches, provide an alternative model of conversion from that of the Roman Catholics? It is not so much that the dispersed groups of the Left should form a united front in order to convince more people to join, but that the model of the “federation of the different Christian sects, with equal rights for all” (PN 2: 282; Q5§17) is itself not a model from which to launch proselytisation but rather the result of that process. If this smacks too much of liberal pluralism, allowing everyone to remain exactly as they are, then it neglects the profound change that is required not only for a commitment to communism, but also for such a federation to come together in the first place, let alone exist for any time.

The ecumenical movement, at least implicitly, provides an alternative model for proselytisation than the monolithic structure of the Roman Catholic Church, and Gramsci is interested in the implications. Rather than the trickle-down effect of focusing on the moral and cultural leaders, that is, the (religious) intellectuals, he hints at the possibility that proselytising may



take the form not of swamping and absorbing that which is different into one's own system, however much that system may be transformed itself in the process, but of a different type of federation in which the various emphases and traditions may continue to exist without giving up their peculiar autonomies.

The second dimension of a wider notion of ecumenism is Gramsci's effort to produce a definition of religion, perhaps the grandest ecumenical gesture of all. Earlier I read his enticement by the Roman Catholic approach to proselytisation in India—using the religious intellectuals as the key to mass conversions—as a tendency to a peculiarly Roman Catholic version of catholicity that was avoided only by juxtaposing this tendency with his interest in the ecumenical movement. However, when he comes to defining religion itself he falls into the pattern that has become familiar from Althusser and Lefebvre. For one of the traps of the effort at definition is that it shows up the down-side of ecumenism, which can all too easily become a means of universalising, however unwittingly, your own particular type of religious belief or commitment, counting as allies only those who share a basic language that you determine.

The concept of religion presupposes the following constitutive elements: (1) belief in the existence of one or more personal divinities that transcend earthly or temporal conditions; (2) man's sense of dependence on these superior beings, who totally govern the life of the cosmos; (3) the existence of relations (a cult) between men and gods (PN 3: 32; Q6§41).

In his characteristically careful fashion Gramsci gradually narrows his definition: he rules out any effort to define religion without reference to a belief in higher powers, and then cuts out subjection to impersonal and indeterminate forces, excluding even theism due to the absence of a "particular relation between man and divinity" (PN 3: 32; Q6§41). We end up with three key elements: belief in personal non-temporal deities, the feeling of dependence on these beings, and a cult, which he defines as the system of relationships between human beings and these gods. Unfortunately, the desire for specificity, the nervousness about allowing the definition of religion to slip outside the realm of so-called "positive



religion,” renders a definition that is distinctly Christian. In this respect, he has difficulty with the question as to whether Shinto is a religion (PN 2: 308; Q5§50), whether to describe Hinduism as pantheism or theopanism (FSPN: 121; Q6§178), and too often slips into an effort to compare with Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism, the religions of China, Japan as well as Islam (see PN 2: 285–92; Q5§23; PN 2: 305–8; Q5§50; PN 1: 332–34; Q2§90; PN 2: 344–46; Q5§90).

It is a commonplace in the study of religions that the discipline itself arose in the context of and as a result of European imperial expansion and missionary endeavours, even though the two were not necessarily operating in tandem. In light of the vast amount of information about religious practices and beliefs, however bowdlerised it might have been, the effort at cataloguing and understanding also required some definition as to what religion itself might be. And the overwhelming temptation was to move from what was known, namely European Christianity, to come up with the highly desirable but extraordinarily slippery definition of religion per se. Too wide and a whole host of purely social and cultural elements become religious; too narrow and the justification for excluding what appear to be religions becomes a necessity.

Gramsci’s problem, it seems to me, is that he is in the end too Christian, even too Roman Catholic. The giveaway is not the dependence on a personal divinity or two who are believed to rule the cosmos, but rather the necessity of a system of relationships between human beings and these divine operators, what Gramsci calls a cult. The choice of the term cult is curious, since it restricts the notion of a relationship between the gods and human beings to a ritual and collective sense. My Protestant radar is attuned somewhat differently: the notion of a relationship with god or the gods does not conjure up the cult in any sense. Rather, what counts here is the individual’s personal interaction with the deity, to whom you are accountable. By contrast, the *cultus* designates the various rituals, mostly public, in which a group of believers formally orders its belief into patterns of identifiable behaviour. The cult, in other words, mediates the divine commerce, the various interactions with the gods,



usually by means of a figure set apart for such tasks, the priest. But all this is very much a Roman Catholic model of religious belief and practice, with the emphasis on the collective, ritualised, and mediated practice.

Two points arise from Gramsci's effort at a definition. To begin with, might not a definition of religion proceed in a different fashion? Rather than the search for a catch-all definition that achieves a fine balance between specificity and inclusiveness, should not the effort at definition be an *ad hoc* affair, constructed at the moment and then subsequently dismantled before moving on to a new set of features. "Religion" would therefore be the name of a problem rather than a definition, one that we can perpetually rearrange and shuffle in the light of differing phenomena and situations. To put it slightly differently, how we define religion is subject to variation in a dialectical fashion that allows collection and definition continually to alter one another. Second, Gramsci unwittingly shows up another feature of the very notion of religion: the possibility that the idea of religion comes out of a Christian context. Instead of lamenting such a situation, any discussion of religion needs to face this problem directly and work from there. Thus, the various categories of what constitutes a religion—belief and practice, institution and world outlook, religious professionals, the rational ordering of religious experience, authoritative traditions whether oral or written, narratives of creation of the gods and the world, the theories of human existence and so on—inescapably come from Christianity. Thus, any theory and criticism must come from this problematic intersection.

## Politics: The "Eighteenth Brumaire" of the Holy See

One must not think of "ideology" or doctrine as something artificial and mechanically superimposed . . . but rather as something historically produced, as a ceaseless struggle (PN 2: 56; Q3§56).

In many respects, Gramsci's analysis of the various concordats, papal encyclicals, Italian politics and the perpetual to and fro of church-state relations reads like various items on their way to becoming one of





the more astute volumes on church history that I studied during my divinity degree. Except that Gramsci's interest and agenda is somewhat different from, say, *The Church in an Age of Revolution* by the Anglican churchman Alec Vidler that covers roughly the same period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike Althusser, Lefebvre, and Eagleton, Gramsci never seems to have had a period of religious commitment, a youth devoted to the Church, a passion that was to fade with the sensibilities of adulthood. Despite the fact that the Church permeated everyday life in his home on Sardinia, he was always outside the community of the faithful, describing himself wryly as “someone who has not as yet been blessed with the grace of being able to penetrate within the secret of the language of the Saints” (FSPN: 54; Q25§1). In view of Gramsci's avowal of his outsider status, why in the world would he be so interested in the details of the Church's inner workings? The longest and most developed entries concern precisely these matters: Catholic Action, Church congresses and the Church's bewildering array of political alliances. And unless one has a somewhat perverse interest in the detailed workings of church history (and I have known a few these strange, dishevelled people), I would be tempted to skim over them, scouring the table for more delectable morsels.

The obvious point to make is that Gramsci's analysis is resolutely secular, concerned with the political and sociological dimensions of the Roman Catholic Church. He restricts any interest in theological questions and doctrinal debates to their bearing on purely human matters—as, for instance, the history of the doctrine of grace (PN 1: 162–63; Q1§51), or the political struggles between integralists, modernists and Jesuits ((FSPN: 76–92; Q20§4(i–v)). It will lead him to make certain mistakes, such as the denial of the presence of anti-semitism in Italy to which his friend and supporter Pierro Sraffa took exception.<sup>7</sup> The purely secular

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander Vidler, *The Church in an Age of Revolution*, vol. 5, *Penguin History of the Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971).

<sup>7</sup> In the mix of the various forces that produced the Italian state he argues that anti-semitism dissipated in Italy. By means of a dialectical process that overcame the double-bind of Roman



reading of the Church carries on a tradition in Italy that stems from Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and L.B. Alberti, flowering in the work of Albertino Mussato who, in the early nineteenth century “broke with the theological tradition of history, and more than any other individual of his time he was responsible for the introduction of modern or humanistic history” in which “the passions and utilitarian motives of men appear as motifs of history” (PN 2: 337; Q5§85). I do not want to go into the argument that the possibility for such a history comes as much from theology itself as from the drive to oust it from its position of authority, nor even the old point that the passions and utilitarian motives of “men” merely shift the relations of cause and effect. But what is surprising is how relatively recent such a notion of secular historiography is—although it is older than the doctrine of the Pope’s infallibility, promulgated by the modest Pius IX at the First Vatican Council in 1869–70.

Gramsci brings such a tradition—by his time only a century old—back

Catholic cosmopolitanism and municipal particularism, the Jews cast aside their Jewishness to become a crucial element in the formation of nation state (see FSPN: 102-4; Q15§41). Gramsci follows Arnaldo Momigliano on this point: as the cosmopolitanism of the Church was secularised, the chronic regionalism was transformed into a national consciousness that did not do away with the regional characteristics but rather made them into constituent features of the new nation state. In this respect, the Jews were no different from the Piedmontese or Neapolitans: they became Italians while they remained Jews. Except that later he diverges from Momigliano to suggest that the Jews actually gave up their Jewishness to become Italians. Piero Sraffa was not convinced, as he relayed to Gramsci via his sister-in-law, Tatiana. Sraffa pointed to the continued exclusion of Jews from senior positions in the state, and Gramsci responded by arguing that if there was a juridical category of civil pariahs it was unfrocked priests and monks who had left their monasteries. Under the law, he argues, Jews were no different from Protestants, who under the spirit of the law are not degraded but have equal access. The particularism of the Jews may be attributed, he suggests, to the mix of older rabbis and young Zionists. By implication, the cultured Jews to whom he attributes a rising Italian national consciousness were not so drawn to the particularism of a Jewish nation-state. Further, if individual Jews do suffer some exclusions, it is of a distinctly political nature, attributable often to Jews who wish to gain political advantage over others. (He uses the example of the Rector Del Vecchio of Rome University causing trouble for Professor Levi-Civita for not attending official religious celebrations). At the time Gramsci wrote, many Jews supported fascism, only to find themselves the object of the anti-Semitic laws of 1938. He does allow for the possibility “that an anti-Semitic tendency might still arise”(see PN 2: 136; see also PN 2: 79), which was to prove fatally prophetic. In the ease of hindsight Sraffa sensed the inherent direction of Italian fascism and Gramsci’s own assessment was found wanting. Elsewhere he is more prepared to see the continuation of anti-semitism (see PN 1: 109–10; Q1§19 on the anti-semitism at the time of the Risorgimento).



to the gates of the Vatican itself. Yet today this form of inquiry into the Church is so commonplace, especially within the institution itself, that its edge has well and truly been blunted, producing more a massage than a punishing analysis. What interests me far more are the points that Gramsci makes about the Church, particularly in light of his perpetual search for a viable theory of communism and the party in Italy, along with political alliances. Again, he does not mind digging in the most unlikely places.

My concern here is with three dimensions of the Roman Catholic Church's politics: Catholic Action, the in-fighting between modernists, integralists, and Jesuits, and the Church's political alliances. Rather than three distinct areas, Gramsci has the knack of linking them through their own contradictory histories. While Catholic Action, as the "party" of the Church, twists and turns in its various external political alliances, it also has a contradictory relationship with Roman Catholic modernism. With only a little knowledge of the Roman Catholic Church's recent history, modernism and Catholic Action appearing to be at odds with each other, one seeking to defend the Church from the inroads of the other.

Not so, for one of the curious contradictions of Roman Catholic modernism that intrigues Gramsci is the way one of its precursors, the relatively liberal Lamennais (with the extraordinary full name of Abbot Hugues-Felicite-Robert de La Mennais), provides the intellectual possibilities for both Catholic Action and Roman Catholic modernism. Coming much earlier than those modernists under fire at the turn of the twentieth century—Tyrell, Loisy and Le Roy—the positions of Lamennais (1782–1854)—condemned in the encyclicals *Mirari vos* (1832) and *Singulari nos* (1834)—against religious indifferentism and updating the Church respectively, seem positively staid.

Although he eventually arrived at the position of republicanism, Lamennais argued that since the state was not up to the task of securing the Church's mission the two should be separated, and that truth was attainable only by universal rather than individual reason (the hall-mark of both liberal and Reformation positions). Of course, the Church



was the custodian and interpreter of this universal reason. All of which led Lamennais in two directions: the renewed assertion of the Roman Catholic Church's superiority and privilege, and a new alliance between the Church and the masses, or between pope and people. The possibilities of Catholic Action arise from such a new alliance, but the issues of universal reason rather than revelation, as well his espousal of freedom of the press and male suffrage, were just too much for the hierarchy. For this reason, Lamennais becomes the precursor of Roman Catholic modernism (Gramsci is commenting upon an article in *Civiltà Cattolica*, entitled "The Success of Lamennais's Ideas and the First Manifestations of Catholic Action in Italy," from October 4, 1930). All of this took place before the crucial date of 1848 (see below), for Lamennais' book that landed him in so much trouble—*Les progrès de la révolution et de la guerre contre l'Eglise*—appeared in 1829.

The contradiction that lies in the midst of the Lamennais question is that between defence and reform, unleashing a force that seeks to preserve the Church against the inroads of the modern world, a force that simultaneously facilitates those very same inroads. Yet, Gramsci distinguishes between innovations from the centre, which smack too much of compromise and curtailing movements from the laity, and those innovations from the people themselves. The latter, as with Roman Catholic modernism, are always regarded with some suspicion, broken up, reabsorbed, expelled, or channelled into an order, all for the sake of avoiding a deeper and more fundamental reform. The only result is then the establishment of a new Church, as with Luther, who wished to reform the Church from within but ended up with the heresy of another Church, forever changing the meaning of "catholic."

### Catholic Action

As for Catholic Action itself, Gramsci is deeply interested not because, like Althusser, he was once a member, but because Catholic Action provides him with an opportunity to reflect on the nature and practice of the communist party. I am going to infiltrate Catholic Action



for a while before moving on to reflect on Gramsci's treatment of the Roman Catholic Church's internal conflicts and then its political and social policy, especially its confusing series of apparently opportunistic alliances.

Catholic Action draws Gramsci time and again, but it is a Catholic Action distinct from that which is familiar to us in Althusser's France (even though Gramsci regards the French arm as better qualified and organised; see FSPN: 105; Q15§40). For Althusser, the decisive achievement of Catholic Action was the shift from passive religiosity to an active role in politics and society. Coming out of the inter-war period in a France with a disestablished Church, Catholic Action set up numerous organisations, of students, workers, peasants, employers, young couples, young people, and so on, with an explicit agenda of countering the popularity of the socialist and communist parties. As I noted in the chapter on Althusser, he argues that a whole generation of communist party members moved through Catholic Action into the PCF, when they saw that although the Church had identified the key problems, its answers were so much nonsense.

With characteristic insight, Gramsci points out that the widely known Catholic Action of the sort that drew in Althusser was in fact a thorough re-organisation undertaken by Pius XI (1922–39). He does note the activities in which Althusser was swept up, although in Italy they took less the form of associations of workers, students, and so on (but then in France the Roman Catholic Church had been disestablished) and more the form of retreats or “closed spiritual exercises,” modelled on Ignatius Loyola. Built around a core of devout workers, the retreats sought to inculcate an active spirituality amongst an increasingly apostate working class, who tended to be “negative, or at least passive or skeptical and indifferent” (PN 2: 385 and 386; Q5§133; see PN 3: 209–10; Q7§78). All of this took place in the early twentieth century. Yet Gramsci pushes much further back: although there were antecedents from the French Revolution of 1789, the crucial moment is that of the revolutions that shook Europe in 1848. If Lukács could see the demise of the historical novel proper in 1848, when the bourgeoisie met for the first time the



working class as an organised and militant group and hastily began forgetting its own recent emergence, then Gramsci locates a comparable moment for the Roman Catholic Church. Suddenly, the Church needed a specific political party to support it. And this process continues: “To the extent that every national Catholic Action grows and becomes a mass organization, it tends to become a regular political party whose direction is determined by the internal necessities of the organization” (PN 3: 309; Q8§129).

1848 marks the shift for the Church from an assumed and unquestioned position of universal dominance to one of having to defend itself:

Before 1848 one saw the formation of more or less ephemeral parties and single individuals who rebelled against Catholicism while, after 1848, Catholicism and the Church “had” to have a party of their own to defend themselves and lose the least possible amount of ground. They could no longer speak as if they knew they were the necessary and universal premiss of any mode of thought or action (except officially, since the Church will never admit the irrevocability of this state of affairs) (FSPN: 29; Q20§1; see PN 1: 223–24; Q1§139).<sup>8</sup>

The sheer pervasiveness, the untranscendable horizon, of a Christian and more specifically Roman Catholic world-view before 1848 is one that is hard to imagine in the thoroughly secular, or what is now more often called the post-secular, world. Gramsci seeks for examples to show how it might have worked, and he opts for two.

First, he suggests, we might think of the impossibility of an anti-suicide party. Given the universal assumption or necessary premise of life, there would be no need for a party that set itself against the practice of suicide. Only if life were no longer an unquestioned assumption would such a party become necessary. Second, he opts for a similar line to Lefebvre, for whom the hardest terrain on which to fight the battle with

<sup>8</sup> Or, in Q20§2, “Catholic Action marked the beginning of a new era in the history of the Catholic religion—the moment when, from an all-embracing [*totalitaria*] conception (in the dual sense—that it was a total world-conception of a society in its entirety) it became partial (that too in the dual sense) and had to have its own party” (FSPN: 34). See also PN 3: 133; Q6§183; FSPN: 43–44; Q14§55.



Roman Catholicism was that of everyday life. If for Lefebvre the toughest assignment concerns the ingrained habits of centuries, so much so that they are almost part of the genetic structure of the people in question, then for Gramsci these habits of everyday life are precisely the sign of an unquestioned, universal background or world-view. Gramsci takes the example of the word “Christian” and its various derivatives (see FSPN: 29–30; Q20§1; PN 1: 122–23; Q1§38). Thus, especially among the peasants, “Christian” designates a “civilised man” or just a “civilian.” The various examples Gramsci provides—specifically penal colonists and detainees as not “Christians,” as somehow closer to beasts—suggest an even tighter usage: “Christian” designates not merely a civilised man, but also one from Europe without some deprivation (such as prison). Indigenous peoples from any part of the globe, let alone the “infidels” themselves, that is, the Muslims, fall outside the category of “Christian.” (I will not go into the derivatives themselves, such as the French *cretin*, Italian *cretino*, and Russian *krestyanin*, except to observe Gramsci’s fascination for intricate and not necessarily relevant detail. It is as though he is tempted to let his pen run in a different path, one that draws him away from the main line of his thought.)

Gramsci searches for the intricate precursors of Catholic Action before 1848, from the contradictory influence of Lamennais, who provided both the theoretical basis for Catholic Action and was condemned as the first Catholic modernist, to neo-Guelphism,<sup>9</sup> Sanfedistas,<sup>10</sup> the leftward liberal democratic and bourgeois Action Party, and the burgeoning Roman Catholic periodicals set up to combat the ideas of the *Encyclopaedia* and the French Revolution (see PN 3: 133, 136–37, 222–23; Q6§183; Q6§188; Q7§98). But what was the event of 1848 that led to such a shift in the Church’s position? It was the same victory of a conservative liberal-

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<sup>9</sup> Neo-Guelphists were nationalist and anti-Austrian, pushing, in the curious mix of the time (1848–49), both for a return to the Medieval Church and for the pope to gather a confederation of Italian states.

<sup>10</sup> Or *Santa Fede*, the “Holy Faith” militants who, like the neo-Guelphists, wanted independence from Austria with the pope as the political and religious head of Italy.



ism and the bourgeoisie that simultaneously crushed the newly emergent communists *and* removed the Church from its dominant position. I will pick up below this bifurcation that the bourgeoisie enacted between an old order and one that was only in the first stage of its emergence, but it means that the anti-clericalism of Italy, the often military struggle against the Church, all of which ended in a right-wing liberalism sweeping the field—“understood as a conception of the world as well as particular political current” (FSPN: 29; Q20§1)—was combined with the horror and brutal repression of the first organised movement of the working class. As far as the Church is concerned, we saw in the discussion of Althusser that the victory of the bourgeoisie over the Church resulted in the slide from the Church itself as the dominant ideological state apparatus to that of education, the major site of the inculcation of liberal values and culture. Or, as Gramsci puts it in the following entry in notebook twenty: “It is no longer the Church that determines the battlefield and weapons; it has instead to accept the terrain imposed on it by the adversaries or by general indifference and make use of the arms borrowed from the adversaries arsenal (the mass political organisation)” (FSPN: 34; Q20§2). In other words, Catholic Action arose through the impossibility of the Restoration, the return to the Ancien Regime.

Apart from his polemic against the Roman Catholic historians (see also PN 3: 133; Q6§183), who see Catholic Action stemming from the movements of the time of Christ (was he not, after all, the first leader of a Catholic Action group?), it seems to me that Gramsci’s argument has distinct ramifications for his theory of the communist party. In the case of the Church, the argument is retrospective: once it had lost the position of “necessary and universal premiss,” then it required a party to look after its own interests, despite its reluctance to recognise this. If we reverse the temporal order, precisely at the point where one loses its supremacy and the other only begins its long struggle to hegemony, then for the time being the working class and the masses need the communist party to espouse its own interests, to intervene politically to ensure its interests are not neglected, to struggle for a myriad number of workers’





causes. But all of these are only temporary measures, at times in profound tension with the long-term aims of the party. Once communism itself has become the necessary and universal premise of society and culture, then the party itself will no longer be required, dissipating into a newly dominant worldview that requires no defence.

This is of course a version, with Gramsci's own twist, of the Marxist-Leninist theory of the party and the temporary dictatorship of the proletariat. I am not sure whether Gramsci's insight into the function of Catholic Action was enabled by such a theory, now thrown into historical reverse, or whether the history of Catholic Action provides a distinct insight into the function of the party. Except that the dichotomy is a false one unless we want to distance Marxism from religion, and specifically Christianity, with its Church, scriptures, and clergy. Rather than retreat from the implications, I would rather take them further, arguing that it is precisely because of these likenesses, these links, that Marxism has the appeal and strength that it does. In the same way that a religion like Christianity provides a complete narrative not only of human life, or even of that which comes before and after the life span of a biological individual, but also of the place of human beings within the vast sweep of history and society, of both a global and universal nature, so also Marxism is able to provide a narrative of the comparable breadth and depth. Or, as Gramsci puts it: "Socialism is a whole vision of life: it has its philosophy, its own faith, its own morality" (PPW: 37)

It seems to me that this is the level at which Gramsci's analysis of Catholic Action, as a distinct party comparable to the communist party and its function with the working masses, operates. And this is why it matters little, in the end, as to whether the insight comes from his Marxist presuppositions or from his study of the Church, for both gain strength from one another, rather than depleting each other as they struggle for the same territory.

My suggestion that Catholic Action provides potential sources for understanding the possibilities of communist party politics carries through into Gramsci's reflections both on the regional variations of



Catholic Action and his notes on congresses, of all things. As far as the regional variations are concerned, I think in particular of his notes on the relations between Catholic Action and the various parliamentary political parties in places such as Germany (PN 3: 309–10; Q8§129; PN 1: 267–68; Q2§20; PN 2: 284–85; Q5§22; PN 2: 317; Q5§59), Austria (PN 3: 309–10; Q8§129), France (FSPN: 105–6; Q15§40; PN 2: 275; Q5§9; PN 2: 281; Q5§15) and the United States (PN 2: 316; Q5§57; PN 3: 135–36; Q6§187), where the internal conditions of the political parties created stronger and weaker forms of Catholic Action. For instance, in Germany the Centre Party, itself a political party from 1870 and the largest in the Reichstag, already carried on much that Catholic Action sought to do, at least until Hitler dissolved the party. The pope's various efforts to stimulate Catholic Action in Germany and influence the direction of the Centre Party were met at best with lukewarm enthusiasm. Catholic Action was therefore taken to be the “ensemble of Catholic organization” (PN 2: 284; Q5§22) rather a party itself. By contrast, in the United States the alignment of Roman Catholics with the Democratic Party had its own pitfalls. Gramsci's example is the Democratic presidential candidate Alfred E. Smith in the 1928 elections. The huge victory by the Republican Herbert Hoover was the result of widespread conservative Protestant opposition, especially in the Democrat heartland of the south. Smith had to counter accusations that his Roman Catholic faith would compromise his adherence to the constitution of the United States, that the Roman Catholic Church stood against the separation of church and state, and that his opposition to prohibition was morally suspect (Catholics are after all renowned drinkers). The questions for Gramsci relate directly to the viability of parliamentary politics in the USA, and in each question I can hear the echo of his concern for the communist party: “Was it a mistake for the Catholics to rely on a traditional party like the Democratic Party? Was it a mistake to let religion appear to be linked to a particular party? On the other hand, could they, given the present American system, establish their own party?” (PN 2: 316; Q5§57)?

Second, there is the question of congresses, with which Gramsci



fills the remainder of the first long entry from notebook twenty (see also PN 1: 122–24; Q1§38)—the one I have been trailing now for a while. To begin with, in discussing the national Congresses of the “white,” that is, Roman Catholic trade unions and the Popular Party, he identifies a contradiction between these relatively democratic arms of Catholic Action and the hierarchy of the Church itself, which had honed its anti-democratic skills over the centuries. As Gramsci points out, the Roman Catholic Church opted for the line that a little bit of democracy, suitably kept in check, was better than a potential populist subversion of the structure of Catholic Action and the eventual threat brought to the gates of the Holy See itself.

But this observation about the various arms of Catholic Action then moves into a series of points and questions that seem to require further reflection: the agenda of conferences, choosing of leaders, relations between the social composition of the Congresses and of the movement as a whole, adults and youth, the role of subordinate and subsidiary organisations, the press, the agrarian question, the relation between the political centre and trade unions and so on. In the end, he spins out into a discussion of the press, journalist that he was. But what interests me about these notes and points is that they begin specifically with Catholic Action and its congresses, but by the time we get to the reportage of parliamentary debates he is speaking about political parties per se. For instance: “The doctrinal and political homogeneity of a party can also be tested by the following criterion: what are the orientations favoured by party members in their collaboration with the [news]papers of another tendency or with the so-called organs of public opinion” (FSPN: 33; Q20§1)? And if we track back to the earlier points, it becomes difficult to ascertain whether Gramsci is in fact speaking about Catholic Action and its trade union and parliamentary arms—as he does at certain points—or whether he is making notes and recommendations for the function of any party, especially the communist party and its congresses. I will restrict myself to one earlier example: “The agenda ought to spring from the concrete problems that have compelled attention in between



one Congress and the next and from future perspectives, as well as from those points of doctrine around which general currents of opinion are formed and factions come to group themselves” (FSPN: 31; Q20§1).

I want to suggest that this inability to distinguish between Catholic Action, the party as a generic category and the communist party, is another dimension to the point I made above concerning the shift in 1848 that brought about Catholic Action in the first place. In other words, the detailed workings of Catholic Action, its various arms and the apparently mundane matter of the Congresses, all enable reflections on the operation of the communist party. This is merely the weak version of a point that should be much stronger: Gramsci seeks to strengthen the operations of the communist party by keeping a close watch on Catholic Action, for in the end it is an analogous movement with a wholesale social, ideological, and political agenda. And this feature of his analysis shows up even more clearly at the moments in which he is not aware of the comparisons, which in this case is the inadvertent slippage back and forth between observing Catholic Action and tips for running better congresses.

### Internal Conflict: Integralists, Jesuits and Modernists

Comparable to Gramsci’s efforts to track the twisting paths of Catholic Action are his comments on the battles between integralists, modernists and Jesuits. On the inside of the thick stone walls of the Church—although for Methodists, Baptists and other sundry non-established churches all that keeps out the world is a plank or two of wood—the intricate weave of theological debates are also for Gramsci very much political. Thus, apart from his passing references (PN 1: 162; Q1§51) to the liberalism of Rosminism (Antonio Rosmini Serbati argued in the nineteenth century for the limitation of the role of the state to the protection of private property and individual rights) and his reactionary opponent Vincenzo Gioberti, the differences between integralists, moderates (Jesuits) and modernists become for him an intriguing investigation into the political problems of the struggle for hegemony



and centralised rule. Whereas Catholic Action interests him as the political party of the Roman Catholic Church, the internal battles of the Church can provide some insight into the effects of such conflicts on the political program of the Church itself.

I begin with what may be taken as a central assessment of the conflicts before describing the conflicts themselves. After speaking of the various alliances and activities of the three groups, Gramsci writes:

All this shows that the cohesive force of the Church is much less than is commonly thought, not only because of the fact that the growing indifference of the mass of the faithful for purely religious or ecclesiastical questions attaches a very relative value to superficial and apparent ideological homogeneity, but also because of the much more serious fact that the Church centre is impotent to clear the field completely of the organised forces engaged in conscious struggle within the Church itself (FSPN: 78; Q20§4(i)).

The impression of a united front, of one Church, one Faith, one Lord, is precisely that, a front. Gramsci holds less store by the lack of concern for unity among the faithful than in the inability of the “Church centre” to deal with organised internal conflict. To my mind, this last point is the key to Gramsci’s interest in the battles between modernists, integralists and Jesuits. It is not the banal point that one would expect such conflicts in an organisation like the Church, nor even that to a certain extent debates and differences of opinion are healthy, but that the deep political struggles within the Church weaken its effectiveness as a political organisation. I will return to this point below, but not before some reflection on these three groups.

It would be easy to characterise the three groups on a political spectrum from Left to Right, from the modernists through to the integralists. But Gramsci does not fall into this mistake, for the modernists were merely the liberals, as we saw in my discussion of Lefebvre. Belatedly concerned to bring the Roman Catholics into contact with not-so-modern thought (something the Protestants had been vigorously pursuing for some time, although not without conflict and *Angst*), the



modernists desperately wanted the Church to become a little more open and progressive. Reading the modernists today, they come through as mainstream supporters of the status quo, like the stuffy lecturers in theology that took me through my Bachelor of Divinity or with whom I lectured later at a theological college. They were, in other words, good old liberals, a dirty word in many circles of the Church and relief for others who, like myself, had too many questions but wanted to stay, at least for a time.

I will not repeat the brief outline of Roman Catholic modernism that I produced in the chapter on Lefebvre, but it is worth noting that apart from one moment Gramsci tends all too readily to take modernism as a distinct movement within the Roman Catholic Church, full of covert and agonistic operations (see FSPN: 78; Q20§4(i); PN 3: 139–41 95; Q6§195). In this respect, he merely assumes the descriptions of modernism in the various encyclicals and Church documents, which give the impression of a well-organised and coherent movement—a little like basing one's knowledge of the heresies of the early Christian Church on the polemical texts of the various heresy hunters. As for the modernists, there was never any great sense of a movement as such, but rather a common agenda that had myriad forms and a number of significant names, such as Alfred Loisy, George Tyrell, Friedrich von Hügel and Italy's own Ernesto Buonaiuti (author of *Il programma dei modernisti* in 1907, translated into English by Tyrell and A. Leslie Lilly). Gramsci's interest in Joseph Turmel, who was not a major figure by any means, seems to be determined more by the similarity of Turmel's clandestine practices to the integralists than any theological depth. Turmel's only claim to any notoriety was that for twenty years, from 1908–29, he wrote articles and books under a host of synonyms, refuting himself again and again under yet another new name, until found out purely by chance and excommunicated (see PN 3: 139–41; Q6§195, Q20§4(iv)).

By contrast, the integralists were just so highly organised, and Gramsci notes with some amusement on a number of occasions the codes (the Pope was, for instance, “Baroness Micheline”), secret signals,



vendettas, insinuations, gossip, slander, libel, scandal sheets and pamphlets along with underground conspiracies of leaders such as Umberto Benigni in Italy and Cardinal Billot in France (see FSPN: 77–9; Q20§4(i); FSPN: 82; Q20§4(ii); FSPN 86–88; Q20§20(ii)). Their target was mostly the Jesuits, given their power in the Vatican itself under Pius XI, but also the modernists, with whom they often connected the Jesuits. And the integralists' agenda: coming to the fore under Pius X, they loved the *Syllabus Errorum* (so do I, but for different reasons), maintained an almost Jansenist “great moral and religious rigour” (FSPN: 77; Q20§4(i)) and sought to keep the Church on a straight, narrow, and undeviating path. Drawing close to Charles Maurras's fascist *Action Française*, the integralists stepped over an invisible line, threatening the effectiveness of Catholic Action and a Roman Catholic popular political party in France. The Jesuits had their day when Pius XI took action against *Action Française*, the fatal mistake being the support of the overt atheist, Maurras (see FSPN: 80–94; Q20§4(ii), Q20§4(iii), Q20§4(v), Q13§37, Q13§38; PN 1: 155–61; Q1§48; PN 1: 194–95; Q1§106; PN 2: 278; Q5§14; PN 2: 391–94; Q5§141). In other words, the integralists made the relatively right-wing Jesuits<sup>11</sup> look like a moderate centre party of a Church that had already assumed “the mummified shape of a formalistic and absolutist organism” which “hangs together only by virtue of the rigidity typical of a paralytic” (FSPN: 83; Q20§4(ii)).

The amount of attention that Gramsci gives to Maurras and *Action Française* suggests that the tendency for integralism to slip into fascism was worth analysing more closely. Maurras's use of Roman Catholicism's superstitions and ceremonials as “salutary enchantment” in order to counteract the anarchy and “Judaic poison of authentic Christianity” (FSPN: 93; Q20§4(v)), indicates that, for Gramsci, Maurras sought to dupe Roman Catholic integralism and use it for his own ends. I am not so sure, for apart from rule-enforcing exceptions such as the radical

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<sup>11</sup> Gramsci is not particularly sympathetic to the Jesuits: “Jesuitism is an advance when compared to idolatry, but it is an obstacle to the development of modern civilization” (PN 1: 195; Q1§107).



evangelicals in Protestant churches, reactionary theology and ecclesiology so often go together with reactionary or, at best, conservative politics. Running from theologico-political differences within my own family through to the blatantly right-wing politics of Christian fundamentalists around the world, fundamentalist, conservative evangelical and many Pentecostalist and charismatic forms of Christianity espouse with open eyes variations on reactionary politics that often border on fascism.

But let us return to the modernists, who are far more intriguing and enigmatic, especially Gramsci's astute observations in the fifty-second entry of notebook fourteen. Contrary to his tendency to take modernism as a clandestine movement, of whom Turmel then becomes an extreme paradigm, here he distinguishes between what the modernists' enemies say of them and what they themselves say, observing that it is "a complex and multi-faceted movement" (FSPN: 97; Q14§52). The distinction that follows is the most important one: modernism may be understood both as a politico-social manifestation and as a scientific-religious one. I begin with the latter: here Gramsci means the appropriation and use of what is commonly called historical-criticism of the Bible (the investigation of oral and written sources and their compilation) and a new consideration of theology and dogma, particularly with a teleological bent. Both of these were sweeping through the various Protestant Churches of the time, not without controversy and usually gathered under the label of "liberalism," and the modernists felt the incursions of such a liberalism into Roman Catholicism was well-nigh overdue.

This is the way Roman Catholic modernism was presented to me in my theological studies, a decidedly intellectual and ecclesiastical movement whose main concern was internal reform. This the Jesuits found intolerable, for it threatened their own hold on Vatican power. In the hindsight of almost a century, the various modernists—Tyrell, Loisy, von Hügel, Buonaiuti, and so on—became pioneers in an institution that struggled to respond adequately to the modern world. As radical theological students, we could identify in part with the young clergy that swore the infamous anti-modernist oath upon ordination while crossing their fingers, holding onto modernist opinions (PN 2: 268; Q5§1; FSPN: 78;





Q20§4(i)). It is a mark of the tortoise-like pace of change in any of the churches that even in the late twentieth century we often had to follow a similar double standard as we moved through the stages of ordination with their archaic oaths that stood in glaring contrast to the opinions we had developed in the dangerously “liberal” divinity studies we had undertaken.

Yet, for Gramsci the “scientific-religious” side of modernism is not where the edge lay. Rather, through their liberal bent that often tended to mild forms of reformist socialism, the modernists triggered the ire and active opposition of the integralists, with their aristocratic and often fascist connections and leanings. In short, politically the modernists would rather the Church be of the popular classes, and this the integralists could not stand.

In itself, the distinction between what might be called the ideological and the political, or what Gramsci calls the scientific-religious and the politico-social, is nothing startling. He is not the first to have observed the political and social dimensions of the Roman Catholic Church’s (or of any other Christian Church for that matter) theological debates. The emphasis on the political rather than the theological side of modernism has its own background in Gramsci’s Marxism, but the main reason for the distinction is, as I have already suggested on other issues, to be found in his desire to deal with the Church as a possible model concerning the nature, activities and problems of communism.

Underlying the preceding discussion has been the initial point I made, namely that Gramsci’s interest in the conflicts between modernists, integralists and Jesuits has the distinct political motive of tracing the weakening effects of such deep conflicts on an organisation like the Church. I should add at least two further factors, namely, the battle for hegemony and the problems of governance for such a global organisation.

On the first point, Gramsci writes of modernists, integralists and Jesuits as those “. . . who represent the three ‘organic’ tendencies of Catholicism, that is, they are the forces fighting for hegemony within the Roman Church. . .” (FSPN: 80; Q20§4(i); see PN 2: 269; Q5§1).



Hegemony is for Gramsci not merely the mechanism of ideological dominance, by means of both force and consent, but more importantly a term developed in order to theorise the process of revolution. Nor is an “organic” individual, most often associated with intellectuals, simply one who is integrally connected with the popular classes in a dialectical of theory and practice. “Organic” bears a revolutionary urgency, the look forward to winning the struggle for hegemony. As far as the Roman Catholic Church is concerned, the struggle within the organisation for hegemony is both a microcosm of broader political struggles within society as a whole and a signal of the importance of such disputes for the nature and future of the party itself.

Closely related is the second point concerning the problems of rule:

What is important to note here is that all three—modernism, Jesuitism and integralism—have meanings that go beyond the narrowly religious definitions: they are “parties” inside the ‘international absolute empire’ constituted by the Church of Rome and they cannot avoid posing in religious form problems that are often of a purely worldly nature, problems of “rule” [*“dominio”*] (FSPN: 99; Q14§52).

“Posing in religious form” is the key to a passage where Gramsci spills forth the reasons for his interest in the Roman Catholics. As the only global organisation, or, more directly, the first international global empire, one that has a longer history than capitalism, it provides the only long-standing model for the nature of international rule—so much so that even with Catholic Action, that distinct political party of the Church, Gramsci can speak of a “lay Catholic International” (FSPN: 105; Q15§40). He refers here to the meetings of Roman Catholics from around the world to discuss international problems while the League of Nations was in session. Established in France under the auspices of the *Union Catholique d’Etudes Internationales*, this “International Catholic Week” that operated separate from the Vatican contributes “to the creation of a concrete unity of thought among Catholics the world over” (FSPN: 105; Q15§40). In the same way that these meetings function in terms of



the parliamentary interaction of popular political parties, so also do the organic struggles for hegemony within the Church present in religious form purely political questions, with all of their regional variations (see PN 3: 122–23; Q6§164). And these include the struggles of the parties themselves, the importance of the central government to maintain some sort of control, the necessity to avoid being boxed into a rigid position with no room to move, and, as I will discuss in the section on intellectuals, the political strategies used by the Church to effect its own agenda in secular politics.

### Bewilderment? External Alliances

For all his interest in Catholic Action as the political party of the Roman Catholic Church, for all the lessons he might learn from internal debates for the exercise of global politics, for all the explicit and unwritten comparisons between Church and communism, Gramsci still finds some almost impassable divides between them. Thus, in the conflict over the allegiance of the masses between Roman Catholicism and communism, particularly the efforts by the Church to overcome the “apostasy” of the working class through Roman Catholic trade unions, Gramsci summarises the Church’s official position on poverty in four points:

- 1) private property, especially landed private property, is a “natural right” that may not be violated even by means of heavy taxation, and from this principle stem the political programmes of the Christian-democrat tendencies for the distribution with compensation of the land to the poor peasants, as well as their financial doctrines;
- 2) the poor must be content with their lot, since class distinctions and the distribution of wealth are disposed of by God and it would be impious to try and eliminate them;
- 3) alms-giving is a Christian duty and implies the existence of poverty;
- 4) the social question is first and foremost moral and religious rather than economic, and must be resolved through Christian charity and through



the dictates of morality and the judgement of religion (FSPN: 35; Q20§3; see PN 1: 100; Q1§1).

Although Gramsci writes that he is summarising the “most widespread opinions” based on “the encyclicals and other authorized documents” (FSPN: 35; Q20§3), these four points may be read as a brief commentary on the famous encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) of Leo XIII, which sought to deal with the situation of workers and provide the impetus for Roman Catholic social teaching. It boils down to the application of Roman Catholic teaching to the effects of capitalism and the appeal of socialism. In itself, the effort to deal with contemporary questions by facing them rather than condemning them was an innovation, but it ends up being quite conservative: society originates with the family, private property is a God-given right and socialism is mistaken for questioning the status of private property. Perhaps the most “progressive” idea put forward was the notion of the just wage, which should be “enough to support the wage earner in reasonable and frugal comfort.” Yet, the “worker” was a male with a family, cared for by a wife who remained in the home.

Thus, the much vaunted and lengthy tradition of so-called Roman Catholic social thought, as a third way between communism and capitalism that bases itself on theological criteria, turns out to be a variation on liberalism itself, and thereby a tool in the anti-socialist agenda. One could read the inviolability of private property as a self-serving agenda for the Church, but it is also a linchpin of liberal social doctrine.

However, one of the enticements of Gramsci’s notebooks is that he explores different positions, shifts chairs as he ponders another angle. And there are many gaps and breaks, built into the choppiness of the style of the notebooks, into which the reader can enter and engage with him. It will turn out that Gramsci’s apparent condemnation of the Roman Catholic Church’s social policy is part of a larger effort to understand the various political allegiances of the Church. In light of the summary I quoted above one would expect that the Roman Catholic Church would side time and again with the liberals against the socialists.



Yet, the Church seems to flip from one alliance to the other, apparently uncertain about whom to back. If on one occasion its position may be read as a resolutely anti-socialist, at another moment it turns out to be just as resolutely anti-liberal.

I begin with one extreme, the apparent concord between the Italian fascist government and the Roman Catholic Church in Italy. In a discussion of the concordat, particularly the interpretation relating to education in the primary and secondary schools, Gramsci traces the confluence of church and state to the point at which “the state as such *professes the Catholic religion*” (PN 2: 329; Q5§70). No matter that this is the interpretation of the Roman Catholic Church (the symptomatic “Catholic religion” hardly needs explication by now); or rather it matters a great deal, since the Church seems to be twisting itself into all manner of shapes in order to take the fascists as favourable to the Church. That the state seems willing is borne out by the text of the concordat and the Albertine Statute, the royal decree of King Carlo Alberto of Savoy in 1848 (which became the constitution in 1861 until the foundation of the Republic of Italy in 1948), in which the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church become the “foundation and crowning piece” of elementary education.<sup>12</sup>

On other occasions, consistent with the coalition with the fascists, the pope seems to understand socialism as the mortal enemy, except that now he sides with liberal forces in order to forestall socialist gains. On this matter, there is Gramsci’s intriguing narrative of the 1904 abandonment of the *non expedit* decree of 1871, in which Roman Catholics were forbidden to partake in national elections. Here Gramsci paraphrases the account of the pope’s change of mind by the leading liberal politician Gianforte Suardi, who had already forged an alliance between liberals and Roman Catholics in the municipal elections in Bergamo. Apart from

12 In Q7§89 (PN 3: 216–17) Gramsci quotes an article by Father Mario Barbera in *Civiltà Cattolica* which muses that the Roman Catholics misinterpreted the phrase “foundation and summit” in their favour. Taking the phrase in the obvious sense, rather than the Hegelian one of Giovanni Gentile, Mussolini’s minister of education, whose national reform of the educational system in 1923 saw philosophy superseding religion in the move from primary to secondary education, the Roman Catholics were able to assert the need for Roman Catholic instruction in secondary schools in the concordat itself of 1929.



the picture of a Pius X terrified by the image of a Red victory and the subsequent attack on the Church, pestered by the lawyer Bonomi on behalf of Suardi, and apart from his statements, “Follow the dictates of your conscience” and “the pope will say nothing” (see PN 2: 27–9, 305; Q3§25; Q5§47), what interests me here is the way the so-called “progressive” forces within the Church, those in favour of participation in national elections, were in fact arrayed against the socialists.

Yet, despite the appearance of a natural confluence between Roman Catholics and liberals, it seems as though the pope required a little more persuading than such an alliance seems to assume. Elsewhere he speaks of the liberals as those “irreconcilable enemies” (PN 3: 209–10; Q7§78) who came together with Roman Catholics in the Belgian revolution against William I of the Netherlands. My quotation of “irreconcilable enemies” is at the fourth remove from its original location—me quoting Gramsci quoting *Civiltà Cattolica* quoting a certain Ch. Terlinden on William I and the Roman Catholic Church in Belgium—so the opinion is hardly original to Gramsci. It would seem as though Roman Catholics and bourgeois liberals were hardly the best of friends. Of course not; was it not the liberals who overthrew the Church’s assumed and unquestioned cultural dominance so that Catholic Action became the political party of the Church? But in certain circumstances these mortal enemies would join forces in order to deal with another danger: in the Italian elections of 1904 it was the socialists, whereas in Belgium it was the Calvinist oppression of William I, who was keen on neither liberals nor Roman Catholics.

The Roman Catholics will at certain moments join with the liberals, but will they form a common front with the socialists? Caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, the Church would in fact support such an alliance, notes Gramsci, in cases where Roman Catholic workers were being violently oppressed by industrialists. Commenting on a full judgement by the Holy Congregation of the Council concerning conflict in the Roubaix-Tourcoing region (under jurisdiction of the bishop of Lille) in France, he writes that “it recognizes the right of Catholic workers and



trade unions to form a united front even with socialist workers and trade unions on economic questions” and that it is “a sign of *détente* with the radical socialists and the G.<eneral> C.<onfederation> of L.<abor>” (PN 1: 353; Q2§131).

Gramsci is obviously more interested in the alliance with socialists in France than with the liberals in Italy and Belgium, for it shows that the Roman Catholics are not default anti-socialists. But how to understand the Church’s shifting alliances? A rather unambiguous hint appears in Gramsci’s discussion of the armed insurrection of Roman Catholics and liberals in the Belgian revolution. In the same paragraph in which he observes this alliance, he notes that armed insurrection is permissible, especially in “extreme cases of the suppression and limitation of the privileges of the church and the Vatican” (PN 3: 209–10; Q7§78). Calvin would also come to this point, despite the heavy weight of Romans 13:1—“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.”

Rather than seeing the Roman Catholic Church as essentially anti-liberal or anti-socialist, the key to its shifting alliances lies in the Church’s own interests. Thus, Gramsci writes elsewhere in an effort to understand the jerry-built, ad hoc and inconsistent nature of Roman Catholic social policy: “In order to have a good understanding of the church in the modern world, one must realise that it is prepared to struggle only to defend its particular corporate freedoms (of church as church, an ecclesiastical organisation); in other words, the privileges that it proclaims, are the bequest of its own divine essence” (PN 2: 274; Q5§7). Gramsci is tempted to make a quick dismissal at this point—“Catholic ‘social thought’ . . . should be studied and analyzed as an ingredient of an ideological opiate aimed at maintaining certain religious kinds of moods of passive expectation” (PN 2: 274; Q5§7)—but there is also a recognition that the Roman Catholic Church is not merely anti-socialist, or that its agenda is not always at one with conservative liberalism or even outright reaction. What it does, as one would expect, is act in terms of its own interests, its



own wellbeing. And those interests are, curiously, not purely political or even temporal.

The prime example of such a looking out for itself is the difference between Pius IX (1846–78) and Leo XIII (1878–1903): the former ensured that most Roman Catholics were increasingly alienated during his long reign from the everyday civil and political life of the various emerging nation-states in which they lived, whereas Leo XIII for all his conservatism encouraged, for instance, German Roman Catholics to reconcile with Bismarck and end the *Kulturkampf*, as well as French Roman Catholics to come on side with the republic and give away their futile hope for a restoration of the Bourbon monarchy (on the latter see PN 2: 282–83; Q5§18).

In the cases of both Pius IX and Leo XIII, despite all their apparent differences on the social and political fronts, their ultimate aim was to do what they felt was the best for the Roman Catholic Church. Precisely what that “best” entailed was a matter for varying interpretation and practices. It turns out that Leo XIII appears the more progressive of the two, and many Roman Catholics still consider the reign of Pius IX, responsible for what is perhaps my favourite statement, the *Syllabus Errorum*, a low point in the history of the Roman Catholic Church. My point is that rather than reading Gramsci’s observation—that the Roman Catholic Church’s changing political and social policies are always geared towards the interests of the Church—as a criticism of the Church, it turns out to be a recognition of precisely what the Church should be doing. It is, in other words, not inherently reactionary or conservative, even if its decisions, pronouncements and acts often seem to be. In its most basic motivation, the communist party is not going to be, nor should it be, any different. Quite explicitly, the party’s self-interest is the working class—for Gramsci the masses, or *populo*—and the revolution which will overthrow the conditions under which the working class is exploited. In the same way that the Church’s social policy seems contradictory and ad hoc, so also will be the political and social strategy of the communist party unless its prime motivation and “self-interest” becomes clear. The





lesson to be learned is that the party should not act contrary to its own prime objective.

## Intellectuals

Thus far I have argued that the underlying motivation of Gramsci's intricate exploration of the arcane byways of Roman Catholic politics lies in the possible tips and lessons he might learn for the communists themselves, whether in Catholic Action, internal conflicts or external allegiances. But he is also fascinated by the Protestants, especially the ecumenical movement. I will return to the Protestants and their Reformation in the closing section of this chapter, but first his extraordinary considerations of the clergy, the "caste" intellectuals.

Along with the notion of hegemony, probably the most widely influential category from Gramsci's work has been the organic or democratic intellectual. In part this was due to the decisions made by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith in the selections for their English translations of Gramsci's notebooks. Simply put, the organic intellectual is one whose work is integral to the everyday lives and politics of the masses. Lenin is for Gramsci the great model, theorising only in the midst of intense practice. But what did not come out in that initial edition by Hoare and Nowell Smith is the importance of Gramsci's reflections on the clergy, along with some lengthy notes on the religious intellectuals of China (PN 2: 285–92; Q5§23), Japan (PN 2: 305–8; Q5§50) and Islam (PN 2: 344–46; Q5§90)—important not only for the idea of the organic intellectual but for a fuller appreciation of Gramsci's notion of the intellectual *per se*.

Before diving into the swirling currents of Gramsci's thoughts, let me pick up a bolder observation that inadvertently functions as his thesis regarding intellectuals. In a very specific comment on the United States,<sup>13</sup> he notes: "it turns out that on certain occasions the clergy of all the

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<sup>13</sup> The United States intrigues Gramsci: "America is an interesting terrain for examining the current state of Catholicism both as a cultural and as a political element" (PN 2: 316; Q5§57).



churches has functioned as public opinion in the absence of a normal party and a press organ of such a party” (PN 1: 163; Q1§51).<sup>14</sup> He wants to read the churches themselves, and not merely Catholic Action, as a type of political party, or rather, as the stand-in for a political party. It is not that the church is analogous to the party, but that on occasions that church itself becomes a political party in “the absence of a normal party.” And Gramsci is not speaking of a singular Church, the Roman Catholic Church that was his focus in the discussion of Catholic Action, but of the various churches and denominations in the United States. What interests him is the way these churches can form various ecumenical bodies—such as the Federal Council of Churches and the Interchurch World Movement—and speak as one voice on specifically political issues. So let us focus a little longer on the main interest of the quotation I have already been exegeting, namely, the clergy.

For Gramsci, the clergy of all types—priest, vicar, minister, pastor and so on—become not merely the intellectuals but the press organ or public opinion of the party that is not quite a party. The clergy have of course always been the intellectuals of the various churches, especially those who train clergy at theological colleges or seminaries and those who are busy debating and reformulating theology itself and church polity. Too often the work of these intellectuals remains in-house, touching issues only of relevance within the closed ranks of the churches themselves. Although Gramsci is interested in these intellectuals as well (see below), the ones who draw his attention are those who enable the churches to make statements and act on political questions—strikes, class conflict, government policy, and so on. Such acts and statements usually come from the various social justice committees of the churches in question, positions that are perpetually debated within churches in

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Buttigieg’s extremely useful footnotes fill in some of the gaps in Gramsci’s cryptic text. Gramsci refers here to André Philip’s, *Le Problème Ouvrier Aux Etats-Unis* (Paris: Alcan, 1927), and Buttigieg suggests that Gramsci reflects on various instances in which the churches explicitly commented upon and supported strikes, campaigns for the eight-hour day and so on in the 1910s and 1920s. These range from individual priests and ministers, the Industrial Committee of the Protestant Churches, the Federal Council of Churches and the Interchurch World Movement. See PN 1: 454.



light of internal political differences. My point here is that it is precisely when the clergy, or at least those committees and individuals within the churches given to political commentary, function as the press organ or expression of public opinion that they come closest to his favoured organic or democratic intellectuals.

I have chosen this example to begin my discussion of clerical intellectuals, since it is both a contemporary one and outside Gramsci's usual domain of reflections on the Roman Catholic Church in Italy. Plenty of the latter appears in most of Gramsci's comments on the Church, but his tendency is to look to the historical function of the clergy, especially in the Middle Ages, as precursors to the place and role of intellectuals in the modern world.

However, Gramsci is not one to make lax comparisons, especially on a question such as that of intellectuals. And so he qualifies his observations, setting out to construct a historical-materialist understanding of the clergy itself:

Is there an organic study of the clergy as a "class-caste"? It seems to me that it would be indispensable as a beginning and as a condition for the whole study that remains to be done on the function of religion in the historical and intellectual development of humanity. The precise juridical and de facto situation of the Church and the clergy in various periods and countries, its economic conditions and functions, its exact relations with the ruling classes and with the state (PN 1: 234; Q1§154).

The cohortative voice of this quotation runs in a number of directions, especially social or class analysis and history, but I am interested in two aspects of Gramsci's analysis. The first is where he seeks to position the clergy within already existing or given class differentiations; the second takes the clergy as a distinct class, beginning with feudalism and then following through the implications when the social situation of the clergy changes dramatically. However, I do not want to rush off into discussing both of these without exegeting the quotation above a little more carefully.

The text slips from the specificity of "clergy" (although I suspect this may very well be construed as religious professionals in the broadest



sense) to “religion in the historical and intellectual development of humanity,” and then, without drawing a breath, back to the Church and the clergy. I hardly need to repeat a point I have already made in this book, namely that “religion” in these texts, even in someone as careful and astute as Gramsci, invariably means Christianity, and in this case Roman Catholic Christianity. As with Althusser and Lefebvre, so also with Gramsci: the unspoken universalising tendency that comes with the assumed interchangeableness of “religion” and “Church” or “clergy” is a function of the assumed catholicity of Roman Catholicism.

More directly relevant to what follows are the first and last sentences of the quotation. The last, with its call for the detail of time and place, as well as invoking the various categories of Marxist analysis—that is, legal, political, economic, and class categories—is concerned with precision, detail, and exactness. Apart from seeing the necessity of such research, as well as knowing something of the amount of work that has been done in this vein since Gramsci wrote these words some seventy years ago, I cannot but help note the jarring with the previous sentence. Of course, he wants to avoid letting the great sweep of history escape the necessary details, but any one as concerned as Gramsci is with the specificity of time and place will come face to face with himself, in a narrow hallway where he cannot escape from himself, and say: well, if I want to be so specific, then the “Church” is hardly going to give me a picture of the function of religion within humanity.

I have come around to the first observation I made about catholicity and the quotation above. What of the initial sentence? There are two elements here: the clergy as a “caste-class” and “organic study.” If we set the question within the context of his other uses of “organic,” particularly with the well-known organic or democratic intellectual, then Gramsci seeks an analysis that will trace the connections between the clergy and their context, specifically the people with whom and for whom they work, but also their institutional, political, and economic matrix; in short, the various aspects listed in the last sentence of the quotation.

The curious conjunction of caste and class will be my focus in



what follows. With caste, Gramsci does look outside Christianity, evoking most readily the priestly caste of Brahmins within Hinduism, but also other cultures in which the role of religious professional falls to a limited group, entry into which can take place only through birth. Even in certain Christian traditions a caste-like status attaches to religious professionals: within Roman Catholicism at least one child would either go into the priesthood or an order, and in the Protestantism I know, the “son of the Manse”—or vicarage, parsonage or rectory—would more often than not follow the path of his clerical father.

Yet the strength of Gramsci’s analysis lies with class, and he operates along two tracks: one in which the clergy come from existing classes, which then helps explain their varying status; the other where the clergy form a class on their own. The clergy becomes a “caste” in Gramsci’s sense when the conditions for their existence as a class have passed, and yet they maintain a residual status.

I am, despite some misgivings, going to arrange Gramsci’s various comments in a rough chronological order, since it makes better sense of his uses of “caste” and “class.” When he goes searching back a little, especially into the Middle Ages, the emphasis is squarely on the clergy as itself a class in the medieval class hierarchy. In order to get to that point, however, he first distinguishes between the Church as a clerical organisation and as an organisation of the faithful (PN 1: 213; Q1§128). In its latter function, the Church developed a body of political, moral, and religious principles that sat in a profound tension with the interests of the Church as a clerical organisation. Gramsci thus reworks the old distinction between the Church’s temporal and spiritual realms: if the spiritual is that of religious and moral belief and instruction, then the temporal becomes the realm of that “class-caste” of the clergy. The distinction he retools then allows him to account for the close links between the clergy and the lower feudal classes, particularly that of the peasants. But only in a dialectical fashion: the support of the lower classes was not a result of the Church’s moral-religious principles but of its clerical, economic status. That is, as a distinct feudal class, the clergy sought to preserve its economic interests against the other classes who attempted to reduce



its influence; thereby, the Church supported the peasants in an alliance against the other classes, insofar as the peasants enabled the Church to maintain and expand its influence. But this alliance was fraught with its own tensions, since the moral and religious principles of the Church (supporting and being supported by the peasants as part of the community of the faithful) ran against its economic interests. After all, points out Gramsci, as a feudal class the clergy exploited the peasants as much as the king and nobles. This internal contradiction between religious and economic interests then realises itself in the French Revolution whose principles “are precisely the principles of the community of the faithful in opposition to the feudal order of the clergy” (PN 1: 213; Q1§128). The Church was thus playing a double game: it championed the peasants over against the other classes in order to enhance its own status, and yet it also maintained an alliance with the king and the nobles in order to keep the peasants in their subordinate position. It is this latter alliance that the moral and religious principles of the community of the faithful, realised in the French Revolution and then the Protestant Reformation, challenged and attempted to break. The fracture between the clergy as a class and the organisation of believers, between the shepherd and the flock, while itself the working out of a deep contradiction, becomes a heresy and schism (see also PN1: 101–2; Q1§4; SCW: 192).

Lest the logic of this internal contradiction be seen as wholly positive—that is, in the French Revolution and the Renaissance—Gramsci also points out that the destruction of Church property by national liberalism, the heir of the Renaissance and the Revolution, has had a detrimental effect. Here we come across a well-known paradox: although the Church exploited the peasants and others, it also provided charity, popular culture, relief services, and so on, that disappeared with the Church’s temporal estates, replaced by “even more parasitic” (PN 2: 76; Q3§77) forms of ownership. A purely cynical reading would suggest that the Church needed to keep peasants alive in order to exploit them, but that the capitalist relations that followed the Church did not bother with such niceties. Rather, I would suggest that this is another manifestation of the



contradictions Gramsci traces in the medieval Church. What arrives in its place, with all the best intentions of the eradication of the corruption and superstition of the Church, is even worse: pure exploitation with little mitigation.

The implication of Gramsci's analysis of the medieval Church and its legacy is twofold: the French Revolution, which in its laicisation of the internal tension of the Church is itself a more mature version of the Reformation, has a certain dialectical logic within the class tensions of the Church itself. Second, it allows Gramsci to separate the class nature of the Church from its ideological, that is, religious and moral function. What interests him is the nature of the class alliance and not so much the content of the Church's doctrine, for what he seeks is a class section of intellectuals whose thought is not at odds with its own class, but one that both reflects on and guides the practice of the militants of that class in a classic theory-praxis dialectic. The clergy therefore provides the model and precursor of the class links—in medieval terms the alliance between the peasants and clergy—between intellectuals and working class.

I suspect that Gramsci's interest in the clergy as intellectuals under capitalism has a similar motivation: how is it that these intellectuals can maintain such close contact with the people, especially in a situation that is so different in terms of modes of production? The key issue here will be education, but that assumes all sorts of connecting lines from the medieval Church to that of capitalism.

By the time we get to the long eleventh entry in notebook sixteen, Gramsci speaks of the clergy as a "caste" with its own distinct identity over against the secular intellectuals, but also as a part of the larger class structure of capitalism. I am interested in the way the clergy has become a residue of feudal class arrangements, emerging now as a sub-class that is not merely regressive but also pro-active in regard to its constituency, the Church. Further, in light of the observation with which I began this section regarding the clergy as press organ or public opinion, I want to ask whether the "party" in question is the Church itself or more properly Catholic Action? In other words, what is the relationship between this



caste or class fraction of the clergy and the Roman Catholic Church's own "party," Catholic Action?

First, there is the clergy's negotiation of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Already I have trailed all too the briefly the internal contradictions—of the Church as the community of the faithful and the clergy as a medieval class—that opened up the logic of the Reformation and the Renaissance. In realising the values of the community of the faithful, the Reformation and Renaissance culminate in the revolutions of 1848, the crucial date that marks the victory of liberalism over the assumed validity of the Church and the sacred. Gramsci argues that Catholic Action emerges after 1848 as the party for a Church that reluctantly admits the loss of its hegemonic status.

However, when Gramsci writes of the clergy in the context of capitalism, he focuses on education. Rather than emerging unheralded from the mists of an early morning in the mountains, education is the obvious location for the whole question of intellectuals, especially the conflict between secular (*laico*, with the sense of both laicised and secular) and religious intellectuals. Now our earlier reading of Althusser adds another dimension to Gramsci's analysis: the centrality of education after 1848, when the secular and secularising intellectuals come into the light with the tectonic shifts of culture and ideology, is perhaps the most enduring and pervasive signal of bourgeois victory—except of course that Althusser recognises Gramsci's influence in conceptualising education in such a manner (see LP: 142; SR: 281). Thus, in the modern struggle over education, civil or secular educational intellectuals seek to impose their will over a formerly dominant class of intellectuals, namely the clergy. Here the clergy are clearly a residual (in Raymond William's sense) intellectual class fraction fighting a rearguard action.

How does Gramsci read this vital issue of education in Q4§53? He does so in terms of the struggle between church and state. All of which emerges from a more sustained reflection on the various concordats between the Vatican and nation-states in Europe. A crucial feature of the concordats is the return in a different form of ecclesiastical privilege. In





light of the destruction of the clergy's medieval dominance over culture and education—the “intrinsic ties between its conception of the world and actual reality” (PN 2: 221; Q4§53; see FSPN: 63; Q16§11(ii)) that I discussed earlier—the concordats now recognise and grant on behalf of the state a limited set of privileges, mostly political, that the clergy once took for granted.

But I remain deeply intrigued by Gramsci's use of “caste of citizens” to speak of the clergy, or “caste-intellectuals.” He distinguishes between the caste-intellectuals and the secular intellectuals. Both are engaged in an “underhanded and sordid struggle” (PN 2: 221; Q4§53; see FSPN: 63; Q16§11(ii)) for dominance, the one attempting to hang on to, if not recover lost privileges, the other carrying on the program that ousted the clergy in the first place. The details of Gramsci's intriguing analysis of the “division of labour” between secular and clergy intellectuals in education remain highly relevant, especially where the establishment of Roman Catholic universities is still under way. But I am also interested in the working categories of his analysis, especially division of labour, which assumes that intellectuals either form distinct classes or, rather, sub-groups or class fractions, for which he uses the term “caste.”

So, let us dive into a little more detail concerning this “caste” and then move onto the categories of analysis. In Italy before the Second World War, the Roman Catholic Church was left the task of education in primary and secondary schools, while the state took over at the tertiary level in the secular universities. In various states the story differs in degree, but in each case the Roman Catholic Church has fought for the right to run its own schools. Protestants of course followed suit, particularly in a contest for the minds of the young.

In a manner reminiscent of Althusser's class analysis of the various levels of education, Gramsci points out that the university is the place for the ruling class, as well as those selected from other classes who will be absorbed into the mechanisms of rule. Only at the tertiary level can the higher reaches of modern critical thought be taught, rather than the dogmatic education of the primary and secondary schools.



For those who attain these first two levels—the petty bourgeoisie and popular classes—a restricted and relatively un-critical education is all that is required. These people, after all, will be better with their hands and bodies than their minds, able to put things together and co-ordinate colors rather than think. Even without the nature of the divide between church and state characteristic of Italy, the tendency remains in many countries for universities to draw from the (upper) middle class for their students, even where university education is “free,” and for the newer universities themselves to cluster in middle class areas. In the more traditional working class zones, such as the coalfields north of Sydney where I spent my later teens, technical colleges still abound and students more often than not leave school before the end of secondary school in order to take up a trade.

Before Gramsci passes on to consider the University of the Sacred Heart, he makes a subtle and unacknowledged shift. He begins with the “caste intellectuals” over against the secular lot: the caste of the clergy spends most of its energy teaching and training these classes. However much their numbers may be drawn from various classes, whether the petty bourgeoisie or working class or residual aristocrats, the process of theological training, removal and setting apart from the community, ordination, and obligations—materially and spiritually—to the Church ensure that they become part of a curious group that is not quite a part of existing class structures.

Although the specificity of Gramsci’s analysis in relation to Italy is part of its appeal, in the discussion of Q4§53 he speaks more generally of Europe. In this case, his assumptions and observations about the status and role of the clergy apply also to the various Protestant Churches. For any of these churches reserves its strongest punishments for those intellectuals who are not seen to have the interests of the Church in question at heart. One may espouse a political position, pursue a controversial line of thought, seek to be socially engaged or even radical, but as long as the good of the Church remains one’s primary motive, then one’s many sins will be forgiven. But the unforgivable sin is to show the glimmer of an



alternative allegiance, whether political or intellectual, to give people the sense that what one does is not in the end work for the benefit of the Church, enabling the show to stay on the road. Should this happen, the punishment is brutal and long.<sup>15</sup> But this is precisely what one would expect of the ‘caste’ of religious intellectuals, those with the Church itself as their primary desire and motivation.

The problem, argues Gramsci, is not only the declining number of professions or “callings” open to the clergy, but also that those who entered the ranks of the clergy were “intellectually subaltern” (PN 2: 223; Q4§53; see FSPN: 65; Q16§11(ii)). Further, the limitations of the seminaries meant that the education of its candidates was often incomplete and partial, failing to equip them for anything but the lower-ranked jobs. Is Gramsci speaking of Italy in the 1920s and 1930s or the current state of the churches in countries throughout the western world? The situation is all too familiar: cash-strapped theological colleges or seminaries trying both to train candidates for the ministry or priesthood as well as attract fee-paying “secular” students, operating with third-rate teachers, inadequate libraries and woefully short of the necessary technical equipment. And the candidates who hear God “calling” them often have mental and social disorders, dealing with a crisis in their lives through becoming a candidate, having ‘failed’ in some other profession. Even these candidates are all too few.

As far as Italy itself was concerned in the first years of the twentieth century, the problems of low pay, the limitations of the subaltern intellectual profession of teaching in primary and secondary schools, as well as the influx of women into teacher training and then teaching itself, led to priests studying at the secular universities. Having obtained diplomas, they were then able to obtain jobs in the public service, first to supplement their stipends but then as a means to leave the Church entirely. Apart from professional limitations and low pay, Gramsci also cites the effect

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<sup>15</sup> One should read the “one” as autobiographical here, for when I was a “caste intellectual” I made the mistake of an alternative allegiance or two and was punished for not loving the Church enough.



of contact with “less suffocating and narrow circles than ecclesiastical ones” (FSPN: 66; Q16§11(ii)). The crisis that such a situation generated—the Church “was about to be defeated automatically” (PN 2: 223; Q4§53; see FSPN: 66; Q16§11(ii))—was also very much the dissolution of the clergy as a distinct caste and its absorption into the relatively newer capitalist class structures. I am reading beyond Gramsci at this point: he puts it in terms of the Church’s inability to produce members of the ruling class from within its own ranks without resorting to the old strategy of relying on aristocratic Roman Catholic families.

In order to remedy this situation, at the heart of which lies the restoration of the clergy as a distinct class fraction with the agenda of the Church in mind, Gramsci cites the importance of the University of the Sacred Heart, the first such institution (I hardly need to add the epithet “Roman Catholic” with a name like that). Despite his call later in this long entry for the limitation of the Church’s power and influence and the means it uses to secure its own future, Gramsci cannot help a surreptitious admiration for the Church and its intellectuals. It seems to me, as I have already argued in regard to Catholic Action, that Gramsci’s interest in the clergy, that distinct caste of intellectuals that does not quite fit in with the culture and society in which it works, derives from his search for various critical models on which to build the work of the communist party and its intellectuals.

First of a number of Roman Catholic universities that will follow, the University of the Sacred Heart in Milan was recognised by Mussolini’s fascist government in October 1924, three years after it was founded. For Gramsci, the implications range far and wide: the Roman Catholic universities will splinter the secular uniformity of the existing universities; in doing so they will, dialectically, provide a continuous stream through all levels of schooling, in contrast to the discontinuity for students moving to secular universities; above all, what interests Gramsci is the centralised plan and uniformity of purpose that makes the Roman Catholic universities so formidable.

Rather than the inherently disparate and plural form of secular



and liberal culture, especially its educational policy, the “caste,” with its own universities backed by a single-minded Church, will soon outstrip its secular rivals. Various factors come together in the Roman Catholic universities: “a concentration of secular-religious culture (*cultura laico-religiosa*), the like of which has not been seen for many decades” (PN 2: 222; Q4§53; see FSPN: 64; Q16§11(ii)); the organisational efficiency of the Church which is far superior to that of secular culture; the Church’s homogenous structure that puts all its weight behind the universities.

Although Gramsci would argue that between the pluralism and relative freedoms of secular culture and the enforced uniformity of the Roman Catholic Church he would prefer the former, he cannot help admiring the Church at the same time. Indeed, the supposed “freedoms” of the secular culture of which he speaks was not much to write to Russia about. If anything, the fascists in power would become less tolerant than the Church, and so I suspect that what draws Gramsci in is the fact the Church can make political headway against the fascists without surrendering the prime item on the agenda, namely its own interest and advancement.

Yet, all of this formidable concentration of intellectual activity is not merely for the restoration of the Church, nor even for the preservation of the clergy themselves. Given that the universities are “schools for the ruling class,” the Roman Catholic universities will become “the mechanism for selecting the most intelligent and capable individuals from the lower classes to be admitted into the ruling class” (PN 2: 222; Q4§53; see FSPN: 65; Q16§11(ii)). And Gramsci is not thinking merely of the ruling class within the Roman Catholic Church, still far too much dominated by sons of aristocratic relics. The Church wishes to do far more than produce priests: lay people, thoroughly inculcated with Roman Catholic culture and deeply loyal to the Church, but also highly sophisticated and intelligent, will become “more valuable auxiliaries of the Church as university professors and as top managers, etc. rather than as cardinals or bishops” (FSPN: 67; Q16§11(ii); see also PN 2: 224; Q4§53).

Is Gramsci here the ecclesiastical detective, uncovering a vast plot



of that curious caste, the clergy? He has a far more interesting agenda, although he does criticise the clergy as intellectuals. No subtle conversions are on the horizon for him: for instance, commenting on a 1929 philosophy conference, he suggests that those caste intellectuals intent on restoring neo-scholasticism seem not to notice the effect of refutations of their position, treating scientific truthfulness and honesty as “a weakness [or naiveté] of their adversaries” (PN 2: 224; Q4§53; see FSPN: 67; Q16§11(ii)).

On the other hand, he berates the secular intellectuals, who seem to have given up far too much ground to the caste intellectuals. By means of the concordats—agreements between two sovereign bodies within the one state concerning its citizens—the secular intellectuals have lost contact with the vital activity and life of the state, becoming detached, realising that they and their struggles are extraneous. Or, as he puts it, the “abstract polemics of cultural snipers” (PN 2: 221; Q4§53; see FSPN: 63; Q16§11(ii)) do not define the ethical nature of a state: that is defined by its legislation. In the situations he has in mind, the effective legislation is of the concordats, one that splits the unitary state into two, leaving a whole group of individuals—Roman Catholics—free to refuse or at least limit the desired effect of the laws of the state. It is worth noting that Gramsci speaks of the “efficacy of those laws” (PN 2: 221; Q4§53; see FSPN: 63; Q16§11(ii)) and not the laws themselves, which Roman Catholics are beholden to obey. Gramsci’s criticism is here directed at the secular intellectuals, for they have relinquished some hard-won gains. If, as we saw above, 1848 was the crucial date for the abdication of the Church as the assumed cultural dominant, and if liberalism was the great victor in a long and bitter struggle, then for the liberal intellectuals and educators to acquiesce in the concordats amounts to a massive series of concessions to Roman Catholic privilege. In the end, Gramsci is hardly more enamoured with the clergy than he is with the secular intellectuals, but what he finds lamentable in light of his over-riding concern for the engaged and connected intellectual is the surrender of precisely this role by secular intellectuals.



Gramsci does not want a situation where the state gives up being “an active, a permanently active, centre of its own culture” in favour of the Church (FSPN: 68; Q16§11(ii)). In this respect, the secular intellectuals are but one part of a larger problem. Despite his profound opposition to the fascists, Gramsci does not want to see a return to the overwhelming secular power of the Roman Catholic Church. Philosophical arguments, theoretical refutations, and the like are not sufficient and will not contain the Church and its intellectuals: only the quotidian “exaltation of human forces throughout the whole of society” will do so (PN 224; Q4§53; see FSPN: 68; Q16§11(ii)).

Nonetheless, he does not write the clergy off in his discussion of intellectuals, searching despite all his criticisms for the role of the organic intellectual: the detachment or lack of class fit of this “caste” of intellectuals; the single-mindedness of the educational program of the Church, of which the university functions as the missing piece; the “democracy” of the Church; its distinct politics and ability to have a direct impact on contemporary politics; and finally the whole notion of the “Catholic cell.”

I shall not pause too long over some of these items. The semi-detachment of the caste or class-fraction of the clergy, no matter how much they may be drawn from existing classes, is in some respects analogous to the image of the communist party and its intellectuals. They too do not fit neatly into the class structure of capitalism, the difference with the clergy being that the communist intellectuals are anticipatory rather than residual, looking forward to a communist society rather than back to a former period of almost unchallenged dominance.

Any notion of the Church’s “democracy” operates in a distinctly paternalistic sense. What interests Gramsci is the fact that “the son of a peasant or an artisan can become a cardinal and a pope if he is intelligent, capable, and sufficiently pliable to let himself be absorbed by the ecclesiastical structure and to have a feeling for its particular *esprit de corps*, its spirit of conservation, and its present as well as future interests” (PN 2: 222; Q4§53; see FSPN: 65; Q16§11(ii)). On a number of occasions, he mentions the poor and those outside the ruling classes as precisely



those on whom the Church focuses its educational energy. Is this not precisely the class with whom the communists work? For this reason, it seems to me, Gramsci is vitally interested in the way the Church works. And so his observations on the singular interest of the Church, its *esprit de corps*, the need to have the Church's own well-being at heart, all have about them a double edge: on the one hand I can read a criticism of the closed environment of such a body; on the other there is an admiration for the united purpose that the Church seems to express. Although the means of achieving such a united program would be different for the Church (dictates from the top down rather than lively debate at party congresses), Gramsci also desires such a united front for the communist party.

Alongside these three aspects (the detached nature of the clergy, "democracy" and the singularity of the Church), Gramsci is most intrigued by the mechanisms of the Church's political engagement and the notion of the Catholic "cell." As for the former, the introduction of the Roman Catholic universities will provide a long process of selection and training, adapted from the one already in place for the priesthood and Church leadership, that runs through the full years of education from primary to tertiary levels. In particular, it brings forth the "most capable youngsters of the poorer classes" (PN 2: 223; Q4§53; see FSPN: 67; Q16§11(ii)) and trains them for ruling class roles, all the while maintaining their deep loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church. In other words, alongside the explicit political activity of the Church, through its own "party," Catholic Action, as well as other political parties, the Church also has, as we saw briefly above, a mechanism for infiltrating the ruling echelons themselves, precisely with a new type of intellectual. Not a caste intellectual in the old sense, one who is part of the clergy and works in this role; rather, a lay intellectual whose deepest affiliation is with the Church and thereby acts in its interest. Is this not the type of intellectual that Gramsci desires for the communist party? One in close connection with the party and the people, busily part of the daily life of politics, cultural, intellectual, and economic leadership, rather than the aloof and remote intellectual





who keeps “free” from such mundane pursuits (as Croce).<sup>16</sup>

Then there is the image of the “cell.” On at least one occasion, Gramsci uses it to speak of the Roman Catholic universities within Italian society: “The new situation in the schools makes it possible to insert into the secular ruling class cells of lay individuals who owe their position solely to the church, and these cells will increasingly reinforce themselves” (PN 2: 223; Q4§53; see FSPN: 66; Q16§11(ii)). I am tempted to call this a Brechtian estrangement effect, for Gramsci is not speaking of the base communities of Latin America and liberation theology, nor of the Roman Catholic Left in other places such as England in the 1960s. It is after all the Vatican of which he speaks, the vortex of a hierarchical men’s club of extraordinary tenacity. And yet the image he presents of the Church’s new program in education, one that runs through from primary to tertiary levels, is of revolutionary cells infiltrating the ruling class—all we need are the Gauloises and berets. They may think and talk like the ruling class, with all the skills of government at their disposal, but their allegiance will not be to the secular values of that class. Coming from poor backgrounds and with an ultimate allegiance to the Church, these cells, increasing in strength and number, will seek to undermine the secular basis of government. Again, it seems to me that Gramsci is not merely playing with words here. Rather, it is the methods the Roman Catholic Church uses that he finds so enticing for possible types of communist party activity and infiltration.

Forget the content and consider the method: as I argued above on the question of conversion, one of the successes of any Christian Church, any religious body for that matter, is when it can provide a comprehensive social and cultural context in which children and then young adults may grow up. Such an approach, so well known to the Roman Catholics who have been brought up in and continue within a complete program of education, sport, social activities, is always going to result in

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<sup>16</sup> Still alive while Gramsci wrote and one of the most significant idealist philosophers of his own generation, Gramsci both drew heavily from and deeply criticised Croce’s positions. See Fontana Benedetto Fontana, *Hegemony and Power: On the Relation between Gramsci and Machiavelli* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), and FSPN: 326–475.



a much deeper allegiance than various forms of religious conversion characteristic of fundamentalist, evangelical and charismatic forms of Protestantism (which is not to say that there are not fundamentalist and evangelical Roman Catholics). I want to suggest that it is such a total ideological and social environment that Gramsci admires about the Roman Catholics, a comprehensive exercise in hegemony that would make any communist program proud. For has not the Church had far greater time to hone its skills and develop the most effective strategies for keeping its faithful than the communists?<sup>17</sup> Or, to put it in terms he uses elsewhere, what he wants is an organisation as powerful as the Church, for which “Thought,” in opposition to Religion, might stand as a cipher: “In order for ‘Thought’ to be powerful (and it will be able to establish a tradition only if it is powerful), it must create an organisation that cannot be the state because the state, somehow or another, has renounced this ethical function, however loudly it might proclaim it” (PN 2: 117; Q3§140).

The function of the Roman Catholic “cells” closes out a reasonably comprehensive picture of the caste intellectual or clergy, except that in this case the intellectual is no longer clergy but lay. All along, I have argued that Gramsci seeks not merely the correspondences with his much-desired organic intellectual, but that in many respects the detailed interest in the nature and function of the Church’s intellectuals is part of a search for possible models. And the items I have suggested that fill this role are: the comprehensive educational and social program of the Roman Catholic Church; its focus on the poor masses; the ability to infiltrate the ruling class; and its unchanging focus on doing what is best for its own interest. Gramsci will always disagree with nearly every point of the Church’s own agenda, but its means he continues to find useful.

I began this lengthy discussion of the fifty-third paragraph of notebook four with the desire to trace the way Gramsci accounts for

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<sup>17</sup> A former associate of mine who moved from working in a Protestant church to anarchist activism said that she used many of the group practices from her days in the church quite successfully in anarchist action.



what was a class, the clergy, in feudalism but can no longer function in the same way in the very different situation of capitalism. On the way through I was also on the lookout for the ramifications on his central notion of the intellectual. But what has happened on the level of class analysis is marked by his preference, when discussing the situation of the clergy in capitalism, for the term “caste” rather than “class.” On one level, it would be possible to mention that intellectuals now by and large come from the petty bourgeoisie, with a few stray individuals from the upper middle or ruling class and the various parts of the working class. But this would hardly be new, nor would it apply to the clergy of the Roman Catholic Church. What we have instead is a class relic, a residual element from feudalism that maintains a cohesion one would hardly expect. If anything, the clergy are a class fraction, but even this does not get us very far, since, as Gramsci notes in his famous discussion of the Southern Question, those from the north come from the peasants, whereas those in the south are drawn from the old aristocracy (See PN 1: 163–64; Q1§52; SPW 2: 455–56; PPW: 329).<sup>18</sup> In other words: a fraction of which class? Rather, what is interesting about the clergy is the way such a class relic, a caste, can remain both deeply connected with the people—Gramsci’s favoured mass—and yet semi-detached from the current class and economic structures of capitalism. In other words, without recourse to a supernatural or transcendent realm, Gramsci is intrigued as to how one’s own “caste” may operate at some remove from the current structures, always with an eye on a very different future. Thus, precisely through being a relic, the clergy provides a glimpse of something different, able to look forward in a way that does not merely replicate the present. It is their backwardness, their lack of touch that enables them to anticipate a different future. That is to say, they act ac-

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<sup>18</sup> If the northerners tend to be from the peasants themselves or artisans, more closely in touch with and therefore respected by the masses, the southern clergy have far less going for them. Landowners, usurers, and subject to the passions for women and money, the priests should come, as far as the peasants are concerned, from their own district so that at least there is some recourse to redress (through families, electoral rights and their openly conjugal life with a woman).



ording to an agenda that is in many respects their own and not “of this world.”

Finally, if their residual status as a “caste” enables the clergy to work as an emergent group, to borrow Raymond Williams’ terms, then they do so through education and not through the Church per se. Gramsci’s focus on education is something Althusser would pursue more fully, namely the wresting of education away from the Church by the bourgeoisie in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. But what the clergy are able to do is work within the context of the educational system in order to carry out their own program, with distinct political aims in mind. It is this that Gramsci admires about the clergy.

## Reformation

Luther and the Reformation stand at the beginning of all modern philosophy and civilization (LFP 1: 365).

Perhaps the greatest surprise of Gramsci’s ecclesiastical curiosity is his abiding fascination with the Protestant Reformation. At times I get the feeling he regrets not being born north of the Alps, that he was not closer to Luther’s Saxony or Calvin’s Geneva. Viscerally I can grasp the appeal of Luther and Calvin: the lumbering and belligerent German, full of his home-brewed beer, feet planted to bear his bulk as he thundered “Here I stand; I can do no other.” Then there is the precise and wide-ranging intellect of Calvin, fleeing the papal apparatchiks in France, undertaking a project no less than the social construction of a whole new world that inspired a generation. I can even forgive Calvin the occasional slip, such as replacing the odd pub with a Bible-reading house: could not the two be undertaken together?

But I grew up in a strict Calvinist household and, after many years of resistance and denial, realised that Calvinism would have to be the pinnacle of all theological systems. Rather than seek to bring Calvinism down in some bitter vendetta, to reiterate the criticisms which see it as the worst form of legalism precisely because the Law is so secondary, it is much more worthwhile to see where the promise of Calvinism



lies.<sup>19</sup> As far as Gramsci is concerned, the southern Italian with Roman Catholicism imprinted in his genes: why would he find the reformers so attractive?

For all his love of the Renaissance in Italy and the rest of Europe, along with its associated developments in French and German philosophy, the problem is that “these are reforms that touch only the upper classes and often only the intellectuals” (PN 2: 244; Q4§75). His interest is Italy, and he envies the northern Europeans the developments subsequent to the Renaissance, their Lutheranism and Calvinism. All that he finds in Italy are half-starts and misdirected efforts, such as those of David Lazzaretti in the middle of the nineteenth century with his “mixture of religious doctrines from times gone by with a good dose of vaguely socialistic maxims, together with generic references to the moral redemption of man” (FSPN: 54; Q25§1; see PN 2: 18–20; Q3§12). A sign of widespread rural discontent (Lazzaretti came from Monte Amiata in the Apennines), without political parties due to the *non expedit* decree, the whole movement is for Gramsci a mark of the spontaneous, popular and subversive tendencies of the peasants. And yet it went nowhere: Lazzaretti was shot as a reactionary by the police under a Left government, and his followers, maintaining that he was Christ on his second trip to earth (usually known as the Second Coming), remained on the slopes of Mount Amiata.

By contrast, the Reformation uplifted the whole of society and transformed it through and through: “In Italy there has never been an intellectual and moral reform involving the popular masses” (PN 2: 243–44; Q4§75).<sup>20</sup> This is the key phrase, “intellectual and moral reform,” and not the putative return to some primitive Christianity that was the explicit agenda of the reformers themselves (Gramsci reserves such primitivism for Gandhi, Tolstoy and St Francis; see PN 3: 58–62; Q6§78). “Intellectual and moral reform” becomes Gramsci’s code for

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<sup>19</sup> See my *Political Grace: The Revolutionary Theology of John Calvin*.

<sup>20</sup> So also: “The Lutheran Reformation and Calvinism created a popular culture, and only in later periods did they create a higher culture; the Italian reformers were sterile in terms of great historical achievements” (PN 2: 142; Q4§3; see also LFP 1: 365).



the Protestant Reformation as a model of reform itself, coming to secular maturity with the French Revolution (see PN 1: 213; Q1§128). He draws the phrase directly from Ernst Renan's book of the same name, in which the Protestant Reformation becomes the paradigm for a transformation of French society. But there is a third interchange of terms, this time the breathtaking alignment of the Protestant Reformation, as intellectual and moral reform, with the communist revolution; or rather, to draw the specific lesson of the last great European mass movement: "Therefore historical mat.<erialism> will have or may have this function, which is not only totalitarian as a conception of the world but also in that it will permeate all of society down to its deepest roots" (PN 2: 244; Q4§75).

I am going to track this extraordinary move, running through his persistent refereeing in favour of the Protestants, to ask whether there are not some problems with his proposal. Time and again Gramsci contrasts Protestants and Roman Catholics, and the Roman Catholics do not come off well in the comparison. To be sure, the Protestants do not emerge unscathed, especially in the United States, but his favouring strikes a curious note, especially in light of his desire for a Reformation in Italy. In what follows, I begin with Gramsci's reflections on the deleterious effects of the Counter-Reformation in Italy, the home of the Holy See itself, and then move on to the direct comparisons between the Roman Catholics and the Protestants.

### Counter-Reformation and Reformation

Like the infamous list of 80 errors of the modern world in the *Syllabus Errorum* of Pope Pius IX (1864), which listed among other items, Protestantism, pantheism, rationalism, the separation of Church and State, liberalism and socialism,<sup>21</sup> Gramsci piles up his own list of

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<sup>21</sup> The temptation to laugh at such a list is always tempered for me by the not so distant memory of the fundamentalists in the Presbyterian Church of Australia (and elsewhere), who came up with an almost identical list, except that they substituted Roman Catholicism for Protestantism and added, for good measure, that the pope also happens to be the anti-Christ.



the errors and missteps of the Counter-Reformation. Of all the glimmers and possibilities in Italy itself, the first stirrings of the Renaissance and the passing of feudalism, and for all the efforts to insist that the so-called Counter-Reformation was not reactionary but one of a series of reforms over the ages (FSPN: 24; Q26§11), he simply observes: “The Counter-Reformation stifled intellectual development” (PN 2: 338; Q5§85).

As for Italy, he identifies two such developments that were to go nowhere: one of Leon Battista Alberti and his nascent bourgeois individual whose prime interest lay in the local commune with little sense of what lay beyond, and the other in Gramsci’s preferred Machiavelli for whom the church became a “deleterious national problem” (PN 2: 338; Q5§85). I am tempted to describe these as political developments, but Gramsci’s concern, especially with Machiavelli, was to identify the reasons why Italy failed to go through the comparable continental shift that took place further north, reaching through all levels of European society. Politically, culturally and intellectually, the Counter-Reformation has much to answer for, as far as Gramsci is concerned.

As for science: in his *Syllabus Errorum*, Pius IX may as well have included modern physics in his list. It is a wonder Galileo did not make it into the *Syllabus*, for he was still the bane of the Vatican, his condemnation lifted only at the close of the twentieth century in a moment of enlightened forward thinking. And Gramsci notes with a mix of dismay and relish the continuing tale of Galileo in his own time.

Roberto Bellarmino (1542–1621 CE), the one whom Gramsci, among many others, regards as the Cardinal who conducted the 1633 trial against Galileo,<sup>22</sup> was finally canonised on 29 June, 1930, and declared Doctor of the Universal Church in 1931, well after Mussolini was in power and Gramsci was in prison (see PN 3: 115–16; Q6§151). Even if the canonisation was as much due to the victory of the Jesuits in the context of internal ecclesiastical in-fighting (see PN 3: 215–16;

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<sup>22</sup> This fascinating tale is far from clear. Bellarmino seems to have interviewed Galileo after the 1616 anti-Copernican decree, but it seems as though he attested in favour of Galileo after the interview, at least if we are to believe Galileo.



Q7§88), as to Bellarmino's defence of Catholicism against detractors such as James VI of Scotland, later James I of England, along with the obligatory miracle that passes by the devil's advocate, Gramsci finds the whole Galileo affair a rather sordid example of the way the Counter-Reformation hindered scientific development in Italy. And if anyone did not submit to the Church's discipline, he was effectively exiled from Italy. By contrast: "Growth of the sciences in Protestant countries or where the direct power of the church was less strong than in Italy" (PN 3: 116; Q6§152).

And then there is the Index itself, the list of books banned from publication and reading by the Roman Catholic Church. The question was not, as we find now in the successor of the Index (curious how it is always Roman Catholics who are in favour of some form of censorship), how much penis or vagina appears in explicit representations of sex, but a whole range of challenges to the supremacy of the Church. In fact, the ban on Galileo's works was in many respects the culmination: "in the condemnation of Galileo the Italian Renaissance came to an end even among the intellectuals" (FSPN: 22; Q17§15). Despite the resistance of the French to the Index, the printing of uncut works by Italian authors in Germany, France and Holland, the sheer effectiveness of the Index in Italy meant the gradual winding down of the Renaissance in that place. As he is wont to do, Gramsci notes that Machiavelli's complete works appeared for the last time in 1554.

The tracks of Gramsci's comparisons between the Protestants and Roman Catholics run along curious paths, from fetishism through opium and gambling to the central theological category of grace itself, the ideological battlefield of the Reformation. Let me begin with fetishism. In an effort to come up with a distinctly political definition of fetishism, rather than economic or psychoanalytic ones, Gramsci puts forward somewhat tentatively the suggestion that it derives from the Roman Catholic Church: "It is natural for this to occur in the Church since, in Italy at least, the toil of centuries that the Vatican has devoted to annihilating any trace of internal democracy and intervention by the faithful in religious activity has been totally successful and this way of thinking has





now become second nature to the believer” (FSPN: 15; Q15§13). Closer to Marx’s fetishism of commodities rather than Freud’s notion of sexual fetishism, Gramsci’s distinctly political take is to argue that once a political body or collective organism—say state, nation or political party—is regarded by the people as extraneous to their own involvement and activity, then it becomes a fetish, a phantom without any real existence. That is, when the people who are actually members of the group in question think of the group itself as something outside their daily lives, that it somehow exists despite and outside themselves as a distinct entity, much like Marx’s commodity, then we have a fetish. And the prime example of this fetishism is the Roman Catholic Church itself, especially in Italy. God then, at least for Roman Catholics, becomes an extension of the same fetishism, “an abstraction of the collective organism” (FSPN: 15; Q15§13).

But what of the Protestants? In contrast to the Roman Catholic desire for an active consent, an identification of the individual with the whole as it is represented by the rulers, in other words the complete absence of any internal democracy—in contrast to all of this, the Protestant churches are built on the need for such democracy, such involvement by believers, even if “any form of intervention from below would splinter the Church” (FSPN: 16; Q15§13). Anathema to the Roman Catholic desire for unity, the actual difference of opinion and involvement of all believers in the Protestant churches is vital to their existence.

As we would expect by now, the Protestants do find themselves in a somewhat better position. Even precursors such as the German Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) have a favourable glow about them. A reformer before the Reformation, proposing that the pope be subject to the Church councils, that there be unity in a divided church, an understanding of Islam based on a common scriptural core, and, just to round out the necessary image of the Renaissance man that he was, he also proposed the concept of infinity and became one of the foundational figures of modern philosophy. It is not that Gramsci is merely reiterating a given position; rather, his wholesale enthusiasm for Cusa flies in the face of a tendency to deflate the Renaissance Cardinal’s contribu-



tion (he comments on an issue of *Nuova Antologia* of 1929). And then, of course, there is this: “It is fair to say that the Lutheran Reformation broke out because Cusa’s reform activity failed: that is, because the church was unable to reform itself from within” (PN 2: 311; Q5§53).

In his perpetual tendency to return to comparisons between Roman Catholics and Protestants, Gramsci is not averse to the occasional theological observation, although with his characteristic twist. He will, at least with some connections that I want to draw across the various notebook entries, move from a discussion of opium and gambling to the question of grace itself. In a curious entry from notebook sixteen, he muses on the origin of Marx’s “opium of the people.” Picking up on Marx’s well-known interest in Balzac, he suggests that the latter’s phrase “opium of the poor” that describes the lottery, makes its way to Marx’s characterisation of religion as “opium of the people” (see FSPN: 55–58; Q16§1). Not without the mediation of Pascal, who dressed up in respectable form the popular notion of religion as a wager (“if there isn’t a God, what does it matter; but if there is, won’t it have been useful to have believed?” (FSPN: 55–58; Q16§1)). Apart from Gramsci’s predilection for such detailed etymological speculation—something I have noted already—what interests me are the comments towards the end of this entry. After noting the Italian penchant for betting, he writes:

There is moreover a close connection between the lottery and religion, wins showing who is among the “elect” or recipients of a particular grace of a Saint or the Madonna. One could make a comparison between the Protestants’ activist conception of grace that provided the spirit of capitalist enterprise with its moral form and the passive and “good-for-nothing” (*lazzaronesca*) conception of grace typical of the Catholic common people. Look at the role Ireland has had in bringing sweepstakes back into the Anglo-Saxon countries and the protests of papers like the *Manchester Guardian* that represent the spirit of the Reformation (FSPN: 58; Q16§1).

Before he can go into this cryptic reflection too far he catches himself: are not Saints and the Madonna distinctly Roman Catholic? Do



the Protestants not gamble as well? No, they don't. And it relates in the end to their concept of grace, the peculiar paradox that predestination generates. One would expect a Roman Catholic quietism or "good-for-nothing" conception of grace to invade the Calvinist consciousness with even more force, but Calvinists do not gamble on God's grace, submitting themselves to a lottery whose result is unknown. They know quite clearly that they are of the elect, and therefore they have the burden of responding to that grace, with frugality, good and hard works and the laicisation of monkish virtues.

I know too well the paradox at the heart of Calvinism: a predestination in which one can do no good except by God's grace, which then becomes the only means to compel one to engage in any form of consistent good work. At the level of popular piety, the paradox slackens and turns into the Calvinist work ethic, a legalistic moral code and a hatred of Roman Catholics, for only half-remembered reasons. Apart from the ban on going to the shops or doing school work on a Sunday, as well as the heated debates over raffles at the Church fete, there is the image of my 92-year old grandfather muttering in his half-Dutch and pointing to the sweepstake notice on the wall: "these Catholics, all they do is gamble and drink." Coming from the Reformed tradition in the Netherlands, finally ensconced in a Dutch retirement home where the English they had used for their last 50 years in Australia began to fade, my nonagenarian grandparents, faculties fully intact, found themselves surrounded by a fair proportion of the large number of Dutch immigrants to Australia who happened to be Roman Catholic. But it gave them something to focus on, people whom they could actually like and dislike, speak to and avoid, curtain half open to keep an eye on the outside, alert and alive for the first time in years. I had come to visit briefly, each time wondering how long these shrinking relics from 1910 and 1911 could go on, and as we sipped on coffee the day before the Melbourne Cup (Australia's premier horse race on the first Tuesday in November), the dining room was festooned with cut-outs of horses, balloons and sundry party gear for the next day. There was no way my grandparents would be at the party,



for that would be just too Roman Catholic—even if they did not place a bet, God forbid.

As children we would watch the summary of weekend horse-racing on the television with no idea as to what was going on, why people would want to spend so much time on horses running in an elongated circle. So much so that I still have never been to the racetrack, whereas Roman Catholics I know, no matter how lapsed, frequent the track to which they went as children. Their memories are of families, including grandparents, later of teenage debauchery, of close friends, and also of the way the various Roman Catholic schools and institutions were funded through the wide-ranging practices of illegal (or “SP”) bookmaking, mostly by the women and mostly on the horses. And there is no let-up. This, from the *Melbourne Age* newspaper on March 30, 2003: “Catholic nuns from a Los Angeles school took donations to the track and won \$US200,000 on six straight winners. ‘Some would call it luck,’ said Sister Mary. ‘I call it a blessing.’”

But it seems to me that Gramsci has identified something that signals the differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics on the question of grace. It is not just that Roman Catholics like to gamble because they are a lower sub-species of homo sapiens, or that they are lazy and cannot help throwing away their earnings,<sup>23</sup> but that it is congruent with a theology of grace in which the Church holds all the cards and the individual remains uncertain and dependent on the Church for that grace: hence the quietism and near fatalism of such a theology of grace.

Almost despite his caution, Gramsci’s etymological foray (I can picture him in a different life as a patient philologist) swings Marx’s “opium of the people” around to become a characterisation of Roman Catholicism. Initially his argument via Pascal, the wager and gambling uses the instinctual knowledge of Roman Catholicism that is part of his

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<sup>23</sup> In a particularly enlightened moment in the Presbyterian Church of Australia, I recall my boss saying to me one Sunday evening aeons ago, “when Protestants outnumbered Catholics in Australia’s history the country made progress, but when Catholics outnumbered Protestants, we went downhill.” The name of this tolerant and broad-minded man of the cloth escapes me these days.



Italian context in order to reflect on religion itself. But then he pulls himself up, the comparison with the Protestants showing how specifically Roman Catholic all the previous discussion about wagers, lotteries, and gambling happened to be.

Gramsci will return to the question of grace, perhaps the key theological issue of the Reformation: “The history of the doctrine of grace can be interesting for examining how Catholicism and Christianity adapted to different historical epochs and different countries” (PN 1: 163; Q1§51). Apart from the various currents within the Roman Catholic Church that I have discussed above, he is drawn to the Calvinist position on grace of which Jansenism then becomes the Roman Catholic version, albeit denounced as a heresy. In fact, like Lefebvre, who despite himself could not resist the regional and heretical appeal of the Jansenists, Gramsci finds in Jansen many of the features of a suppressed reformer, closer to the Calvinists and Protestants more generally, and ethically just a little better than the Jesuits:

The main objection to Pascal’s formulation of the religious problem of the “wager” is that of “intellectual honesty” towards oneself. It would appear that the whole conception of the “wager,” as far as I recall, is closer to Jesuit than to Jansenist ethics, too much of the “merchant’s outlook” etc. (FSPN: 59; Q16§10).

What of Calvinism itself? Without even a nod to Weber, Gramsci draws from German and French sources<sup>24</sup> both the paradox of Calvin’s doctrine of grace and its simultaneous realisation and dissolution in the United States. Thus, in drawing out the ultimate logic of Luther’s “not by law but by grace,” along with “justification by grace through faith,” Calvin argued that human beings can produce no good works by their own means. We are, as the first point of Calvinism would have it, totally depraved through original sin. Therefore, we are thrown entirely before the mercy of God who in his grace deigned to send Jesus Christ to save

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<sup>24</sup> In particular, the translation of Kurt Kaser’s book on the Reformation, *Riforma E Controriforma* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1927 from the German of 1922), as well as André Philip, *Le Problème Ouvrier Aux Etats-Unis* (Paris: Alcan, 1927).



us, or at least some of us (limited atonement). Only through him can we be saved and not through any other means: grace is wholly of God and can in no way be earned.

The paradox of Calvinism is that it leads not to quietism, a resignation before the futility of any human act, awaiting God's grace in his own time. Rather, through the insistence that human beings must respond to God's grace through good works—which are now only the signs of God's grace and not the means of earning grace—Calvinists work the hardest of all. Calvinists therefore become the best capitalists, always willing to put aside religious scruple in order to make a profit, as the Dutch among others showed time and again.

Gramsci's favoured example is, however, the United States, where the paradox of grace works itself out in full. Except that, as Weber was to argue as well, the religious dimension of Calvinism was but a passing phase. It is dissolved in the culture of capitalism, becoming a "lay religion." But just when it seems as though Calvinism may be the ultimate democratic form of religion through its very dissolution, the internal consistency of its doctrine of grace throws up another paradox: predestination. For Calvin, grace may be irresistible and unlimited, but atonement through the death of Jesus Christ is limited only to the elect. Further, those who are to be saved have been predestined so before the creation of the world. As have the damned. God's grace is, in other words restricted to the elect, those predestined to salvation—it may be a democracy of depravity, but it is an aristocracy of salvation.

I must admit that I share Gramsci's fascination with Calvinism, not merely because I grew up in a strict Calvinist household with migrant Dutch parents in the Reformed Churches of Australia, nor even because it is in many respects one of the most consistent and sublime systems of Christian thought. Rather, in many respects Calvinism may be seen as a major precursor to historical materialism itself, cast in the inescapable language of theology and the sacred in the long twilight of feudalism. I want to suggest that part of Gramsci's interest lies in Calvinism's affinity with Marxism, which may now be read as a retooled Calvinism with a temporally rather than ontologically transcendent reference point.



I have taken a different line here from Gramsci's run into the "religion of the Rotary club" (PN 1: 163; Q1§51), not merely because I cannot, like him, stand the Rotary Club. While there is a certain logic to the suggestion that predestination renders Calvinism non-democratic, a doctrine for an industrial elite, an elect aristocracy, it neglects the flip side of the doctrine of election, namely that the role of the elect is not to restrict God's grace to itself but to make it available for all, since you never know who is elect and who is not. To be sure, I have never met any Calvinists who assert that they are of the damned, that Calvin is right but that they missed out. But it seems to me that the notion of predestination, the concern with an advance party of the elect who must never tire in their work for the Kingdom of God, also functions as a precursor to the notion and role of the party in Marxism.

Apart from teasing out the paradoxes of Calvinism, why else is Gramsci fascinated? As we saw, the Protestant Reformation is one of the few movements that have mobilised the masses into a fundamentally different social, intellectual, political and economic practice. And this is precisely what he seeks to do with the Communist Party in Italy, although in a somewhat different vein. Hence the great interest in Machiavelli.

### The Italian Luther

However, in order to get to Machiavelli, I would like to pass through the situation in Italy one more time. And it will turn out that Gramsci's argument concerning the deleterious effect of the Counter-Reformation in Italy is not particularly original. For it echoes the argument of others that Italy's political weaknesses, the instability of its nation state, was due to the absence of a full-scale Protestant Reformation. And this argument, popular in certain circles in Italy, is itself a specific form of the wider valorisation of the Protestant Reformation that Gramsci traces through the works of Ernst Renan, Sorel and Proudhon himself (see FSPN: 25–26; Q14§26)—except that the argument was developed first in a France that lay between the Renaissance and the



French Revolution. In each case, it turns out that the model for reform is a Protestant one, which for Gramsci means “intellectual and moral reform” through the furthest and deepest reaches of society.

In the end, Gramsci is not going to remain with the image of an Italy suffocated under the thick blanket of Roman Catholic reaction, stagnating in a back-water of Europe. Rather, the Vatican finds itself fighting various rear-guard actions against a whole series of efforts at reform, molecular changes within society and among the faithful that the Vatican resists in desperation. In a characteristic effort to identify as many threads as possible, he identifies the key factors in “the religious question in Italy”:

1. the real, effective one, by which intellectual and moral reform movements arise within the mass of the people, both in the passage from orthodox and Jesuitic Catholicism to more liberal religious forms, and as an escape from the confessional camp towards a more modern conception of the world;
2. the differing attitudes of the intellectual groups towards a necessary intellectual and moral reform (FSPN: 27; Q14§26)

As far as Italy is concerned, reform has taken a path that includes the mix of secular liberalism and liberal Catholicism during the Risorgimento; the mix of positivism on the one side and democratic and Masonic anti-clericalism in the period 1870 to 1900; and then modernism and idealist philosophy until the First World War; the political organisation of Catholics until the 1929 Concordat; and finally the working out of the implications of the Concordat itself. At the moment he writes he sees a confluence of both a new type of anti-clericalism and a much greater interest in religious questions by the laity that itself smacks a little too much of Protestantism.

I have paraphrased Gramsci's discussion here, not merely because it brings out the difference between the Protestant Reformation he assumes as a model and the constant reform that was taking place in Italy. The key lies in his statement: “it is undeniable that many things are changing within Catholicism, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy is alarmed





about it, since it is unable to control these molecular transformations” (FSPN: 27; Q14§26). At the same time, Gramsci seeks more than molecular reforms, the incremental shifts of change. Rather—to bring in a term he does not use himself—he also wants molar transformation, a thoroughgoing and wholesale overturning of the current order—capitalism—that would fundamentally reshape culture, society, and economics. And, although he does on one occasion attribute an Italian intellectual reformation to Croce (SPW: 460), his preference for an Italian model is Machiavelli.

The whole complex question of the relationship of Gramsci and Machiavelli is not my task here (Fontana’s useful book has already done that),<sup>25</sup> save to focus on the way Gramsci hold him up as the “Italian Luther.” While Gramsci looked to the Reformation as the last great transformation of all levels of society, his Italian Luther retains one dimension that differs from the Reformation: religion must be subservient to the state of the New Prince (PN 2: 378; Q5§127). But this means that I will finally need to broach the question of hegemony, that most well worn of Gramscian categories.

Gramsci is selective in applying Machiavelli’s guidelines to what he calls the “modern Prince,” but there are two basic points. The first is the need for a reform of religion or world outlook, for which the modern Prince “must and cannot but be the preacher and organiser of intellectual and moral reform” (MP: 139; see PN 2: 150–51; Q4§8). This reform of religion itself provides the basis for a national-popular collective will whose desire is a better and higher form of civilisation. The prescription for moral and intellectual reform looks for all the world like the agenda of the Protestant Reformation, except that it needs to be read in light of the second point, namely “formation of a national-popular collective will of which the modern Prince is at the same time the organiser and active working expression” (MP: 140). The Prince’s very status as a “myth-prince” renders him the first sign of this new collective, which turns into its most potent form in the political party, “that particular party which, at different times and in the different internal relations of the various

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<sup>25</sup> Fontana, *Hegemony and Power*.



nations, aims (and is rationally and historically founded for this end) to found a new type of State” (MP: 146; see PN2: 152; Q4§10; PN 2: 382; Q5§127). For Gramsci, in the same way that Machiavelli becomes, in the rousing conclusion to *The Prince*, the embodiment of the people to whom he has addressed his tract, a political myth such as this can only realise itself if it becomes the ideology, the drive behind and content of the political program of the party.

If religion is a crucial feature of intellectual and moral reform as that is to be wielded by the “modern Prince” in order to bring about social change, then religion is very much part of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony. Two-edged, the theory speaks not only of the difficulty of maintaining a dominant ideological position but also of the means for revolutionary transformation. On the first count, the ruling ideas of an age, to gloss Marx, need constantly to be reasserted: ever new ways have to be found to ensure that they hold onto their somewhat tenuous status as ruling ideas. This much is well-known, and forms the recurrent, popular usage of the term: ideas, beliefs, and feelings, such as the value of the nation-state, nationalism, and patriotism, the value of competition, the inviolability of private property, and the individual person (to which the bulk of the judicial system is devoted), the foundational role of the nuclear family in social organisation and reproduction, the generation of self-esteem by selling one’s labour power in work, the right to render anything for sale, and so on, are not so much givens as items of struggle that need to be reasserted time and again. Hegemony, then, is chronically unstable, a primary zone of class conflict, the need to struggle with opposition and dissent.

The conflictual nature of hegemony will bring Gramsci back to the need for both force and consent in the assertion and maintenance of hegemony. As far as consent itself is concerned, Gramsci refers to an intellectual and moral leadership (*direzione*) that operates primarily through consent and persuasion. Thus a dominant hegemony works by articulating and spreading a specific set of cultural assumptions, beliefs, ways of living and so on that are assumed to be “normal,” accepted by people as the universally valid way of living. Here intellectuals, the “organisers”



of ideology, culture, philosophy, religion, law, and politics are central to the idea and operation of hegemony. Hegemony runs deeply through any social and political formation, for the structures of knowledge and values, the filters through which society acquires form and meaning, are precisely those that are constructed and maintained by the leading class or party. The intellectuals mediate between ruling and subaltern groups and classes, universalising the values of the ruling class through this “organisation of culture.” Leadership, a continuing concern of Gramsci’s along with the role of the intellectual, thus takes place when a particular social class can transform its own ideas into a universally assumed understanding of the world. As Fontana writes, “Hegemony is thus conceived as the vehicle whereby the dominant social groups establish a system of ‘permanent consent’ that legitimates a prevailing social order by encompassing a complex network of mutually reinforcing and interwoven ideas affirmed and articulated by intellectuals” (Fontana 1993: 140).

And the purpose is to indicate how such a situation might be transformed into communism: hegemony is both a tool of analysis and of revolution. But this means that the new Prince must brook no rivals, no possibilities of oppositional hegemony in the construction of the new state. Consent must be at one with the use of the force, the two sides of hegemony. Religion thereby forms a crucial component of consent, falling under the rubric of intellectual and moral leadership (*direzione*). Domination or coercion (*dominio*), especially over against antagonistic groups, is the inescapable obverse. By contrast, those with which the leading group is in alliance and association work together by consent: “The supremacy of a social group is manifested in two ways: as “domination” and as “intellectual and moral leadership.” A social group is dominant over those antagonistic groups it wants to ‘liquidate’ or to subdue even with armed force, and it is leading with respect to those groups that are associated or allied with it.”<sup>26</sup>

These two elements of leadership by consent and coercion emerge in Machiavelli’s image of the centaur:

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<sup>26</sup> Gramsci, cited in Fontana, *Hegemony and Power*, 141.



You should know, then, that there are two ways of contending: one by using laws, the other, force. The first is appropriate for men, the second for animals; but because the former is often ineffective, one must have recourse to the latter. Therefore, a ruler must know well how to imitate beasts as well as employing properly human means. This policy was taught to rulers allegorically by ancient writers: they tell us how Achilles and many other ancient rulers were entrusted to Chiron the centaur, to be raised carefully by him. Having a mentor who was half-beast and half-man signifies that a ruler needs to use both natures, and that one without the other is not effective.<sup>27</sup>

Gramsci comments on this passage:

Another point to be decided and developed is that of the “double perspective” in political action and state life. There are various levels in which the double perspective can be presented, from the most elementary to the most complex, but they can be reduced theoretically to two fundamental levels, corresponding to the double nature of the Machiavellian Centaur, savage and human, force and consent, authority and hegemony, violence and civilization, the individual stage and the universal stage (“Church” and “State”), agitation and propaganda, tactics and strategy, etc. (MP: 161).<sup>28</sup>

The ideal figure, the mix of force and consent, is the figure of Moses in the Hebrew Bible, a.k.a. the “armed prophet.” According to Machiavelli, “all armed prophets succeed whereas unarmed ones fail.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 61.

<sup>28</sup> See also: “Guicciardini’s assertion that two things are absolutely necessary for the life of a state: arms and religion. Guicciardini’s formula can be translated into various other, less drastic formulas: force and consent, coercion and persuasion, state and church, political society and civil society, politics and morals (Croce’s ethicopolitical history), law [*diritto*] and freedom, order and discipline, or, with an implicit judgement of a libertarian flavour, violence and fraud. In any case, in the political conception of the Renaissance, religion was consent, and the church was civil society, the hegemonic apparatus of the ruling group that did not have an apparatus of its own; that is, it did not have its own cultural and intellectual organization, but it felt as if the universal ecclesiastical organization was its own. If it were not for the fact that religion is openly conceived and analysed as an ‘instrumentum regni,’ we would still be in the Middle Ages” (PN 3: 74; Q6§87).

<sup>29</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 21.



And so we are back with the problem of the overwhelmingly religious nature of the Protestant Reformation—“Church” and “State” in terms of the quotation above—and the problems that this poses for Gramsci.

I want to suggest that the way the problem enters Gramsci’s texts is through his analysis of the church-state concordats. Specifically Roman Catholic, they manifest a curious shift I have noted already, whereby Gramsci resists too great a criticism of the Protestants, even when they manifest similar features to the Roman Catholics. In other words, a transference occurs and hapless Roman Catholics take the brunt of his criticisms.

In this case I am interested in the church-state concordats that I have already considered in relation to Gramsci’s discussion of the clergy as caste intellectuals. Whereas earlier I argued that his interest in the caste intellectuals lay in the way they provide a possible model for his notion of the organic intellectual, and indeed in the way the political activity of the Roman Catholic Church through its universities shows how political intervention is possible, Gramsci will finally not be particularly impressed by the concordats. The reason: they create a fundamental division within the state, an interference in the sovereignty of the state (PN 2: 220; Q4§53; see FSPN: 61; Q16§11(ii)), or two equal sovereignties within the same state (see PN 2: 330; Q5§71), the one of the spirit and the other temporal. But in light of his comments on the need for the union of force and consent in the new “Prince” of the party and especially in the construction of a new state, this will hardly provide a formula for such a construction. His concerns run deeper than the specifics of the Roman Catholic Church here, for any allegiance to ends, religious or otherwise, other than the new society will cause instability and eventual failure. Or, to put it in the other key term, the hegemony so crucial to the work of the communist party will be undermined and rendered unworkable.

Hence, in the concordats themselves he sees no redeeming feature. They constitute the “capitulation of the modern state” (PN 2: 220; Q4§53; see FSPN: 61; Q16§11(ii)); the concordat “fundamentally impairs the autonomous character of the sovereignty of the modern state” (PN 2: 220; Q4§53; see FSPN: 62; Q16§11(ii)) by accepting the external



sovereignty of the Vatican, which the state, through the nature of the concordat itself, recognises as superior. Various examples, drawn from the concordat between the Vatican and the fascist government of Italy on February 11, 1929, merely illustrate such a capitulation by the state: marriage laws for Roman Catholics that over-ride those of the state; priests under censure by the Church denied public offices; the removal of the laws that abolished ecclesiastical privilege; and the complete exclusion of the state from Church schools, including many primary and secondary schools that function as recruiting grounds for the priesthood and the various orders (see FSPN: 71; Q16§14). Further, he does little to conceal his astonishment at the extent of the Vatican's financial dealings and of the state's continued support, purportedly in recompense for the relinquishment of any claim for restitution of the Papal States, to the tune of 1.75 billion lire (FSPN: 68–70; Q16§11(ii); see PN 224–25; Q4§53).

I have indulged myself in summarising the various objections to the concordats, partly to show how comprehensive the objections are, but mostly to raise a deeper question. Why, for Gramsci, is the state worth defending? He is, after all, writing about the concordat between the fascist government of Italy and the Vatican, mentioning also the one with the Third Reich. For Gramsci the state and its autonomy are crucial for the political activity of the communist party. Even though the state would eventually wither away under communism, and even though communism was very much an international movement, the state is the vital lever to power; its autonomy ensures the sovereignty of a communist state in the short term. But Gramsci's defence of the modern state's sovereignty is also a logical outcome of his notions of hegemony, as the union of consent and force, and of his development of Machiavelli for whom the hard-won unity of the new state was not something to be relinquished lightly. All of this is still extremely relevant, for while the Regulation School argues for the viability of the state in any contemporary economic and political debate, others, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that the moment of the state, specifically the nation-state under capitalism, has waned in the face of the new permutation of "Empire."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See Robert Boyer, *The Regulation School: A Critical Introduction*, trans. Craig Charney



## Conclusion: Towards a Materialist Criticism of Religion

Alongside the specific exploration and critique of each of the writers I deal with in this book, I also have an underlying concern with a materialist philosophy of religion and indeed a materialist theology itself. The particular points of my discussion of Gramsci I will not reiterate here in any great detail, except where they may contribute to such a philosophy. Let me simply identify those items from Gramsci upon which I draw.

In contrast to the way I have read both Althusser and Lefebvre, where it was necessary to read in the interstices of their polemic for a constructive philosophy of religion, Gramsci has handed me a vast and delectable feast. The sweep of his concerns, from the ecumenical movement, proselytising and the effort to define religion itself, through the intricate internal and external politics of the Roman Catholic Church, the clergy as a constitutive feature of his theory of the role of intellectuals, to the fascination with the Protestant Reformation and Machiavelli, all provide a distinct slant on the question of religion itself that is overwhelmingly political. With Bloch I was interested in the discernment of myth and the political interpretation of sacred texts, and with Benjamin I was taken with the issues of myth and the future and temporal transcendence. My emphasis on Althusser was to locate the philosophical necessity of a theory of religion within his writings, drawing out a few fragments, particularly ideological institutions and myth, of such a theory. Where Althusser does touch on politics, it is notably in his discussion of Machiavelli. With Lefebvre, his cultural and sociological concerns came to the fore, where elements of a philosophy of religion emerge, despite himself, in the areas of everyday life, space, women and in his grab-bag of heresies.

We do not have to scratch too hard to locate the distinctly political agenda in both dimensions of Gramsci's writings that I traced above, namely his ecumenism and the perpetual drive not merely to understand

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(New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), and Michael and Antonio Negri Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).



how things are now, but particularly what lessons and guidelines for the future might be gained for the communist party by considering the gains and setbacks, the possibilities and limits of that global institution, the Roman Catholic Church. In the end, the communists were competing with the Roman Catholics for the hearts and souls of workers and peasants (see SPW: 141, 316, 396). If with Althusser and Lefebvre the “catholicity” of their writings appeared in the tendency to universalise, however unwittingly, in a fashion comparable to the Roman Catholic Church’s assumed singular universality, in Gramsci this catholicity takes on a distinctly ecumenical colour. I did identify certain points where Gramsci also fell into a similar pattern to Althusser and Lefebvre. And I also argued with Althusser and Lefebvre that such a universalising catholicity has distinct gains that a totalising approach may provide, running through from the claims of a materialist philosophy to the question of everyday life. However, it also has the disadvantage of projecting the specific nature of one’s own religious context, one that permeates the very categories of thought itself, onto a global scene onto which such a template fits poorly. This is where Gramsci’s ecumenism provides a way forward, drawing out what is implicit in Lefebvre’s predilection for heresies: in following paths around the singularity that the Roman Catholic notion of catholicity assumes in its definition, in sidestepping the process of exclusion that catholicity assumed in the self-definition of the Church of Rome, Gramsci emerges on the other side with a catholicity that is inclusive rather than exclusive, seeking allies rather than heretics.

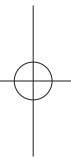
Both the party and religion are forms of world outlook, writes Gramsci, although in light of the previous paragraph, I will now take this statement not as the setting over against each other of mutually exclusive terms, the need for the demise of one in favour of the other. Rather, deep within Gramsci’s reflections on the Church—the generic term is quite deliberate—is a more dialectical relation between party and religion, communism and Christianity.

One signal of this dialectic is his version of ecclesiastical history in which the French Revolution becomes the third step in what I would to





think is an as yet incomplete process. Gramsci identifies three determining events in the history of the Church: the territorial division between the Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Catholic) Churches; the cultural division of the Reformation; and then the liberal-democratic Reform of the French Revolution (see FSPN: 83; Q20§4(ii)). Territory, culture, and politics—except that the crucial step of the French Revolution is that the battle is no longer between the priests, as in the first two stages, but the revolt of the laity against the institution itself. It is “a rupture between shepherd and flock, of the same type as the Reformation but historically more mature because it took place on the terrain of laicism—not priests against priests, but faithful-infidels against priests” (PN 1: 213; Q1§128). I read this statement quite deliberately as the observation that the possibilities for communism and the party itself simply cannot be understood without, indeed are written into, such an ecclesiastical history that is at the same time the political history of Europe. If Gramsci seeks for insights into the party, and communism more generally, from the various dimensions of the Church, then I will want to run in the other direction, exploring the implications for Christianity itself and religion more generally.





## Chapter Six

### The Apostasy of Terry Eagleton

Eagleton has returned to his Roman Catholic roots. Or so the rumour had it at the beginning of the new millennium. It is of course consistent with a rediscovered Irishness, a cultural Roman Catholicism that even the most resolutely secular and atheistic of Irish intellectuals cannot excise without the cultural machinery itself puttering to a standstill (although Perry Anderson would point to his own ascetic Protestant Irish tradition in response).<sup>1</sup> A censored version of Eagleton's Irish Roman Catholic background can be found in the tricky terrain of his memoirs, *The Gatekeeper* (2001), and I will indeed turn to this document later in this chapter. For like Althusser and Lefebvre, who also wrote autobiographies, and even Gramsci's prison letters, I cannot escape (auto)biography entirely.

Yet my concern is not quite with biography. Apart from a critical engagement with Eagleton's theological texts, I will focus on his argument that what the Left needs is a more sophisticated engagement with some of the arguments that come out of the theological tradition rather than the crude caricatures and swift dismissals so commonly found. Although this engagement has in part the need for analytical depth, for a greater philosophical vocabulary, or a recovery of some element of a Europe maligned for everything from the Enlightenment to colonialism, Eagleton's specific agenda, like that of Bloch and Žižek, is that the Left may indeed learn politically from theology, at least in terms of its theoretical concerns in a time of disarray and fragmentation. Over against the other

<sup>1</sup> As Anderson in fact did in a discussion at the "Future of Utopia" conference honouring Fredric Jameson at Duke University, 24–27 April, 2003.



Catholic Marxists, Eagleton vouches without apology for the content of theology itself, for the sophistication of explicitly theological arguments and ideas. And so my concern will be with that content itself, with the viability or otherwise of Eagleton's theological positions; yet I also want to reverse the direction of travel and ask what the implications might be for theology itself.

For Eagleton, theology forms the inclusio of his published work. The would-be theologian of *The New Left Church* (1966) *The Body as Language: Outline of a 'New Left' Theology* (1970), the "Slant" *Manifesto* (1966) and a string of articles in *Slant* itself disappears for more than three decades only to re-emerge after a career as one of the world's leading Left theoreticians and critics in *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (2003). These texts are the focus of what follows, tracing continuities and discontinuities, assessing the arguments themselves, and seeking Eagleton's own contribution to my search for a materialist theology. But there are generous dollops of theology also in the *The Gatekeeper* (2002) and *Figures of Dissent* (2003), and these texts will appear frequently below.<sup>2</sup>

Three zones of Eagleton's writings are relevant for my argument. To begin with, for a writer and a critic whose style is as well-known as his politics, and for one who constantly comments on and analyzes the style of others, the issue of style, of sentence production, is hardly avoidable. Pugnaciously witty, with an eye for the ludicrous, from the local name of Oscar Wilde's Dublin statue ("Quare on the Square" or "Fag on the Crag") to I. A. Richards' hair catching on fire from lightning on a mountaineering expedition, making his political points by one punch line after another, at times flippant, Eagleton seems to write with an ease that escapes most of the rest of us. And the volume and range of work—plays, novels, poetry for the pub, a travel book, journalistic book reviews, and

<sup>2</sup> Since originally writing these lines on Eagleton, he has pumped out (the choice of terminology is deliberate) a string of explicitly theological works: *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003); *Holy Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); *Terry Eagleton Presents: Jesus Christ, the Gospels* (London: Verso, 2007); *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); *The Trouble With Strangers: A Study of Ethics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). However, none of these works add anything particularly new to the basic theological categories Eagleton deploys.



of course the criticism—seems to reflect a writer who has never had a block, who enjoys the act of writing. Yet, those first books on theology, *The New Left Church* and *The Body as Language*, have none of the stylistic flair of his later work. Still recognisably Eagleton, especially the characteristic sliding across a whole range of literature and theoretical material, the sentence production is patiently pedagogical, keen to make the point in the clearest possible manner. Is this the sign of a writer who has yet to find a style, or is there something more about the apostate theologian who gave up the faith and found a new style?

Second, even though he writes at length on a cluster of theological categories that I designate in terms of the inseparable connection between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, the crux of Eagleton's theological recovery in the later works is that christology has a distinct political dynamic which the Left ignores at its own peril. This message, that the lowly and down-trodden will be lifted up, is one that he recycles with minimal alteration from his early theological work—except that now the audience is the cultural and political Left rather than the Roman Catholic Church. Although Eagleton wheels out other theological categories—anthropology, hamatology, sacramental theology, ecclesiology, and even eschatology—he is a distinctly christocentric thinker. But he is also a Roman Catholic thinker, one who cannot and does not particularly wish to excise that stamp from his writing. Thus, the Eucharist can be understood only in terms of the doctrine of transubstantiation, asceticism in terms of celibacy, poverty and obedience, ecclesiology automatically includes the priesthood, and the “christian church” is none other than the Roman Catholic Church. Again, like Althusser and Lefebvre, there is an implicit assumption here that the very specific Roman Catholic features of theology are those of theology generally.

The third zone of Eagleton's work, and one that marks him out from the others in this book, is his historical location in the Catholic Left of the 1960s and 1970s. In the mix of the sixties, from Vatican Two through the Prague Spring and the Civil Rights movement to May '68, the circle around the journal *Slant* generated a heated and very public controversy within and without the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed,



much of *The Body as Language* first appeared in earlier versions in that journal. At the same time that liberation theologies were emerging in Latin America and among African Americans in the United States, *Slant* was causing its own disturbances in the restricted space of England. But what I find intriguing about the Catholic Left and *Slant* is the depth of Eagleton's involvement and his studied and resolute refusal to comment on or recognise that involvement in his later work, especially when many of the same ideas recur.

What, then, of ecclesiology? In going for the engine room of Christianity, for theology itself, rather than the various appurtenances such as its institutional structures, Eagleton appears at first sight to throw off the external trappings for the vital heartbeat of Christianity itself. Apart from what will become obvious—the very specific Roman Catholic nature of Eagleton's theological ruminations—one of the assumptions in my analysis of his work is that theology, at least in the way Eagleton deals with it, cannot dispense with its institutional ties as easily as he might like to think. In fact, it is precisely when he tries to cover his tracks most carefully, especially in relation to his deep involvement in the Catholic Left, that such an implicit ecclesiology peers out from behind Eagleton's texts. And so I will turn in the closing section of this chapter to some easily forgotten writings on ecclesiology buried in the ecstasy of the sixties.

Before I immerse myself in the curious pleasure of Eagleton's texts, I need to explain the sense of "apostasy" that I see there. Contrary to the Roman Catholic sense of apostasy, in which one is never entirely certain of salvation, never entirely confident of being part of the flock, racked with guilt and the need for penance in the face of such uncertainty, I read Eagleton's apostasy in an unapologetically Reformed (Calvinist) sense. If Roman Catholics always face the threat of falling away for good, of stepping outside the fold never to return, for Calvin apostasy is only a temporary phase. If you do escape forever, then you were never of the elect in the first place and could never be described as an apostate. A true apostate, by contrast, is of the elect, is destined for salvation, and that can in no circumstances be denied you, least of all



by the church. Wherever you wander, however many times you deny your own salvation, you will always return, always come back after even the lengthiest bouts, for that salvation is the one certitude of your life. Eagleton is not particularly enamoured with such a doctrine of election or predestination,<sup>3</sup> but I can see a glimmer in his espousal of the paradox of grace (see SV: 109). Although there is nothing inevitable about the future, God can see what he (Eagleton) or you or I will do because God is omniscient. So also, the basis of human freedom is a radical dependency on God, who thereby becomes the necessity of freedom. Our freedom is never the assertion of our own private selves, for that becomes “an absurd parody of genuine freedom” (BL: 7), but it depends on giving ourselves over to God. Paul would call this the complete freedom of being a slave to Christ; Eagleton at an earlier moment called it the life of the saint (BL: 8–9). Although Eagleton prefers Aquinas here, he has actually hit on Calvin’s notion of predestination: neither the caricature of God forcing us to do what he wants, nor even a version of determinism that functions like an “external fatality,” predestination is the awareness after the fact that what looked like a freely chosen act was predetermined by God. A true apostate, then, is one who can see his or her return as God’s will, after the fact, even though the wilful rejection of God seemed like an assertion of freedom. And Eagleton shows all the signs of one of Calvin’s apostates, a returnee, the one who comes home from the journey.

## Wit and the Encyclopaedia, or the Tensions of Style

Hardly “charmless” or “bloodless” (FD: 58), “drably functional” (FD: 126) or given to “the usual flat-footed style of the cultural left” (FD: 51)—Eagleton’s less than sympathetic observations on I. A. Richards, Jonathan Dollimore, and Gerry Smyth—his style is almost effortlessly witty, belonging to the tough, alcohol-fuelled exchange of

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<sup>3</sup> “Though Kierkegaard’s work succeeds in doing the well-nigh impossible, raising Protestantism to the dignity of a universal philosophy, it remains in the end the preserve of the elect” (SV: 51).



the pub rather than the senior common room or the high table of the English university college. But these days, in good Irish fashion—where, Eagleton tells us, between 20% and 30% of the population are teetotallers (II: 12)—he has exchanged the pint glass for the teacup, so you are hardly likely to find him at the local watering hole. But he can still turn a phrase as though he had just downed his thirty-second beer, past the characteristic blackout period and past even that moment of extraordinary lucidity that is apparent only to oneself.

On one level, Eagleton's style fills that most crucial of roles in the Left, namely, polemic against the Right. Indeed, he sees this as one of his main tasks as a "radical" critic: "That is what we are in business for" (FD: ix). In part due to the smaller numbers of Leftists or radicals (and the frequency of these terms in this chapter reflects Eagleton's constant political dichotomies), Eagleton seems to have taken to heart Althusser's description of philosophy as class conflict in theory—except that he would include literary criticism, English, the writing of plays and poetry, and so on. Self-consciously humorous, his wicked licks often have a political barb in them: "A further benefit of this stance [post-structuralism] is that it is mischievously radical in respect of everyone else's opinions, able to unmask the most solemn declarations as mere dishevelled plays of signs, while utterly conservative in every other way. Since it commits you to affirming nothing, it is as injurious as blank ammunition" (LT: 125).

Or is it that wit is a far more effective scourge of one's opponents than merely attempting to bulldoze them in a style that cannot even be called limpid? Or that one can get away with far more through ridicule, that the dig is more effective and readable? Or that, as Andrew Milner once suggested to me, the move from theology into English literature, a characteristically unserious business, also frees Eagleton's style up from the strictures of theology and indeed the dreaded seriousness of the Left.<sup>4</sup> In many respects, *The Truth About the Irish* or *The Gatekeeper*

<sup>4</sup> In fact, Eagleton's depiction of wild sexual romps in the Workers' Socialist League—in which STDs moved more rapidly than political theories—is perhaps wishful thinking, for as more than one person has pointed out to me, you are far more likely to find puritan sectarianism in such groups rather than unrestrained sex.





are exceedingly readable texts (I read both within a couple of hours of obtaining them and enjoyed them immensely), consciously designed as bestsellers. But they are lightweight, something you would write for relaxation, while your mind is in neutral. And then there are the plays: “Saint Oscar” is quite good, but the others less so (SO). The novel, *Scholars and Rebels* (1987) wears on you after a while, with too many in-house allusions and a narrative that thins out even more rapidly than the characters. As for the poetry, when he moves away from the ditties that pepper the plays it is tolerable at best and often woeful.

This is not to say that Eagleton cannot still write seriously or deeply, as the best essays in the *Figures of Dissent* collection attest, such as those on Lukács or Žižek, or the masterly tragedy book, *Sweet Violence*. But what is noticeable about Eagleton’s writing is that the earlier one goes, say to the essays collected in *Against the Grain* from 1975 to 1985 (AG), and to the monographs written during this time, such as *Criticism and Ideology* (CI), is that they become much more self-consciously serious and convoluted. Or rather, to put it in chronological perspective, as he continues to write, Eagleton’s texts become more relaxed, taking his own writing less seriously. Seen from the perspective of of these later texts, the earlier ones threaten to break out every now and then, the moment of humour brought to bear on a pressing theoretical or political point, as in the parody that begins his essay on Fredric Jameson’s style (AG: 65).

Yet in these earlier screeds, I can go for pages, entire chapters and essays and the humour is as rare as sunlight in a rainforest, buried in the political urgency and at times dense theoretical points that Eagleton needs to make. And so, by the time I finally tracked down copies of *The Body as Language* (1970)<sup>5</sup> and *The New Left Church* (1966)—strangely

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<sup>5</sup> In my increasingly desperate search for this shortish book, I even inquired of Eagleton himself, only to be told that when he came across copies he burned them. John Milbank has a copy, Ken Surin informed me, but Milbank was a little cagey about letting it out of his grasp. “It’s not very good,” he told me when we ran into each other in Toronto. Finally, after futile book searches across the planet and even off it by professionals who stake their lives and livelihoods on finding texts like this, one materialised, mysteriously, in Monash University library. It had not been there in 2000 when I first searched for it, and now, out of print, it appeared in its light blue cover.



absent from the publisher's blurbs of later books that list previous publications—and having read a good deal of the other Eagleton before then, the patient pedagogical style of these very early monographs left me nonplussed and in a state of profound ataraxia. Flat-footed, one might say, certainly plodding and even, dare I say it, even bloodless and a little charmless.

So, what am I to make of this strange and oddly pious Eagleton? A deathly seriousness pervades these short early texts, and I have been able to detect one or perhaps two moments of light relief, a turn of phrase that promises even the smallest shard of mirth.<sup>6</sup> But I want to suggest that this is not merely the first effort of a young scholar to establish his credentials, to show that he can actually think and write; rather, it has much more to do with the content, the discipline of theology itself. For talk about God—theo-logos—is not noted for generating uncontrollable laughter or gut-busting mirth. One does not normally turn to a *summa theologica* for a killer joke or two to tell at the party tonight. Theology is a serious business and this gravity it shares with Christian liturgy and the Church in general. Apart from the innocent anecdote that may elicit a smile or two at the beginning of a sermon or homily, the prayers of confession, approach, and supplication are not the moment to slip in a joke, nor is the high point of a Eucharist an inherently amusing affair, nor does one usually find a dirty ditty in the hymn-book.

I guess this was one of my downfalls when I was for my sins a religious professional. I found that the gravity of the whole business was an albatross around all our necks. I could not help a perpetual series of jokes, sly observations about a hymn or two, a wicked grin as a I broke the bread and poured the wine. Of course, the vast number of young

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<sup>6</sup> “If my local MP visits me while I’m hospital or when I attain the age of 104 or whatever, what is of primary importance isn’t that he has a good bedside manner or can deal with the foibles of old folks, but the fact that he is symbolically representing the community’s interest in me. Naturally it helps if he is humane enough not to sit on my injured foot, but this humanity doesn’t in itself constitute the substantial meaning of the visit” (BL: 89; PL: 16). Or, “The Queen of England, despite the fact that her interest in human life seems to extend only fractionally beyond racehorses and corgis . . .” (BL: 90; PL: 16).



people over whom I held some sort of jurisdiction loved it, but they were the ones who dubbed me “Irreverend.” And on this matter the older people agreed. For God is an exceedingly serious being, requiring his subjects to speak very slowly and deeply, with any enthusiasm or intonation carefully excised through an inordinately long and intense period of training for the ministry. Any jocular note was outright irreverence, bordering on blasphemy and a sign for the discerning that one had begun the slide towards unbelief.

For all his desire to bring together Roman Catholicism and Marxism, Eagleton is in *The Body as Language* and *The New Left Church* very much part of the Church, adhering to all its major points of doctrine. And it is with the overt professions of faith, the summoning up of a christian (always lower case) viewpoint, that style merges into content. A few of the more glaring passages:

The truth that the bread becomes the body of Christ is then the truth that the physical world, progressively transfigured by man under Christ's lordship of creation, can become the language of human encounter without simultaneously intervening between men as a source of alienation and division (BL: 39–40; see also LRT2: 29).

In the moment of his historical death, Christ projected himself beyond the limits of history into the future: in this sense, as the risen man in heaven, he incarnates the death of history itself. To receive him in the eucharist, therefore, is to grasp the ultimate frontier of human experience—the end of history, one's own personal death—in order to transcend that threshold, within the movement of Christ's transitus, into eternal life (BL: 47; see also LRT2: 31).

Since the resurrection, the meaning of human community has been Christ. Whenever two or three are gathered together, in a pub or discussion group or works committee, Christ is the ground of their communication, the living principle of their community. Christ assured us that whenever a genuine act of human communication and thus of community took place he would be involved in it: when we love each other we love him (NLC: 142).



However, before I subject the theological content of both the early and late Eagleton to sustained scrutiny, I want to return to style for a moment. Whereas the issue of humour brings forth a sharp difference between the serious theological writer and the pugnaciously witty radical critic, there is another feature that runs completely against the break I have traced above.

One element of Eagleton's style that is consistent from even his earliest work, parts of which may be traced back into the mid-sixties in the journal *Slant*, is a perpetual gliding from one reference to another. One has the feeling of pushing against an encyclopaedic weight as almost every paragraph brings yet another comparison, another topic that is roped into the general line of argument. At times they seem to function more like one discursus after another, a connection, a possibility of applying an insight to something else that is on his mind in the process of writing itself. This writerly act can be disconcerting at times, especially when I am interested in the topic itself and not, say, how one might apply it to an aspect of English literature. For instance, in *The New Left Church* he picks up points from William Golding, Ibsen, Arthur Miller, Dostoevsky, Graham Greene, T.S. Eliot and George Eliot, all while discussing the intensity and martyrdom of christian commitment (NLC: 2–9). Or in *The Body as Language* he runs through Marshall McLuhan, Roland Barthes, Mallarmé's symbolist poetry, Wittgenstein and the still influential, in England at least, educational psychologist Basil Bernstein, all in a few pages (BL: 15–18). At other times, when this feature of his style works much better, the bits and pieces come together to broaden and reinforce a point that Eagleton is keen to make as universal as possible. Thus, in the closing chapter of *Sweet Violence*, to which I will return later, he makes a direct move to reinvigorate debates on the Left by means of theology itself. Many of the arguments he makes here, especially the reversal of the fortunes of the lowly and outcast in certain strains of Christian thought, he draws from his earlier work on theology. But this time he sweeps broadly to include the anthropological point about the scapegoat, Horkheimer and Adorno, Albert Camus, the classical Greek *pharmakos*, Antigone, King Lear, Macbeth, Oedipus, Nathaniel



Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Dostoevsky, Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* or *The Ambassadors*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Lacan, Benjamin, Kafka, and Thomas Mann's hedgehog. I am not sure if I have listed everything in this one chapter alone, but you get the idea all the same.

The concern that emerges here with *Sweet Violence* is not one that we find in the early theological works. The encyclopaedic raiding is similar, the effortless skimming that threatens to avoid depth in the pleasure of writing itself, but in the very style a tension emerges between the specificity of the Christian tradition and a desire to say something a little more global. While he derides the postmodern concern with the detail of anything but one's own tradition, and while all of his references come unapologetically from that tradition (see the sample list above), the effort to provide so many comparisons indicates a desire to overcome the universal claims of Christianity that were so much to the fore in the theological texts. While Christianity has something valuable to say, it is but one feature among many in *Sweet Violence*. Christianity may no longer have the singular universality to which he was once committed, yet the tradition of Western thought is one that he almost militantly champions. This nervousness and tension is one that I share in this book, for each of the writers with whom I deal, from Althusser to Žižek, is unavoidably European, even Eurocentric. And yet the fashionable ban on what is so obviously a specific and particular tradition is one that I also resist.

Simultaneously straining against each other and crashing back together, these two elements of Eagleton's style—the vast gulf between serious theology and polemical wit over against the piling up of references—will manifest themselves in the content of his writings, especially the theological ones, in so many ways. To put it slightly differently, the possibilities and limits of both his style and the content of his theological writings themselves come out of his own theological tradition.

And that tradition is Roman Catholic. Thus far I have used the broader term “Christianity,” and Eagleton has a liking for the term as well, often in the lower case. But his work, like the others in this book, is not merely Christian but Roman Catholic. The stylistic tension I have laid out above is one that comes from that particular form of



Christianity, with its own history of doctrine and ecclesiology. If at an earlier moment he works consciously within that tradition, making the universal claims endemic to the whole notion of ‘catholic’ that should by now be utterly familiar, elsewhere, especially in the later writings, the global series of references and the effort to subsume Christianity within that broader series is also very much part of Roman Catholic thought. It is this that I want to dub the “catholicity” of Eagleton’s writings, which might be described as seeing the hand of God in the most unlikely of places. The remotest tribal group in, say, Tierra del Fuego or the Matto Grosso, will have gained a glimpse of God at work in their own world, which then becomes the point at which Roman Catholics can make contact and show how Christianity completes what they already know. Karl Rahner’s famous notion of the “anonymous Christian” is perhaps the most explicit expression of such a doctrine, but it is an extraordinarily handy tool in any missionary endeavour.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, in Protestant thought, especially the Calvinist variety with which I am so enamoured, there is absolutely nothing of a redeeming nature about any line of thought outside Calvinism itself (the doctrine of total depravity). Without God we have not a hope in hell, or anywhere else for that matter, of saying, doing or discovering anything worthwhile.

## Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis

I have already slipped into the explicitly theological content, where

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<sup>7</sup> For this reason, Eagleton is simply wrong in his comments on Protestantism: “Even if there is some sort of order in the world, it may be fitful and ambiguous, its ordinances both coercive and inscrutable. Kafka’s fiction is the *locus classicus* of this double bind, but it can be found more generally in Protestantism and the idea of the *Deus absconditus*, in the vision of men and women groping among the semi-legible tokens of a darkened world for an assurance of salvation which is forever denied them” (SV: 148). “No doubt it is almost impossible for us now to recapture the imaginative excitement felt by those reared on a diet of tragedy, elegy and homily at the emergence of a form [the novel] which seemed to find the commonplace and quotidian extraordinarily engrossing, assuming in its Protestant manner that spiritual dramas were hidden behind every shop front and under every frock coat” (SV: 181). “For the Protestant puritan, moving fearfully in darkness amidst fragments of revelation, God is just but utterly inscrutable” (SV: 210).



I will want to interrogate what turns out to be, yet again, a glut of theological material in what is at times referred to as the “committee” of Terry Eagleton. Given that the later Eagleton is so much better known, so widely read, even by people who work in the more arcane disciplines such as biblical studies,<sup>8</sup> I begin with that material, winding my way back to the earlier writings from the time of *Slant*. And what emerges from these theological scratchings is a continuous search for the integration of orthodoxy and orthopraxis, particularly through the node of christology.

At one level, Eagleton is an orthodox theological thinker, interested in the central features of Christian theology rather than the heterodox currents that so enamoured Ernst Bloch or Henri Lefebvre. Yet it is not an orthodoxy of a liberal or conservative type: “being ‘subjected’ to an orthodoxy of humane belief and behaviour is rather preferable to being a heterodox thug. Feminism is not an orthodoxy in Nepal, and more’s the pity” (FD: 139). Even here, orthopraxis is never far from the scene—he writes of “belief and behaviour”—when Eagleton’s text turns, as it does with increasing frequency in the early years of the new millennium, to theology itself. In fact, orthopraxis has a much longer life in Eagleton’s work, persisting when he shed theology with only the barest of seemly haste in the early 1970s. For the need to be conscious of one’s acts, the criticism of the ravages of capitalism and the urgent need to do something about it, engage in “action” as it is so routinely called, is inescapably a question of orthopraxis. Dealing justly, overcoming exploitation, the desire for a society in which Marx’s old slogan—from each according to their ability, to each according to their need—is not an impossible economic dream but starts to become reality: all of these come into the realm of orthopraxis.

But the coupling of orthodoxy and orthopraxis, indeed when the latter becomes more important than the former, is one of the abiding features of Roman Catholicism. To be sure, Protestantism also cannot

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<sup>8</sup> I am by no means the first. See, for instance, Gale Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) and Norman K. Gottwald, “Social Class and Ideology in Isaiah 40–55: An Eagletonian Reading,” *Semeia* 59 (1992): 43–57.



do without either one of the pair: for Calvin, the only viable response to God's grace was good works. Yet it still means that good works are necessarily secondary: extremely important, never to be shirked, inseparable from the Christian life, but logically secondary. In fact, the polemic of the reformers' slogan, *non sub lege sed sub gratia*, not by Law but by grace, was aimed directly at the Roman Catholic Church. Taking up Paul's distinction, which he found in the tension between the Old Testament and the New, they applied it in a breathtaking moment of hermeneutical license to the Roman Church: like the realm of the Law in the Old Testament with its stifling priesthood and cultus, the Roman Catholics had fallen into the worst of legalism, which rendered good works, orthopraxis, the prerequisite for salvation and therefore heaven. Hence the extremity of the response: grace is temporally and logically prior. One can attain salvation only by means of God's grace and never through the Law. Of course, the more intelligent of the reformers and the Roman Catholics realised not only that that they were speaking the same language, emphasising one pole over against the other, and they also knew that the Law was itself a means of grace just as grace was inconceivable without the Law, as does Eagleton when he steps out of his christianised reading of the Hebrew Bible (see SV: 166). But one's worst enemy is always the one who shares the same house. There is nothing quite like the opponent who is closest to yourself, the one who should really be an ally but turns out to be your mortal enemy. A barb across the hallway, the curse in the kitchen, the all-out argument over a drink in the lounge-room; open warfare in the same domain is always the most bitter. Or, as Lenin was fond of quoting: God save us from our friends, from our enemies we shall save ourselves.

The paradox of Protestantism, especially Calvinism, is that the relegation of the Law to an also-ran means that it comes back with a vengeance. And so Calvinists, Puritans, and other sundry Reformed groups have more than often become the most legalistic of all, with a swarm of regulations, statutes, and stipulations that become the hallmark of adherence, rather than the freedom of grace itself. In this respect, the





Roman Catholic insistence on the inseparability, on the logical equality of the Law and Grace, of orthopraxis and orthodoxy, shows through in Eagleton's work. For he is not ignorant of the subtleties of theology, whose value he has increasingly asserted, nor is he lacking intellectually, even if he is unaware of the depth to which orthopraxis permeates his work.

If orthopraxis is not quite the same thing as the Law, it does rely upon the Law to set its agenda, to provide the guidelines for the way in which one should act. It also allows one to take the moral high road, of which Eagleton for all his awareness of such a path's pitfalls, takes without apology. The theological notion of forgiveness that has re-entered his work of late provides both a recovery should one slip from time to time but also an extraordinary political strategy to which I will return a little later. Before considering Eagleton's orthodoxy a more closely—both the favoured territory of my indelible Protestantism but also a mode of delayed satisfaction that comes from the same extraordinary way of life—a few comments on his orthopraxis.

I have not set myself what is by any mode of reckoning a hard task, for Eagleton's orthopraxis is not difficult to spot. Not even content to argue, like Jameson, that there is a distinct political role for intellectuals in the development of a Marxist culture, a non-synchronous cultural leap forward that may anticipate a socialist society for which the realm of economy has a long way to go, Eagleton insists on the limited role of writing, intellectuals and culture in general. In the end, the pressing questions are not the intricacies of literary criticism, or some clever turn of critical theory, but global child slavery, systemic economic exploitation, chronic militarism, the imperialism of the United States and the widespread depredations of capitalism. Things are dreadfully wrong, and rather than throw his hands up in desperate resignation, he insists on the need not only to name what is wrong but also to do your best to overthrow the system that relies on such injustice in order to function.

At least he is no hypocrite, a vice for which he castigates other Left critics, having thrown himself into the daily action of the International



Socialists and then the Workers' Socialist League in the 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>9</sup> Although the image is incongruously quaint—the Warton Professor of English at Oxford handing out leaflets at a local factory at the pre-dawn shift change or selling a socialist newspaper on the footpath—he is not someone to speak without acting. But he will target others on the Left for resigned inertia in the face of what appears to be an unstoppable juggernaut. Thus, for all her sharp criticisms of First World post-colonial academics, or his central role in the intellectual Left of England and the emergence of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, even luminaries such as Gayatri Spivak and Stuart Hall do not escape criticism. If he hands out to Spivak a devastating criticism of her resignation, her ensconcement within one of the most prestigious institutions in the United States, her lack of political activism and her wilfully chaotic and opaque style (FD: 158–67), then Hall's five decades or so of political activism are limited to media interventions in the context of the middle class—in the context of which, Eagleton comments to Hall's credit, he has not lost his warmth and geniality—and hardly anything in the realm of proletarian politics (FD: 207–15).

In response to those who feel that revolution is impossible now, he cites time and again the mass revolts in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s. Although the result is hardly what any socialist would like—the spread of robber-baron capitalism into the former Eastern Bloc—the possibility, Eagleton insists, may emerge suddenly and without warning, like a thief in the night. If there is an eschatological note to the way I have cast Eagleton, in whose work the word “revolution” is as common as the curiously British English “a spot of,” if there is a distinctly New Testament parousia just around the corner, then this is largely to his credit; for it seems to me that the Left is poorer for its disavowal of eschatology, which cannot be understood without the Hebrew Bible. Not so much the end of time, which the use of a Greek word for a distinctly Hebrew

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<sup>9</sup> Eagleton neglects to mention the names of these organisations and the fact that he was in two of them rather than the one about which he writes in his memoir. Thanks to Andrew Milner for pointing this out to me.



notion exacerbates, eschatology is more about the transition from difficulty, oppression and pain to a time of peace and social well-being. Although the twin beasts of messianism and apocalyptic always crouch at the door—Eagleton is in fact guilty of a little too much messianism for his own political good—eschatology, which may be understood as a temporalised transcendence, has not had an advocate in socialist and communist circles since the work of Georges Sorel almost a century ago.

I will dwell longer in the tents of eschatology when I come to the conclusion of this book, but I have already broached the whole domain of his orthodoxy. Rather than gradually work my way through, keeping the object hidden beneath a carefully draped cloth, only to whip it off and cry, “My God! Look! Eagleton’s a Roman Catholic after all,” I will lay the items out in broad daylight. Actually, it is rather difficult to avoid such a conclusion from the moment I mention theological motifs like asceticism, celibacy, sacraments, and the priesthood, communal activity and helping one’s neighbour rather than a chronically privatised matter of belief, let alone the overwhelming feel that Christianity is as much about the continuity of an institution—the most enduring of institutions that we know, Eagleton points out—as about individual belief. And these are items from the late Eagleton, who is quite conscious and proud of his Roman Catholic background. There are other items too, such as forgiveness, humility and justice that are not so recognisably Roman Catholic on their own, but in the mix of his theological reflections cannot but be so. And then in the earlier writings we find that the eucharist involves nothing else than the doctrine of transubstantiation, or that the ministry can only be seen as the priesthood, that there is a distinct tradition of Roman Catholic social teaching that diminishes itself by not engaging with Marxism.

If all I want to do is argue that Eagleton is a Roman Catholic thinker, then there is nothing much to say. But what interests me about his theological work, and by implication his wider work, is how orthodox it is. What can be gained from such an orthodoxy and specificity? And how does it relate to his radical politics?



## Asceticism

Let me begin with his defence of asceticism. The criticisms of asceticism—that it is world-denying, dualist, the domain of men in rejection of women and children, that it leads to its own obsessions and excesses (in the churches too often of alcohol and young boys), that it smacks of a puritanism of which we are well rid—are so well-worn and reiterated in such a crude fashion that one wonders if anyone knows what the word means any more. For Eagleton, asceticism, in the very traditional Roman Catholic form of the vows of celibacy, chastity and poverty, is *also* about the criticism of injustice and self-indulgence, explicitly or implicitly. In denying the world as it is, ascetics actually hold out for a better world, the political kingdom rather than the kingdom of heaven, “concerned with future transformation rather than present self-loathing” (FD: 124). Too often spiritualised, asceticism can become a refusal of the command “consume!” within capitalism, the generation of ever-greater needs by an economic system that must expand, in both new geographical markets and the generation of new needs and turnovers in already saturated markets, if it is to survive.

In *The Body as Language* such asceticism becomes the mark of the priest and “the revolutionary leader in the mountains of Columbia or the jungles of South Vietnam” (BL: 91), both of whom take on the eschatological vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience in order, paradoxically, to bring about that which they deny—a world of plenty. More than thirty years later, in the memoirs, this reading of the other, political side of asceticism turns the enclosed Carmelite nuns in his home town of Salford into something of an implicit and contradictory political cell: communists and radical separatists despite themselves, they symbolically denounced the systemic oppression and poverty of industrial towns like Salford. Their asceticism and implacable otherworldliness becomes an “acknowledgement of the wretchedness of human history, which they would no doubt have called the sinfulness of the world, and were thus the reverse of the bright-eyed modernizers” (GK: 14). But how is their asceticism political in any way apart from contradiction and implication?



Eagleton suggests that by their extreme self-abandonment they symbolise the extent and depth of the change required in order to render a just world.

I must confess that I cannot find much to retrieve from the safety valve of female orders in the Roman Catholic Church, although Eagleton does his best. Simultaneously recognising and shunting to one side any aspirations for women within the Church, the hierarchy of the Church thereby conveniently absorbs and dissipates, as Gramsci observed, a deep desire for reform. My own asceticism is a much more Protestant one, generalised away from the priesthood and religious orders in the fashion that Weber outlined so well. No longer appropriate to late capitalism, in its very obsolescence such a Protestant asceticism becomes a criticism of capitalism itself: not in terms of the need to work hard and save now for plenty later, but in the ascetic refusal to engage in the first place, to step out of the circle, however partial and momentary that might be.

I suspect that Eagleton's reappropriation of asceticism is in part a reaction to the profound influence and continued discussion of Weber's famous work on the Protestant ethic. In a grudging note, he comments that the only sustained tradition of theological questions within social theory turns on Weber's study (see SV: xvii). What he wants to introduce in his own way is a much wider consideration of other theological items, which happen to have a distinctly Roman Catholic flavour. But in his rush to counter the caricature of asceticism as some life-denying and world-defying creed, a refusal of enjoyment and pleasure in one's own life and company of others, he neglects to point out that asceticism generates its own pleasure, more *jouissance* than plain gratification. For the attraction of asceticism is not only the appeal of martyrdom, of anticipating one's death by living in the service of others, in a conscious and somewhat resilient manner, but also of its much deeper pleasure that works only through pain and self-denial.

### Evil and the Humble Virtues

Asceticism, however, does operate with a particular species of dual-



ism in which the world as the domain of evil must be resisted and denied, especially one's own body. Of course, there are other strains within Christian thought that dwell with bodily and sexual pleasure—Eagleton's example is sex itself as a model for the union of Christ and his people (FD: 124; BL: 29). But I want to suggest that the connection between Eagleton's all too cryptic comments—as he slips from one topic to the other—on asceticism and evil lies in the realm of politics and economics, that the world in many respects is evil, especially in the socio-economic register of capitalism. Thus, he commends Norberto Bobbio for not being afraid to broach the question of evil itself, “demanded as it is by the monstrosities of the century through which he lived almost from one end to the other” (FD: 118–19).<sup>10</sup> Neither the negation nor absence of good, as some forms of traditional theology would have it, nor even the instrumental and purposeful purges of a Hitler, the quintessence of evil lies in its intrinsic nature. It has no purpose or end apart from itself, is as non-functional as good, God, art, creation or humanity. Eagleton's favoured examples are the Shoah, or Holocaust, and the devil (SV: 254–56). Without motive or rational meaning, the Jews, gypsies, gays, and others in the final solution were subjected to pointless torture and humiliation, transported at great expense across Europe only to be murdered en masse. Similarly, the devil performs evil for its own sake, an agent of motiveless pain and destruction. The central term that Eagleton himself does not seem to want to name is theodicy, the traditional three-way contradiction between God's goodness, justice, and omnipotence. And the problem for theodicy is precisely the sort of gratuitous suffering, the absolutely purposeless evil that exists for its own sake. I can agree with Eagleton that the value of a figure like the devil is

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<sup>10</sup> I wonder at Eagleton's assertion that Norberto Bobbio is one of the few who dares to use the word “evil” itself. In fact, the move has become something of a commonplace: I think of the volume *Radical Evil*. Edited by Joan Copjec, where Kant's own reflections on evil are revisited from the top of the last century's massive piles of corpses. See Joan Copjec, ed., *Radical Evil* (London: Verso, 1996). Or Lacan's reflections on evil in his *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Dennis Porter, vol. VII, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan* (London: Routledge, 1992)), let alone the move of liberation theology to consider evil and sin in political and structural terms that has influenced so much theology in the West.



that he reminds us of the positive, palpable nature of evil, that it is not merely the absence of God or goodness; or even that when middle class values such as thrift, prudence, temperance and sexual repression dominate, the devil becomes much more enticing and alluring, the “flipside of suburbia” (FD: 21). But I am not sure that meaningless evil is the end run of any theological consideration of evil itself. Is not the instrumental reason, charted so well by Horkheimer and Adorno, that he so quickly dismisses also inherently evil? And I think here not of the calculated and malicious individual act, say running over your former spouse’s cat or sending an anthrax-looking white powder in the mail to a personal enemy. There are a host of blood-soaked examples, such as the depredations of imperialism, both of an older colonial and neo-colonial age, or the necessary exploitation by which capitalism itself operates, or the long history of the oppression of and assault on women, let alone the Holocaust which is only the most widely-known and commented-upon of genocidal and racist acts. Is this not even more sinister than evil for its own sake? The devil himself in traditional Christian theology engages in his campaigns of mayhem and disruption precisely for the sake of world domination. He knows he cannot win, but he will give it a damn good try all the same.

Yet the political and economic notion of evil, central to the work of liberation theologians, is something I would want to include in any materialist theology, for it reminds us for the need both to name evil unequivocally and remain conscious of the massive forces arrayed on its side. I will return to the inherent dualism in such a position in a moment, but first the curious psychoanalytic turn of Eagleton’s argument:

The demonic are those who sense some frightful non-being at the root of their identity, and who find this sublime chaos embodied in a particular figure, whether Jew, woman, homosexual or foreigner. Exterminating this otherness then becomes the only way of convincing yourself that you exist. Only in the obscene enjoyment of dismembering others can you plug the gap in your own being, warding off the threat of non-being by creating even more of the stuff around you. . . . The damned cannot



relinquish their torment because it is bound up with their *jouissance*, cannot escape the brutal sadism of the Law because this is just what they desire. And this is why they are in despair. But since we all desire the cruelty of the Law, at least if Freud is to be credited, evil of this kind is at once gratifyingly rare and exceedingly commonplace (FD: 119–20; see SV: 256–58).

Like Irigaray, who argues that Lacan is absolutely correct as far as describing the status quo is concerned, but fails to articulate any possibility of change, Eagleton has here enlisted psychoanalysis as an astute description of the nature of evil. Elsewhere he comments on the tension in Žižek's work between his political dissent and "chirpy wit" on the one hand, and the thoroughly pessimistic view of human life that he peddles with unceasing enthusiasm on the other (FD: 205–6). There is, as I will explore in the next chapter, a contradiction at the heart of Žižek's texts between his dialectical Lacanianism with its ban on utopia and the Leninist program he vociferously pursues—except that Eagleton does not quite put it this way. Rather, the Lacanian Real, that central category of Žižek's thought, is for Eagleton "a psychoanalytic version of Original Sin" (FD: 205), the *felix culpa* or fortunate fall. He can do this via Schelling, on whom Žižek writes at length, for in Schelling's work that which allows God to be God is that which is expelled, the foreign body at the core of his being—that is, Creation—that makes him who he is, and all of his creation too for that matter. In fact, for Eagleton it is precisely Žižek's anecdotal wit that is the sign and concealment of the obscene vision of humanity, which thereby becomes the excluded item that constitutes Žižek's style in the first place.

Psychoanalysis, then, particularly Lacan's version of it, becomes for Eagleton a way of speaking about evil. Thus, the non-being, or gap or otherness—for Lacan the Real—that one wishes to exterminate or fill becomes what makes us who we are: evil. Which is another way of saying that Eagleton subscribes to a rather conventional theological anthropology: human nature is by definition fallen nature. It is just that Lacan provides another way of describing, alongside Paul who becomes the first psychoanalyst, such a fallen humanity. The Paul Eagleton likes is





the one in Romans, where he ponders the paradoxes of the law (see SV: 150; Žižek and Badiou will develop this much more fully). The law, for Paul, is not what cuts off sin and the desire to sin, what holds us from falling into the morass of sin. Rather, the law generates the knowledge and desire for sin in the first place (Eagleton quotes Romans 7:7),<sup>11</sup> which Eagleton then reads in Lacanian terms as the taboo on which the law is based, the excess that enables the law to be what it is. What he neglects to notice is that in Paul's argument this means that the Jews, those who have been recipients of the law, have a far greater responsibility since they are the ones who know what sin is. But in this distinctly Calvinist moment (total depravity),<sup>12</sup> Eagleton suggests that there is no way out of this mess by our own devices, since we are trapped in the vicious circle of the law itself: *jouissance* is then the need to transgress the law, a transgression on which the law itself is based, in order to savour the punishment that follows. One's ultimate obedience is to transgress; the sadistic law demands this obedience and yet punishes us for that obedience.<sup>13</sup>

Eagleton might have enlisted Ezekiel 20: 25–26 to support his argument: “Moreover I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not have life; and I defiled them through their very gifts in making them offer by fire all their first-born, that I might horrify them; I did it that they might know that I am Yahweh.” It is a logic of taking the people's sins to their extreme—a little like smoking to excess in order to give up—but in doing so, the whole argument of

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<sup>11</sup> “If it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet’” (Romans 7:7).

<sup>12</sup> “And before the infinite, as every good Protestant knows, we are always in the wrong” (SV: 52).

<sup>13</sup> “The Law is not in the least averse to our delight, so long as it is the pleasure we pluck from allowing its death-dealing force to shatter us erotically to pieces. It is tender for our fulfilment, ordering us to reap morbid gratification from destroying ourselves; and the more guilt this self-odium breeds in us, the more we clamour for the Law to chastise us and so deepen our pleasure. Like all effective authorities, the Law good-heartedly encourages the participation of its subjects. In admirably paternalist spirit, it wishes us to take a hand in the business of torturing ourselves, work all by ourselves, make it appear that our self-undoing is our own doing, so that it may accomplish its ends all the more successfully” (SV: 269).



Ezekiel 20, with its litany of Israel's sinful past and wilful disobedience, shears off and shatters. The people are trapped: until now they had ordinances and statutes from Yahweh against which they rebelled and for which they would be punished. But now Yahweh has spared them only to spring the theological trap. They can either follow the earlier statutes and ordinances and be condemned for not following the new ones, or they can obey the new ones only to be punished for not obeying the earlier ones. They are damned (somewhat literally) if they do and damned if they don't. But is this not the truth of the Law itself for an Eagleton who has himself written on psychoanalysis on more than one occasion? The Law is in fact a vicious circle for which obedience is transgression and the punishment that follows the desired and necessary outcome.

However, if psychoanalysis describes the status quo, the state of evil out of which we can in no way extract ourselves, then there is no room for a homeopathic approach. We can work out our own salvation about as much as a bandicoot. The earlier Eagleton is not so sure: "Falleness is the history of the linguistic animal, man; and the christian belief is that it cannot be entirely overcome by his own power" (BL: 54). The "entirely" is the crucial qualifier, generating a Roman Catholic ambivalence which he would not relinquish—good works will get you part of the way but you need Christ's help to get you over the hump. In the text from 1970, *The Body as Language*, he argues that human beings can be only partially successful, since the conditions for such falleness—language as the source of both human community and of the objectification and exploitation of those in that community—block the possibility of completely repairing the fault.

Even the later Eagleton is not quite so happy with the bleak picture psychoanalysis provides. Just when we thought that the Law was a pit of quicksand from which we cannot extract ourselves, Eagleton switches to a developmental model, in which the realm of Law is for the immature, children and the like, from which we then grow up into virtue and ethics. Once we supersede the written law, kicking the ladder away when we have attained maturity, the Law itself is written on our hearts. Basing himself on his



favoured letter of Paul to the Romans—the one that will draw in Žižek and Badiou as well—Eagleton calls this the law of love, the move from the rule-book to the “spontaneous habit of virtue” (SV: 166). But the shift is curious in a couple of counts: the move comes from within the law, and all we need to do is grow up. Further, we progress from the law to virtue in the same way that salvation moves from cultic observance to ethics. (The mention of feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and those in prison depends not on Paul, but on the apocalyptic passage of Matthew 25:35–36.)<sup>14</sup> On both registers—the move from law to virtue and the internal nature of this move—we are still in the end contained within the realm of the law. This is hardly a law in which we are trapped, from which we cannot extract ourselves except by some external assistance. Theologically that assistance is covered by the term grace. What has happened, it seems to me, is that Eagleton has slipped from a Protestant to a Roman Catholic line on this question: William Blake and Lacan (in whose company I can also discern the silhouette of John Calvin) have given way to a characteristic Roman Catholic concern with ethics and the moral life, in which there is a glimmer of potential within each one of us. Ethics will return in full force with Eagleton’s christology, as I will argue below.

Now the problems start mounting. On the one hand, goodness is as self-sufficient as evil, and the immediate reason for such an argument is to avoid some notion of recompense for goodness, some reward for virtue. Rather, in “a world as shabby as this, goodness doesn’t get you anywhere” (FD: 119). Fair enough, for too often in Roman Catholic thought, let alone Christian thought more generally, goodness is attractive only if there is some trade-off. On the other hand, his response is dualistic: evil has “some formidable opponents,” namely “humility, modesty, meekness and other such virtues” (FD: 120), to which he adds elsewhere “vision, courage, dedication, loyalty, selflessness, and endurance” (SV: 74). Above

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<sup>14</sup> “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me” (Matthew 25:35–36). See also Isaiah 58:7.



all, there is love (he might have quoted 1 Corinthians 13 here): not the well-worn lurch of lust and a warm glow for another human being, but an indifferent, unconditional, impersonal and, especially, a public and political law of love that has its benchmark in the love for enemies and strangers (see SV: 166–68). Ordinary virtues, no doubt, hardly a match for the sophistication and massed forces of evil. Yet implicit in the opposition is a dualism, a mutually exclusive opposition between good and evil.

The hint of a tension accelerates into a full-throttled contradiction before we know it. Just when we thought good and evil were sealed off from one another, existing for no purpose apart from themselves, Eagleton indulges in a rare moment of dialectics, this time in a discussion of the ambiguities of modernity. In this case he argues that over against the conservative nostalgia for a fabled golden era, liberal progressivism, and postmodern amnesia (the usual three targets), only Marxism “insists that modernity has been a revolutionary advance in human welfare, and, with equal passion, that it has been one long nightmare of butchery and exploitation” (SV: 241; see also BL: 22). As he finds in his favoured example of Thomas Mann’s *Dr Faustus* (SV: 246–47, 249–50, 260–1), capitalism is full of promise and its denial, the offering of undreamed of opportunities only to whip them away again—from feminism to the anti-colonial movement. The only terms appropriate to such a political economic system are irony, ambivalence, and oxymoron. In more specifically theological terms, we have here the dialectic of good and evil.

What is going on here? Eagleton risks being caught by a tension of his own making: if good and evil operate purely for their own sakes, without reference to anything beyond them, then how can they be in dialectical opposition? He equivocates, between an opposition between good and evil that is “positive as well as insidious” (SV: 246) and an existence all for themselves, but what he wants to avoid is the theological position, often implicit in the various texts he discusses (see SV: 246–47), that virtue can only arise through vice, that the necessary condition of good is the free run of evil itself. “If good would not be good without evil, and if God’s greatest glory lies in his bringing the former out of the latter, then the two states of being are mutually dependent” (SV:



247). But such dependence leads to the difficult position that we would never be rid of evil unless we dispensed with goodness as well, and for Eagleton this would leave no possibility for change for the better. Hence the argument for the autotelism of evil and the demonic, as well as of good itself, that I have outlined above and to which Eagleton devotes a large slab of text in *Sweet Violence* (SV: 253–73). Yet, the neat sidestep that avoids the trap of a dialectical and mutual dependence only lands him in another snare equally problematic. For if good and evil are intrinsic, sufficient only to themselves—no matter how much ontological depth such a position might provide Marxism’s dialectical reading of capitalism—then the possibility of lining up the modest virtues Eagleton espouses against evil falls by the wayside. One way out of this problem is to argue that any opposition to evil must be an accident, entirely outside the autotelism of goodness, done purely for the heck of it. In the same way that God’s act of creation is entirely contingent to his nature, entirely unnecessary, that which is good might well not oppose evil, and the fact that it does is not necessary to the nature of goodness. It just happens that it does so. But Eagleton does not make this move, preferring to court a curious dualism.

Another way over which he places a large “no road” sign is the radical monotheism of certain parts of the Hebrew Bible, such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Job, in which God is the source of both good and evil. In this case autotelism is restricted to God alone, but this would lead Eagleton back into an unacceptable situation in which both were dependent on each other. What autotelism gives him with one hand—God’s complete autonomy—it takes away with the other, but I suspect he is more interested in good and evil, that is, the question of ethics, than God.

This preference would explain the absence in Eagleton’s theological reflections of a central feature of the notion of evil, namely the ontological point that evil is an affront to God. For Eagleton evil is an entity unto itself, a self-fulfilling and self-serving mode of being that requires no outside purpose or justification. But, as I argued above, there is a tension between the intrinsic nature of evil and a certain dualism, the



unavoidable opposition of good and evil. I want to suggest that this tension is a mark of Eagleton's effort to sidestep the notion that evil is a fundamental offence before God, that God's own nature cannot abide evil and therefore constantly works for its eradication. This position of course follows a different line from that of radical monotheism, where God is the originator of both good and evil. By contrast, here evil is not part of God's nature, and it must therefore have an external cause, which is either human freewill or the devil himself. The objection that immediately follows—are not human freewill or the devil ultimately God's creations?—misses the point, for the paradox of freewill is that God wants not automatons who will mechanically worship him (the reason why, it was often said in the West, sporting teams from the old Soviet block played so well), but free creatures who want to worship him. The catch is that they may very well not want to do so . . .

So Eagleton avoids two traditional theological positions in his discussion of evil—either it originates with God or it is an affront to him—but is there any mileage for a materialist position in the idea of an ontological affront? I have deliberately removed God from the equation, but I have come back, via content that Eagleton chooses (or perhaps dares) not to touch, to the deeper import of his own insistence that the Left must include theological issues in its theoretical debates. And that is the need for an ontological, or rather transcendent depth to the political problems that bedevil the Left. I would prefer, however, to distinguish between ontological and temporal transcendence: the latter has some unexplored tracks to which I will return.

### The Absence of Sin, or, the Politics of Forgiveness

Eagleton's desire to tarry with the damned and the demonic, the characterisation of evil as intrinsic act, cannot but evoke the question of sin itself. And yet, sin is barely present in Eagleton's work: the absent conversation partner, it sits with his head down at the corner of the table, ignored and alone. I have, perhaps, spoken too soon, for Eagleton does deal with sin, albeit briefly and in a curiously skewed fashion in some of his early and carefully buried theological musings. The emerging



theologian of the 1960s skims by the whole question in but a few pages, a pause before launching into the two long final chapters of *The Body as Language*. Here he explicates the fall and original sin in terms of his primary distinction between language as creative and destructive: as the pre-condition for history and world-formation, for relating to other human beings, language is also the means for objectifying and exploiting human beings in order to carry out those projects of shaping the world. Eagleton himself is guilty of an awful sentence here that he would probably disown: “When man does this—uses others as objects for his private self-advancement—he commits what the christian calls sin and the socialist capitalism” (BL: 52).<sup>15</sup> Apart from recoiling at the crude conjunction, the unnamed term of these pages is reification, curiously excised from an earlier draft in *Slant* that was later edited for *The Body as Language* (LRT1: 22). The possibilities here are significant, particularly in terms of an intermeshing between reification and the ban on images, and thereby idolatry, that so interested Adorno. For does not idolatry involve sucking the life out of relationships between the living and injecting it into the relations between inanimate objects, between things, commodities? And yet, Eagleton does not pursue such a possibility, stalling any elaboration of harmatology in a materialist sense.

The fate of reification in *The Body of Language* is the fate of sin itself in the later recovery of theology (so perhaps I have not spoken too soon after all). Banished and repressed, Eagleton produces a range of substitutes—history, confession, and forgiveness—that turn around the absent centre of sin. As far as history is concerned, he commends the radical asceticism of the Carmelites of his youth for attributing the evil of the world to its sinfulness: “they clung to the quaintly outmoded view that there was too much cruelty and aggression in the world for it to be merely accidental, or solvable by piecemeal reform” (GK: 14). And this flaw in the world, the deep rift that sets history on a default skid from disaster to disaster, can only be healed through as radical a transformation

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<sup>15</sup> Slightly less crude, although only just, Eagleton also equates alienation and sin like many of his Catholic Left comrades; see SM: 20; BL: 40.



as the depths of . . . sin. Except that I have put the word ‘sin’ into his mouth, since he skips past it on the way to redemption.

All of which brings us to the questions of confession and forgiveness. Never one to miss the chance of taking a swipe at liberals, Eagleton berates Peter Brooks, in his *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature*, for his theological myopia regarding the role of the confessional in the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>16</sup> What we get from Eagleton in response is a brief survey of the theological underpinnings of the confessional, although with the curious rider at its close, “Nobody is being asked to believe all this” (FD: 141). I want to ask: what parts are we, or more strictly speaking Eagleton himself, asked to believe? Quite a lot, it seems to me, given his predilection for reverting to political examples for each theological point he throws in.

The key theological terms clustering around the confessional are forgiveness, guilt, shame, judgement, repentance, and sacrament. Inevitably, his argument turns towards christology, which I will explore in more detail below. But, if Eagleton finds that Brooks hardly uses the word “forgiveness,” then the word that Eagleton himself cannot seem to write is “sin.” Thus, with his first point, that confession in a theological sense is concerned with forgiveness, as opposed to the legal focus on punishment, he neglects to mention that this is, after all, forgiveness from sin. Eagleton is keen to present the insider’s view of the confessional, the impersonality and anonymity of which is about as Roman Catholic as the pope’s need to tuck in his shirt with a wooden spoon. Rather than the abject, tormented and angst-ridden process that Foucault would have us believe is the confessional itself, for Eagleton it is as everyday and “perfunctory an affair as buying a pound of carrots” (FD: 139; see GK: 32). The conventional formulae for penance—most commonly a number of “hail Marys”—is less a sign, for Eagleton, of the flippancy of the confessional as of its success.

A number of things are going on here, not least of which is the

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).





desire to drag the confessional away from its association with guilt and penance, those inescapable features of cultural Roman Catholicism. In fact, apart from the aside that we have much concerning which we need to feel guilt and shame (FD: 140), Eagleton comes close to that strain of Protestantism in which guilt barely features at all, in which God has already forgiven us before we ask: “he accepts us just as we are, in all of our squalor and disagreeableness, and there is no point in trying to impress him by embarking on some twelve-step self-improvement programme” (FD: 140; see GK: 122). By this time, Eagleton draws on William Blake, one of the few theologians he deems worthy to mention, but Blake is hardly a Roman Catholic thinker, preferring the fringe, antinomian groups at the edge of the Radical Reformation that E. P. Thompson has uncovered in his characteristic fashion.<sup>17</sup> But Eagleton does not push Blake’s heretical side, drawing near to the heart of Calvin, for whom God’s grace is so over-whelming and undeserved that forgiven has been granted well before it was asked.

This is much more home turf for me, even to the logical point of election, but rather than berate Eagleton for straying from his more conventional Roman Catholicism, pointing out irritably that he should leave Protestant doctrines to the Protestants, I want to pick up another aspect of his stress on the perfunctoriness of the confessional. I cannot see much point in an obsessive concern with guilt—so much so that Roman Catholics will relate the childhood practice of concocting sins so that they have something to say to the priest—for a life racked with guilt does not get us very far, and there is much to be said of the notion that human beings are forgiven sinners, although for Protestants no one but God can pronounce such forgiveness. And yet his stress on the every-day ordinariness of the confessional connects with the absence of the term “sin” at this point, marking a curious privatisation of sin itself in Eagleton’s reflections. The confessional and its focus on forgive-

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<sup>17</sup> Edward P. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). See Roland Boer, *Criticism of Theology: On Marxism and Theology III* (Historical Materialism Book Series; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 57–102.



ness become unwittingly the concerns of the individual and his or her various misdemeanours. The examples and asides are telling here, from Eagleton's invocation of "empirical experience" (his own) to the comparison with purchasing a pound of carrots.

Eagleton will extract himself from such a privatised realm, but this is where his preferred theoretical partner for speaking about evil and sin—psychoanalysis with a more surreptitious dosage of Marxism thrown in—is no mere accident. And it is Lacanian psychoanalysis rather than someone like Marcuse, whose day is perhaps yet to come. Now while there are all sorts of possibilities for social and political analysis via Lacan—Irigaray and Žižek are the most notable examples—the way Eagleton uses Lacan is inevitably tied to the starting point, namely the psyche of the privatised individual. There is nothing new in my observation, and it is widely known particularly among Marxists who engage with Lacan, and yet Eagleton is still caught in the Lacanian snare. In order to get him out, I will need to rearrange his own emphases and enlist the help of some Latin Americans.

In particular I think of the liberation theologians, whose work has influenced so much theology in the West and who rework and recover an element of sin virtually lost, namely the structural nature of sin. Reacting to a chronic privatisation of sin and evil, in terms of both the individual and sex, liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Juan Luis Segundo, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, emphasised that evil and sin must be understood in terms of social, political and economic structures, that a trans-national company, political party or nation-state could be sin.<sup>18</sup> I write "sin" and not "sinful," for the latter conjures up an entity known as sin of which we then partake. Political and economic structures may be sin themselves, rather than partaking of sin, for the latter slips all too easily into the image of an evil leader or two using neutral structures for their sinful ends. In this way, liberation theologians

<sup>18</sup> Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Turnbridge Wells, Kent: Burns & Oates, 1987); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1983); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1969); Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1976).



could make use of Marx's analysis of capitalism, the long stretches of *Capital* that detailed the exploitation of English factories and the enclosures, as descriptions of sin itself.

If we take up the material or structural nature of sin, one can hardly imagine a CEO of a trans-national company heading for the confessional in order to seek forgiveness for exploiting lowly-paid labourers, for the destruction of vast reaches of forest or polluting of rivers and the oceans, for the drive to make a profit at the expense of people's well-being and health, for perpetrating the notion that everything is getting better even though a quick look around tells us it is hardly so. This is where Eagleton's example of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission is telling. Here two other terms appear, repentance and redemption, which Eagleton defends with what has become a characteristic liking for that which has been discarded and is now out of favour: "An acceptance of one's frailty and failure is the only sure basis for any more enduring achievement, as the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission . . . might suggest. They are not busy simply consoling, therapising and disciplining themselves down there in Pretoria" (FD: 141).

Hardly the personal affair of the confessional, nor the individual slips and petty sins for which Eagleton was so keen to identify as unthinking and mechanical only a couple of pages earlier. In full public view (Eagleton's essay was first published in 2000), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission sought to short-circuit the inveterate tendency for revenge that the post-apartheid era in South Africa readily leant itself to. But my point is that in this example Eagleton unwittingly wrenches his discussion of confession, forgiveness and repentance out of the private realm of personal devotion and religious commitment and into the space of political, economic and social sin. This is how I suggest we read his comments in *Sweet Violence*:

Forgiveness is both lavish, since a form of generosity, but also a kind of negation, refusing to return like for like, plucking something from nothing. As such, it is a utopian gesture which stands for a moment outside the rules



of the game. A refusal to retaliate goes along with what seems its opposite, the extravagance of giving more than is actually demanded, offering your cloak as well as your coat or walking two miles rather than one (SV: 140; see NLC: 22).

But it is also how I want to read his comments on repentance, *metanoia* and even christology. Except that he still will not write the word “sin”: from what, I want to ask, does one repent? From what does one undergo the radical transformation of *metanoia*, usually translated as “conversion”?

Confession comes to stand in for sin in Eagleton’s text: confession, he states, is the signifier of repentance and *metanoia*, and, more astoundingly, redemption depends upon confession. On the first I can agree in part, but not the second. Yet on this first point—confession as a signifier of repentance—the Roman Catholic Eagleton takes over, a relic of his earlier incarnation in which the sacraments were crucial. Thus, he argues not only that confession is a sacrament (the theological term for signifier), but also that one cannot approach the altar in the communal Mass without reconciling oneself to one’s neighbour. Here the theologian of the 1960s throws off his covers, for the sacrament is still the signifier of an un-alienated and reconciled life. As he wrote in 1970: “The promise of the sacramental life is that these contradictions will be finally surpassed, in the fully human society of heaven” (BL: 12). In fact, the curious turn to the sacraments makes much more sense in light of this earlier Eagleton. For, as I will elaborate below, a characteristic feature of his early theological reflections is the leitmotif of the sacraments, especially the eucharist (see NLC: 69–84). Eagleton’s passion for the eucharist in its full Roman Catholic form is almost completely muted by now,<sup>19</sup> but glimpses like these, the argument for the value of the sacrament of confession, appear every now and then. He probably would not hold quite to this view now, politicising the promise of heaven so far that it becomes a purely temporal affair. But even at this level, confession is a signifier/sacrament

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<sup>19</sup> Some time after I first wrote these lines, Eagleton did mention the eucharist more explicitly, in a process of gradually recovering more and more of his former theological positions. See *The Trouble With Strangers*, 83, 194–96, 272, 299, 323.



of such an un-alienated society. This is so indelibly Roman Catholic that I am not quite sure what to do with it: do the Protestants, who recognise only baptism and eucharist as sacraments forego the political signifiers of confession, or even marriage, extreme unction, confirmation and ordination?

But the second point—redemption relies on confession—is one that even the crassest of Roman Catholic theologians would hardly want to affirm. This would make redemption and reconciliation depend upon one's act of confessing sin, which gives primacy to human agency. Rather, confession is a necessary part of the process, but redemption itself depends on grace and not on correct observance of the necessary steps, as Eagleton himself says elsewhere. Indeed, he invokes William Blake to dismiss the notion of God as an avenging judge, one who dispenses redemption only as a reward for the appeasing acts of human beings, salvation being a reward for good behaviour. The better name for this character is "Satan," the accuser of the book of Job (see also GK: 122; SV: 210). However, if we are already forgiven—and I still have in mind the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—and if God accepts us we are, "something of a worm" (FD: 141), then confession can hardly be a pre-requisite.

The ready objection to such a point is that forgiveness would seem to let the perpetrators of the worst crimes, from genocide to economic exploitation, off the hook. If they know that they are always forgiven, if not by God then at least by their neighbours, then what is to stop them from doing the same thing again? Should they not be justly punished? Eagleton's response is the properly theological one that "mercy must not become a form of blithe indifference; it must pay for its lavishness by reckoning the cost and feeling the pain of the injury it has endured" (FD: 142). There is, if I may extend his comments, a close connection between the one who forgives and the one forgiven. Invariably they are one and the same person, and the theological reason for granting forgiveness is that we are ourselves forgiven. *Metanoia* is after all about a radical transformation in which one repents from sin never to do it again, and seeks to make recompense as a response to that forgiveness. In Calvinist terms, one cannot but help respond in this way to God's



unwarranted grace, or if the theological language becomes too much, repentance means that one will respond to the forgiveness granted by others. It may seem myopically utopian, in light of the human propensity for sin, but it seems to me that such a fully-fledged notion of forgiveness must be a prerequisite for any workable human society, no matter how utopian it must seem. How else should we read his comment that “to be accepted back into a community one has offended may be more than some darkly incorporative device” (FD: 140)? And such a radical notion of forgiveness short-circuits the pattern whereby the victimised become those who victimise others, justifying their switch in roles by the narrative of past suffering.

In the end what I will want to draw from Eagleton’s reflections around that un-named centre of sin is his emphasis on the tough question of forgiveness. That he works his way through those indelibly Roman Catholic practices and notions such as confession, priest, and communal Mass is less a matter of extraneous matter that we can discard once the point has been made, as the possibility in Eagleton’s case for getting where he wants. But the same features also set some traps or limits from which he can be extracted only by means of resetting the focus: thus, before face of the threat to dwindle into a privatised notion of sin, confession, and forgiveness I pushed the other side of the tension and read for a sense of structural sin implicit but also beyond Eagleton’s own text.

## Radical Christology

With my theological radar switched on, what astounds me in reading Eagleton is the way nearly all of his theological reflections wind towards christology. And this direction arouses within me a whole series of deep suspicions that Eagleton will need to answer. In terms of the traditional categories of theology, he has little to say apart from the occasional comment about the doctrine of creation<sup>20</sup> or of eschatology—the great

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<sup>20</sup> “To say of the world that it is ‘created’ is for classical theology to say that it is pointless. Like God, and like humanity, it exists purely for its own delight. God created the world just for the hell of it, as a quick look around will doubtless confirm. Creation is a scandal to the sharp-faced



themes of his much admired Walter Benjamin. As for the topics he does consider, harmatology and the doctrine of evil loom large in the later works, but only because they may be seen as subsets of christology itself.

When one reads Eagleton's theological material long enough, the arrival of Christ on the scene, less incarnation than Parousia, or Second Coming, is hardly the surprise the New Testament would have us believe it should be. No matter where he begins, the end run is christology. So, for instance, in his discussion of the asceticism of his beloved Carmelites: from asceticism, through the implicit and symbolic politics of the nuns and the sinfulness of history, he ends up with Christ.

The Christian gospel invites us to contemplate the reality of human history in the broken body of an executed political criminal. The message this body proclaims, as the theologian Herbert McCabe puts it, is uncompromising: if you don't love you're dead, and if you do love you'll be killed. Here, then, is the pie in the sky, the opium of the people, the sentimental twaddle of salvation (GK: 16–17).

The only irony in this passage is in the last sentence. If you think this is superstitious or delusional nonsense, Eagleton goes on to argue, then it is nothing compared with those who think the future will be an enhanced capitalist present, having finally solved the world's problems. But what interests me is the “opium of the people” phrase thrown in the midst of “pie in the sky” and “sentimental twaddle.” Given its bed-fellows, I suspect Eagleton is here not picking up the ambiguity of the famous Marxian phrase—the cry of the oppressed and so forth—but rather criticising the Left's disparagement and dismissal of Christianity without considering its revolutionary potential. He is not alone here, as Ernst Bloch, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek would no doubt point out.

Or, a discussion of pain and bodily suffering brings him around yet again to Jesus Christ. Not so far from asceticism, or indeed his favoured topics of martyrdom and self-sacrifice, pain is one of those things that the common-sense Eagleton suggests is a brute fact for which there is

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stockbrokers for whom everything must have a point” (FD: 182; see SV: 128).



no meaning, no matter how hard we might try, something with which language itself cannot quite grapple. And Eagleton is not going to buy the argument for the redemptive function of pain, suffering, and illness.<sup>21</sup> Apart from the fact that much suffering has no redemptive qualities whatsoever, he matter-of-factly points out that it would be much more desirable if suffering itself did not happen, if the qualities of dignity, courage, and endurance might emerge in a less stressful situation. Over against moral heroes who triumph through pain, he would rather have no cause for such heroism in the first place.

It is hard to see how a christological point can be made from this, since is not the whole point of Christ's death and resurrection the overcoming of undeserved suffering and death? But, as Eagleton suggests, it would have been better had the world not been riddled with the pain and suffering that even the devil would have had a hard time dreaming up.

Although Jesus is very often to be found curing the sick, he at no point exhorts them to be reconciled to their suffering. On the contrary, he seems to regard such sickness as an evil, depriving its victims of an abundance of life and cutting them off damagingly from community with others. He would no doubt have shared the mythological opinion of his age that suffering could be the work of evil spirits. There is no sanitizing pretence that such disabilities constitute a "challenge," an "opportunity" or an enriching difference. On the contrary, they are rightly seen as a curse, and Jesus's battle against them is presented as an integral part of his redemptive mission, not as some mere outward sign of an inward healing. (SV: 34–35; see GK: 113).

Here as elsewhere, Eagleton is a little too hasty to attribute what is said in the New Testament about Jesus to the man himself. The well-known problem in New Testament studies is that it is well-nigh impossible to say anything about the historical Jesus apart from the fact that he was alive for a while. Better, then, to say that one is opting for a particular aspect

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<sup>21</sup> "One has a grotesque vision of pious believers rejoicing in their coronaries and cancers, locked in hand-to-hand combat with saints struggling fervently to cure them" (SV: 36)





of the representation of Jesus Christ, except that the down-to-earth Eagleton would rather have some historical figure on which to fix his particular brand of christology. And so he speculates as so many before him on Jesus's self-knowledge, disappointment, his willing submission to death, and generally how he felt and thought (see especially SV: 35). There is not much to be gained from such speculation, unless one wants to enlist this redeemer figure in one's own brigades, to justify a particular representation of Jesus as one that he would endorse himself. Then there is quite a bit to be gained.

But we can take a different tack: there are countless other instances in both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament where the removal of sickness and pain is part of the utopian image of what the world might be like. From the absence of pain in the garden of Eden, through the eschatological space of pain-free and tear-free existence at the end of time, to the Hebrew prophets. So, for instance, Isaiah: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy" (Isaiah 35:5–6). We are in the curious realm of eschatology and apocalyptic; indeed, Eagleton's perpetual turn to christology, as well as his favouring of the motif of redemption for a world off the rails, has a distinctly eschatological, or rather, messianic, feel to it.

Third, hard by pain and suffering is the question of martyrdom. Over against the individuality of suicide, the giving up on life since it has become unbearable, Eagleton stresses the collective side of martyrdom. If the suicide relinquishes what is worthless, the martyr offers up what is most precious—his or her own life (see SV: 35). It is the most radical expression of the intensity, the all-or-nothing dimension of the Christian life (NLC: 6–11). Eagleton invokes Paul, although without explicit reference to any New Testament texts, to make a moral point concerning the way we should live our lives: "It is the martyr's meaning of death-in-life which St Paul has in mind when he comments that we die every moment. . . . True self-abnegation is not a matter of political submissiveness or the heady *jouissance* of sexual pleasure, but of anticipating one's death by living in the service of others" (FD: 125; see SV: 36).



The martyr, then, is the ultimate moral exemplar, although Eagleton neglects to mention that Paul himself urged his readers to imitate his own life; only by living as though one were already dead, that is, in denying the primacy of one's self, is a life fully in service to others possible. In this respect, it is less a purely individual act, but "a socialising of one's own death" (FD: 124).

Again the political point is not difficult to spot: over against the liberal creed of the sacrosanct private individual, the collectivising of individual life in martyrdom, of living in service to others, of offering up one's own life in the hope that something good may come of it, has a distinctly socialist feel to it. The revolutionary who gives her or his life for the end of oppression and a more just society is not far beneath this picture. A little further down, but not too far, is the figure of Jesus Christ himself, whom Eagleton has no qualms in taking as a revolutionary.

Jesus plainly does not welcome his own impending torture and death, even though he seems impelled by an obscure conviction that such failure will prove the only way in which his mission will succeed. In the carefully staged Gethsemane scene, however, he is clearly presented as panicking, terror-stricken at the thought of what he must undergo and urgently pressing his Father to spare him such torment. He does not sound like a man for whom resurrection is just around the corner. One must be prepared to lay down one's life for others, while praying devoutly that one is never called upon to do anything so thoroughly disagreeable (SV: 35; see GK: 113–14).<sup>22</sup>

Eagleton is relying more on the narratives of the three synoptic gospels rather than that of John, where Jesus seems in complete control, even in the process of his own death. Rather than take the myth of Jesus' death and resurrection as the source of redemption, although he does use it as a political model, Eagleton's christology here begins to show its true colours. Asceticism, the overcoming of pain, and then martyrdom all invoke the figure of Jesus Christ as exemplar, as one to

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<sup>22</sup> The most complete statement of this position is now to be found in *Terry Eagleton Presents Jesus Christ*, vii–xxx.



follow and imitate in your own life. I will have more to say on this type of christology below, save to mention here that with a venerable tradition of its own (although pilloried in my own Calvinist tradition as moralising), the notion of *imitatio Christi* operates on the model of leader and disciple.

But I have run on too quickly in my discussion of martyrdom, carried away a little by the importance of the moral exemplar in Eagleton's work. If we take a few steps back then martyrdom turns out to assume the notion of self-sacrifice, which in the final chapter of *Sweet Violence* becomes the key political question that emerges from the issue of tragedy. And tragedy too will find its inevitable focus in christology. In a wholesale effort to wrest the argument that tragedy has much to do with religion away from conservative scholars, Eagleton argues not only that sacrifice is a central category for tragedy, but also that the Left should be very much interested in it. And if this does not fly in the face of suspicions from the Left (the problem being the apparent valorisation of myth and nature over against history and reason), then his recovery of christology as a linchpin of sacrifice will make more than a few splutter over their drinks.

Sacrifice or self-sacrifice? I have used the two interchangeably thus far, but Eagleton makes it clear at the beginning of his discussion that he is interested in the transformation of sacrifice from its form as a mode of appeasing the capricious gods and bargaining for their favour into *self-sacrifice* in the person of Jesus Christ. I will return to this problem below, but once he has done this he can align a whole series of (self-) sacrificial figures under this banner: the ancient Greek *pharmakos*, the most deformed and dejected members (for there were two *pharmakoi*) of the community who were ritually degraded and spurned, struck on the genitals while being paraded down the streets, before being sent out of the city-state; the embodiment of such a figure in Oedipus, who rids Colonus of its curse by embodying the curse itself; King Lear, whose only relief was not to suffer that fate of being eaten; Captain Ahab of *Moby Dick*, embodying the outcast whalers upon whom early capitalist society depended heavily; the polluted yet redemptive figure of Hester Prynne (the only woman in this collection) of Nathaniel Hawthorne's



*The Scarlet Letter*; and so on. All of them are scapegoats, *pharmakoi*, Christ figures.

But let me return to Christ, at least in my discussion. For Eagleton, the political point of Jesus' death and resurrection is twofold: he is the self-sacrificial model *par excellence*, but he shares the status as scapegoat with a long list of other tragic victims. Eagleton cannot emphasise enough the sheer dereliction and simultaneously redemptive necessity of such a scapegoat, playing on the ambiguity of the "sacred," that which is both reviled and holy, untouchable yet revered. The catch, however, is that the moment Christ's crucifixion is seen as the necessary step, the prerequisite for his resurrection, when suffering is "the way-station or essential passage to victory, rather as dental surgery is an unpleasant but unavoidable step to towards oral health" (SV: 36), then it can no longer be redemptive. Crucial to Eagleton's understanding of tragedy, this Adornoesque dialectical move—pushing at item or term to its limit so that it yields its dialectical other—will also become important in my criticism of Eagleton's christocentric theology. No human sorcerer this, no conjuring trick, and Eagleton pulls out a string of signals of Christ's failure on the cross: the "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Mark 15: 34; Matthew 27:46) quoted by the Jesus of Matthew and Mark from Psalm 22 (although Eagleton as usual neglects to make the direct references); the failed expectation that he would return before his followers were dead; the descent into hell of the Apostles' Creed; Paul's notion that Jesus was "made sin" that evokes the pattern of the scapegoat. "Cul-de-sac," "miserable failure," "accepting the worst," "forlorn faith," "bereftness," "the last bitter drop," "destitute," "the hell of meaninglessness and desolation," "monstrous," "outcast"—all of these terms pepper the discussion of Jesus's tragic death (SV: 37). But Eagleton is after the political point, which turns out to be the need for going beyond the most wretched and hopeless condition in which human beings can find themselves before any political redemption is possible.

Christ is then the tragic scapegoat, the sinless one who takes on the sins of the community and is expelled in fear and loathing in order to avoid catastrophe. Rather than focus on the community restored,



tragedy is concerned with the scapegoat, wandering beyond humanity in some border zone of loathing, meaninglessness and unresolved trauma: “In Christian terms, this is Christ’s descent into hell after his scapegoating on the cross, the solidarity with human despair and destitution by which he ‘becomes sin’ for our sake” (GK: 114; see SV: 283). But in a deft theological turn, the immunised community becomes the arena of liberals and conservatives, where the monsters are either the outcome of not having quite enough to get by or those outside the community boundaries. The wilderness itself, the wild and hideous territory into which no self-respecting liberal or conservative would go, is where the radicals hang out—“for the radical, the real monsters are ourselves” (GK: 114). But this is where all the scapegoats seem to end up as well: Christ, Oedipus, Lear, in fact the vast majority of the current world population, “whole sweated, uprooted populations” (SV: 296), are there, and so also should the radicals be there. These outcasts are, in a move that comes straight out of *The Body as Language*, the *anawim*, “the dispossessed or shit of the earth who have no stake in the present set-up, and who thus symbolise the possibility of new life in their very dissolution” (GK: 114; see SV: 277).

Here is the key to Eagleton’s christology, and let us stay with it for a while. Boldly put, the political model of Jesus Christ is the thoroughgoing transformation of the lowly and rejected into a world without pain, suffering, and oppression. Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection become the leitmotif for such a transformation, which in Marxist circles has become known as revolution. A distinctly Hegelian Marx, it would seem, has turned up at the foot of the cross, for Eagleton stresses the connections between Christianity and Marxism at this point. While both are concerned with the everyday life of common people, the transformation envisaged is not a restoration of the status quo, but something qualitatively different. Both point out that things are much worse than they seem, class society on the one side and a world riddled with sin and evil on the other; yet both hold to a much stronger hope that the world can be a whole lot better, that human beings have more potential than anyone—Eagleton’s list swings by liberal idealism, pragmatists,



conservatives, reformists, and postmodernists (see SV: 40)—gives them credit. Or, even more strongly, what the New Testament draws from the Hebrew Bible in describing Christ, as the stumbling block or *skandalon* that has become the corner-stone, the early Marx, suggests Eagleton, attributes to the class yet to be formed, the class which dissolves all classes in the process of redressing wrong in general (SV: 288).

The reason for bringing Christian theology into contact with Marxism once again is that the distinctly political gospel of the former provides an ontological depth to Marxism, an exacerbation of the stakes into the absolute opposition of evil and good, sin and repentance, forgiveness and grace, all of which turn on the notion of *metanoia*, a radical transformation that may be translated from the Greek as revolution. All of Eagleton's various theological reflections, from those on evil and history, through the cluster of terms—confession, forgiveness, repentance, redemption, and *metanoia*—with sin as their un-named centre, asceticism, martyrdom, to self-sacrifice and tragedy, turn on the question of christology. In this sense he is a radically christocentric thinker. But this should come as no surprise for anyone who has read *The New Left Church* and *The Body as Language*, for here the efforts to integrate theology, literature, and politics, or to incorporate linguistic theory and Marxism into theology, hinge on christology, although of a distinctly sacramental or eucharistic form. Thus, in linking the historical movement for liberation to Christianity, Marxism too, it would seem, is complete only in christology:

Unlike the marxist, however, the christian recognises the risen Christ as the ground of this historical movement. He believes this because Christ, uniquely, *is both a body and a language*: he is an animal, yet an animal with the universal availability of a language, the word of God. In him, we can achieve at the level of physical union a fully human, expressive and universal communication; in him, language and bodiliness finally converge into a single life (BL: 12; italics in text).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> One other example: "Socialism . . . is the drive to integrate the global communication which capitalism historically opened up with the sensuous concrete life it needed to negate. Its final significance for the christian thus centres on Christ: on the universal word made animal" (BL:



I have a number of questions concerning this nub of his rediscovered radical theological past, and so it is best to list them first before delving into more detail: the nature of that relationship with his earlier theological thought; the lack of reference to that other current with which his position has so much in common, namely liberation theology and its influence in Western theological and New Testament studies; the favouring of certain christological metaphors (legal, sacrificial, exemplary, political, and collective) over against others; the deep desire for a historical Jesus; and the immense difficulties raised by such a resolute focus on a redeemer figure (the problem of the personality cult).

### Theology Redivivus?

As for Eagleton's first incarnation as a theologian, let me pause for a while with the question of form, for his earlier arguments follow what will by now be an all too familiar path, except that here we have the laying of the first stones. Thus, in his discussion of language and world, or rather sensuous life, in *The Body as Language*<sup>24</sup> he runs through various theoreticians—Barthes, Mallarmé, Wittgenstein, McLuhan, Merleau-Ponty, Basil Bernstein's research into the differences between middle-class and working-class language, the German idealist Jacobi, and Saussure, all through the filter of Marx<sup>25</sup>—to argue two distinctions, between the creative and destructive functions of language itself and between the immediate nature of bodily gesture and the mediated universality of other communication (from gifts to television). On the first point, language is not only the gateway into history and the “world,” the step away from immediate sensuous life, but also the way human beings escape that world, building distance from such a history. In other words, the very means of history's emergence is also the means by which

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<sup>24</sup> See an earlier version of this argument in NLC: 73–84.

<sup>25</sup> And this is a pared down list: see the original article he plundered for the first chapter of *The Body as Language*, where we find Ernst Cassirer, Lévi-Strauss, Sartre and others in an intense effort to include just about everybody who counted along with some who didn't (LRT1).



alienation from it is produced; as signs, language is the medium of human experience, but it is at the same time the transformation and manipulation of signs into fetishes that alienate experience, the world and human relationships; or, as he puts it, sin. As far as the second distinction is concerned, the disjunction of bodily communication and the extended body of other forms of communication folds back into the first distinction, since mediated communication opens up a host of possibilities for both human community and alienation. The culmination of the argument lies in nothing other than christology, although here Eagleton puts it in terms of the eucharist. Stepping through Merleau-Ponty's argument that the body itself is already a type of language, a means of symbolic communication with the world, he argues that in the eucharist one finds the dissolution of the distinction between body and language, and between unmediated and mediated communication. The key here for Eagleton is the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation: in the same way that at the moment one consumes the elements of the eucharist they cease to be bread and wine and become the body of Christ, which they must do for communication to become fully transparent, so also the destructive disjunction at the heart of language, between sign and reality, the alienation between human beings and between humans and the world, is overcome and reconciliation emerges. Transubstantiation therefore means that the "sensuous immediacy" of Christ's body is at one with the universal media of bread and wine: "Christ's self-giving in the eucharist is globally available, achieved through material products in which all are able to share, but nevertheless bodily direct because what is given in those symbols is nothing less than himself" (BL: 36).

The determined march of Eagleton's argument towards christology is all here in one of his earliest works: as far as the form is concerned, nothing much has changed over three decades later. What has changed, at least on first appearances, is the content of the argument: the strange feeling of reading these earlier works comes, it seems to me, not from an overly pious Eagleton but from his passionate attachment to the Roman Catholic liturgy, understood as a "symbolic re-embodying of the mean-





ings of the revolution” (BL: 114-15).<sup>26</sup> His two favorite sacraments are the eucharist and marriage,<sup>27</sup> and he often compares the sensuousness of the former with the fleshly euphoria of the latter (I cannot help the image of a young randy Eagleton imbibing the bread and wine in the throws of orgasm). Rather than the political christology of his later texts, what we see in the first publications is more of a eucharistic christology and politics. There is nothing of the need for a historical Jesus (see below), for all of the christological reflections must pass through the medium of the Mass itself.

Yet, when we read more closely the terrain becomes all too familiar. Contemporary theory, Marxism, christology are by now well-worn nodes in the work I have discussed thus far, but when we peer behind the eucharistic screen, a number of familiar items tumble out: sacrament as signifier, the importance of sacrifice, the question of evil, the revolutionary implications of Christ’s death and resurrection, and the significance of the downtrodden and oppressed. Inevitably, form has given out to content, so let me take but one example of content, that of the *‘anawim*.

The appearance of the *‘anawim*, or more properly *‘anawim*, in *Sweet Violence* and *The Gatekeeper* are hardly new, for they are integral to the argument of *The Body as Language*. Eagleton is no Hebrew scholar, but he makes significant theological mileage from the term, glossing it as “destitute and dispossessed” (SV: 277). A little Hebrew: *‘anawim* is the masculine plural of *‘anaw*, which has the sense of being bowed down or dejected, and then also humble and pious. However, it appears only once in the singular, referring to Moses (Numbers 12:3); otherwise it is always in the plural. The most common usage, found in the prophetic

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<sup>26</sup> Here is another: “The liturgy, then, is a political force—a force constantly working to transform human society into its own, communal image” (SM: 13).

<sup>27</sup> “Marriage, of course, is traditionally connected with the imagery of banquet, dance and eucharist because it represents a free communication of *bodies* richly expressive of a fully *personal* community. In this sense it symbolises the transcendence of the estrangements discussed in this book” (BL: 109). Althusser’s strictures against this movement in the Roman Catholic Church, as a subtle re-imposition of the Church’s oppressive measures relating to sex, might have been mentioned to Eagleton when he was writing this (see Chapter Three).



literature and the Psalms, refers to one's relationship with Yahweh: bowed, humble, and pious. Fewer references indicate the proud and mighty who are brought low (Isa 32:7; Amos 2:7; 8:4; Prov 16:19; Job 24:4).

But Hebrew has a knack of overlapping words, indicated by the practice of *Qere* (what is read) and *Ketib* (what is written): in the case of a particular word *Ketib* refers to the consonantal text, the original form of written classical Hebrew, while *Qere* is an alternative vowel structure for the same consonants. By and large, the comprehensive vowel pattern in the Hebrew arrived late, an overlay on a consonantal text. The work of the Masoretic scribes of the ninth century CE, the vowel points were supposed to assist reading a language no longer used. But sometimes the Masoretes preferred an alternative reading, and since one could not alter a text already regarded as sacred, they simply placed the vowels of such an alternative reading against the consonants, obliging one to read another arrangement of consonants that suited the vowels. The most obvious example is the word *Yahweh*, one of the names of God: if the consonants indicate *Yahweh* (*Ketib*, what is written), the vowels (*Qere*, what is read) indicate that one should read '*Adonai*, "my Lord." Pious Jews today will avoid even '*Adonai*, reading instead *Hashem*, "the name," in a step that threatens to become an endless effort to avoid idolatry.

So it is with '*anawim*, whose consonants often appear with the vowels for the much more widely used word '*anayim*, and sometimes vice versa. The plural of '*ani*, '*anayim* means the poor or wretched, those brought low and oppressed. The overlap between '*anawim* and '*anayim* suggests that the poor and oppressed are also, in God's eyes, the humble and pious, in all the best senses of the term.

So what does Eagleton make of the '*anawim*? The couple of references in *The Gatekeeper* become central in the final chapter of *Sweet Violence* and, not surprisingly, *The Body as Language* from 1970. They are, as I noted, for Eagleton the "destitute and dispossessed":

St Paul refers to them rather colourfully as "the shit of the earth." The '*anawim* are the dregs and refuse of society, its tragic scapegoats. They are the flotsam and jetsam of history who do not need to abandon themselves to be remade, since they are lost to themselves already. And



it is with them that Yahweh identifies. He will be known for what he is, in the words of Luke 1:53, when you see the mighty cast down and the lower orders exalted, the hungry filled with good things and the rich sent away empty. The true sacrificial figure, the one which like the burnt offering will pass from profane to powerful, loss of life to fullness of it, is the propertyless and oppressed (SV: 277).

In itself there is nothing wrong with his effort to democratise the notion of the scapegoat by means of the *'anawim*, the poor and the pious, however you want to read the word. Eagleton does precisely that with his closing sentences of *Sweet Violence* (SV: 296), stressing the point in a welcome moment of Marxist universalism, that it is the majority of today's world that is dispossessed, and not just certain minorities, that in becoming so used to capitalism we have forgotten that it has always been based on the exploitation of whole populations by a relative few. The *'anawim* are, then, in a dizzying sweep, the vast and various working classes scattered throughout the globe for whom the ancient and not so ancient scapegoats and *pharmakoi* and Christs of tragedy and beyond have moved out of their small circle to join the multitude.

As far as this argument is concerned, nothing much has changed from 1970. One sample from *The Body as Language*:

These men—the *anawim* of the old testament whom Christ speaks of in the beatitudes—are the “dirt” which falls outside the carefully wrought political structures of society, those whom society cannot accommodate; as such they stand as a living challenge to its institutions, a potent and sacred revolutionary force. . . . The *anawim* are the embodied negativity of each *status quo*, and as such focus its breaking-point; they are thus, themselves, a kind of contradiction: an expressive sign of human failure and limitation which yet, by pinpointing so exactly the limits of a social order, the points where it tails off into chaos, offers a positive symbol for the future. . . . The *anawim*—the scum and refuse of society—have, like all dung, a contradictory status: the more they reveal dissolution and decay, the more politically fertile they become (BL: 67–68, 70; PS: 21–22).

If there is a difference with the later material, it lies in the ecclesial



and sacramental stress of *The Body as Language*—“the *anawim*, like the ecclesial sacraments, are signs effective only insofar as they tend to their own abolition” (BL: 69; PS: 22)—but even this focus fades somewhat as Eagleton presses onto the political point. And that is exactly the same as in *Sweet Violence*: the *anawim* are just like Marx’s proletariat (the same quotation from *The Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* appears; see BL: 68; PS: 22 and SV: 288),<sup>28</sup> although Eagleton neglects to note that they are more like the undesirable lumpenproletariat from whom no good can come. As one of the *anawim*, Christ brings out the truth of God’s concern with them in the Bible, namely that the lowly will be raised up only through the utmost abjection and desolation. Even the deep contradiction of the *anawim* remains the same across more than three decades, for like the anthropological category of the sacred (Eagleton makes the same argument, using many of the same texts from Mary Douglas) in which dirt is both rejected and valued, Christ and the *anawim* embody the simultaneously destructive and redemptive forces that lie at the heart of political revolution.

The last chapter of *Sweet Violence*, then, is a rewrite of the penultimate chapter, “Politics and the Sacred,” from *The Body as Language*. The latter is much sparser, restricted to Mary Douglas’s<sup>29</sup> work on dirt from *Purity and Danger* and the *anawim* themselves,<sup>30</sup> while *Sweet Violence* fills out the picture with everything from ancient Greek tragedy to *Moby Dick*. But all *Sweet Violence* does is spell out in more detail the same

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<sup>28</sup> “A class must be formed within human society which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere of society which has a universal character because its sufferings are universal, and which does not claim a *particular redress* because the wrong which is done to it is not a particular wrong but wrong in general.” Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law in Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Volume 3, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 [1843]). In *The Body as Language* Eagleton quotes the first part of the sentence, while in *Sweet Violence* the whole text appears, minus ‘within human society.’”

<sup>29</sup> Although Eagleton insists on calling her Mrs Douglas in a polite relic. The argument in SV: 289–90 summarises the material in BL: 60–66.

<sup>30</sup> A major focus of the “Politics and the Sacred” chapter from *The Body as Language*, namely Brian Wicker, *Culture and Theology* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1966), has been carefully excised from *Sweet Violence*.



argument from the earlier text: the value of Christ's death and resurrection, along with various other pieces from literature and anthropology, lies in the political implications for revolution.

### A Strange Absence

Apart from one item—an interest in the intrinsic nature of God, the universe, creation, evil, art and literature to which I will turn below—Eagleton has plundered his own writings in political theology from some thirty years before. These days he is not so enamoured with the argument that the priesthood should be modelled on the Leninist revolutionary, or that the Roman Catholic Church needs to reinvent itself as a revolutionary force (at least he does not mention these arguments in his later work), but he makes the most of his resolutely christological focus, often with little change from the earlier material. While he may have all sorts of reasons as to why he should not refer to that earlier work, I cannot see any reason why he omits the liberation theologians. Earlier on I referred to the liberation theologians in order to spin out Eagleton's analysis of sin, particularly since he carefully avoids referring to them. He began at the same time, the sixties, when liberation theology first took shape, although their impact was felt precisely when he first moved away from theology and remade himself as a Marxist literary critic in the 1970s. Gustavo Gutiérrez's classic, *Theology of Liberation* was published in 1969, while James Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation* appeared in 1970,<sup>31</sup> independently from the movements in Latin America. As I mentioned earlier, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff and Juan Luis Segundo followed Gutiérrez in what became an extremely well known movement within and outside the various churches, although most were Roman Catholic. Among others, I would add Jorge Pixley, Jose Miranda, J. Severino Croatto, and Elsa Tamez, the last two in biblical studies.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1970).

<sup>32</sup> Jorge Pixley, *On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987); José Porfirio Miranda, *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression*, trans. John Eagleson. (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1974); J. Severino Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics*



In the work of these scholars, coming from a context of liberation and anti-colonial struggles throughout Latin America—Castro in Cuba, Allende in Chile, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua to name but a few—and the involvement of certain elements of the Roman Catholic Church alongside revolutionary peasants, we find the same themes as in Eagleton's theological materials. The scandal of the liberation theologians, as with Eagleton and *Slant*, was the conjunction of Marxism and theology. And the result was an emphasis on God's preferential option for the poor, read in texts of both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, the distinctly political elements of the Kingdom or Rule of God, the political and revolutionary dimensions of the Jesus movement, a revolutionary ethics, and a critical engagement with major currents of Western thought. Although there is a good deal of systematic theology, especially in the work of Gutiérrez and Segundo, liberation theologians rely heavily on the Bible.<sup>33</sup> The two foci of liberation theology have been and remain the narrative of the Exodus in the Hebrew Bible and the figure of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

Yet, despite the hype, liberation theologians have always held Marxism at a distance, using its methods for analysing capitalism, the social, political, and economic dimensions of oppression and exploitation. But they have maintained an ontological reserve, arguing that without some form of divine transcendence one cannot avoid fetishising what is human. So, the only perspective that avoids idolatry, the raising of human beings or the products of human hands into the status of gods, is ontological transcendence itself. And this includes Marxism, the proletariat, or indeed the leader of the movement. In this respect, Eagleton's early work, with his effort to recast the Church as a revolutionary force, or the priesthood in terms of Leninism, has less of such an ontological reserve. He is, or rather was, willing to go further in the conjunction of Marxism and theology. Other differences and emphases also appears, such as Eagleton's later fascination with the intrinsic nature of God, creation, goodness, and so on, but as *of Liberation*, trans. Salvator Attanasio (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981).

<sup>33</sup> Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*.



far as christology itself is concerned Eagleton and a whole spate of liberation theologians by and large would agree with each other.

I can, however, find only one oblique reference to liberation theology in Eagleton's earlier writings and none whatsoever in the later material. While there may be a partial excuse that he was unaware of liberation theology in the 1960s, since its major texts appeared after his theological writings and the work with *Slant*, this excuse looks exceedingly thin by the time of issue 21 (volume 4.3) of that journal. For here, just before Eagleton's own "Language, Reality and the Eucharist" (LRT1) appear Helder Camara's "Violence—the Only Way?," Richard Shaul's "The Church and the Struggle for Liberation in Latin America" and Camilo Torres's "A Message to Christians."<sup>34</sup> The issue in these articles is less the developed form of liberation theology that began to appear soon afterwards but the involvement of radical priests with the revolutionary and anti-colonial movements in Latin America. Torres, at least, did so, but it was in the turmoil of such events and actions that the praxis of liberation theology emerged. And it is Torres whom Eagleton mentions, the priest who joined the rebels and was excommunicated for doing so. Yet Eagleton mentions only his name (BL: 93; PL: 17) and nothing of liberation theology itself.

By the time of Eagleton's later work, the intense focus on liberation theology had passed with the quelling of liberation movements by the 1990s and the inroads of pentecostal and charismatic Protestants. But then, many of the tenets of liberation theology had entered the work of Western scholars such as the widely influential and massive work of John Dominic Crossan, about whom Eagleton must have heard, unless he lives in complete isolation. In both the longer study, *The Historical Jesus*, and the more accessible *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, he argues that Jesus' message was one of radical egalitarianism, with the free sharing of food and miracles, that led into political trouble with the

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<sup>34</sup> Helder Camara, "Violence—the Only Way?," *Slant* 4, no. 3 (1968): 9–14; Richard Shaul, "The Church and the Struggle for Liberation in Latin America," *Slant* 4, no. 3 (1968): 15–17; Camilo Torres, "A Message to Christians," *Slant* 4, no. 3 (1968): 17.



Romans.<sup>35</sup> An Irish Roman Catholic, Crossan is one of those in the West who has taken up many of the insights of liberation theology without any explicit political connections. Even if Crossan's Jesus looks more like an Irish peasant—perhaps an even greater reason for an Eagleton who has recovered his Irish roots to acknowledge it in some way—both the shorter and longer Jesus books have had a profound impact inside and outside biblical studies. It is not as though Eagleton is one who writes rather than reads, nor does he restrict his reading to a narrow field, so I find it passing strange that the material closest to his own theological positions should warrant nary a mention.

### The Desire for a Historical Jesus

I have not plucked Crossan's book randomly out of my memory banks in order merely to berate Eagleton for not having read something. For, as I pointed out above, what interests me about Eagleton's christological reflections is that they implicitly or explicitly rely on some notion of who Jesus was and how he thought and acted; in short, he has a particular construction of the historical Jesus.<sup>36</sup> Crossan's book, with its highly political Jesus, is but one of the most well-known works in a search for the historical Jesus that has barely paused for a breath since the nineteenth century. We have any number of historical reconstructions: the ethical example of nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism (Adolf von Harnack's "fatherhood of God and brotherhood of Man"); the apocalyptic visionary and wonder-worker of Albert Schweitzer; the eschatological prophet of Edward Schillebeeckx; the wandering wisdom teacher of Robert Funk; and of course Crossan's political peasant. But Jesus has been and still can be the first feminist, a gay blade, a leader of a group of small businessmen, the first greenie, the Wicked Priest or the Teacher of Righteousness from Qumran, the first advertising executive, as well as, in his spare time, the Son of God.

<sup>35</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993); John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995).

<sup>36</sup> See especially *Terry Eagleton Presents Jesus Christ*, vii–xxx.





Viewed in the context of such a wealth of historical Jesus studies (which Eagleton tellingly does not provide), he speculates and assumes a particular Jesus, a figure with a political and redemptive mission who sought to overcome pain and suffering, who lived and died as a martyr, in the service of others, and whose death is nothing other than a tragic event with redemptive possibilities. The short-hand for Eagleton's Christ, if its repetition is anything to go by, is the "executed political criminal" or just the political criminal: "It is one of the more grisly ironies of the Christian gospel that when God finally got around to putting in a disgracefully belated appearance in the world he had created, he did so as a political criminal" (GK: 122). Yet there is nothing new here, particularly in light of his own background with the Catholic Left, of liberation theology and the more recent work by the likes of Crossan.

However, my question is why such a figure, the executed political criminal, needs to be based in some historical reconstruction. Eagleton does not offer any methodological criteria for his reconstruction, compared to a Crossan, Funk or (a little earlier) Schillebeeckx. There is no effort to deal, for instance, with multiple appearances of the same item, arguing either that a saying of Jesus can only be genuinely his if does not appear in other texts of the time, Jewish or otherwise (a position characteristic of historical Jesus research in the middle of the twentieth century), or that where a feature appears in only one source, such as the virgin birth narrative in Luke, it cannot be genuine (the method of Crossan et al). On this approach, the features that stand out as authentic are items such as the sharing of food, or table fellowship, and the healing narratives. Instead, Eagleton operates in a way familiar to anyone who has read enough biblical criticism. So we find phrases such as "sounds like" and "seems to regard," along with occasional assertions of certitude: "no doubt," "plainly" or "clearly presented." All of which is based on taking some of the gospel passages, particularly those concerning healing and the passion narratives, as in some way representative of how Jesus actually might have acted, thought and felt.

I want to register my scepticism not merely concerning Eagleton's



historical Jesus, but of any search whatsoever.<sup>37</sup> However, the more interesting question is not whether we can recover any historical kernel concerning the historical Jesus, but why Eagleton in particular would want to do so. What is there to gain by arguing that the political criminal actually has some connection to whoever the person Jesus might have been? Quite a bit—for Eagleton. Obviously, there is the force that it gives to his argument, especially for one committed to historical materialism as a method. In the case of Jesus, however, the whole situation becomes much more acute, for the authorial weight of this figure, even on a minimal cultural level, means that what Jesus might have said and felt will be more significant than that of any other figure. I would suggest that this is the case even with Eagleton's assumed readership in these later works, namely the cultural and political Left (although his readership is extremely broad these days), let alone any ecclesial or religious audience.

### Christological Metaphors

Eagleton's recourse to a historical Jesus who keeps threatening to disappear into the fog of history and endless biblical scholarship, having always slipped out of the room into which the (biblical) scholar has just entered, must therefore be understood as a rhetorical strategy, one that he uses to increase the force of his arguments irrespective of the historical Jesus himself. Eagleton would have been better off writing that his historical Jesus is but one representation among a host of others, one that is distinctly useful for his own argument, but a representation nonetheless, with no necessary historical verifiability.

In fact, this is precisely what Eagleton does in his christological work more broadly, selecting certain features, metaphors and images, except that he perpetually attempts to connect them with some putative historical figure. His preference is for legal, sacrificial, exemplary, political, collective, and, earlier on, liturgical motifs that can be found, among others, in the New Testament and subsequent biblical and theological reflection

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<sup>37</sup> See Stephen Moore, "The Quest for the New Historicist Jesus," *Biblical Interpretation* 5, no. 4 (1997): 438–64.



(although the two by no means coterminous). In a curious case of literary transference that seems to bedevil anyone who seeks to interpret the Bible, the biblical texts in question end up setting the agenda for interpretation. What seems at first to be a method one brings to this text ends up being the method the text determines for the interpreter. Hence the uncanny feeling that any new method one brings into the domain of biblical criticism, from the medieval allegorical method to a materialist exegesis, has always been there from the beginning. New vistas open out, the method seems eminently applicable in all circumstances, everything needs to be re-assessed, until you sense that the unknown biblical authors had read Derrida, Marx, Levi-Strauss or Adorno well before you did.

So also with the images and metaphors that cluster around the figure of Jesus: invariably they run over and through one another, so it is useful to distinguish between them in order to see where Eagleton's focus lies, but also what he avoids. Let me begin with the legal metaphor. Here is Eagleton: "Jesus is God in the shape of human frailty, no longer the judge on the bench but the political criminal who becomes an advocate alongside us in the dock" (FD: 140). Eagleton contrasts two images of God: Satan and Jesus (see SV: 210). If the one comes through as accuser and judge, who watches our every step and deed and rewards us accordingly, the other is our co-defendant in the dock, the "friend," as he puts it in a favoured phrase drawn from the early theological writings, "of the shit of the earth" (GK: 122). But such a metaphor has a venerable biblical pedigree, from the notion in the Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy to Kings) that (dis)obedience will lead to punishment or blessing, through the image of the accuser and redeemer of property and blood (the *go'el*) in the book of Job, to the representation of Jesus' death and resurrection as the payment of a legal penalty for sin. Contrary to Eagleton's sharp distinction between the Judge-Satan (the vengeful God of the Hebrew Bible) to the Defendant-Jesus (the God of love in the New Testament), both images are part of the complex imagery of God. Thus, Jesus acts as defence counsel for us sinners before a God who seeks to punish us for our wrongdoings. Yet, when he gets to this point, in a discussion of the Protestant Milton, it is no longer acceptable: "In a classically



Protestant scenario, Christ's love is needed to shield us from the Father's wrathful justice, as a sympathetic defence attorney might save you from a grilling at the hands of a particularly irascible judge" (SV: 210). The differences are subtle: instead of God switching from judge to co-defendant in the person of Jesus, here we have Jesus defending us from God. I must confess I cannot see that much difference: the legal metaphor has merely switched sides, at one moment used favourably and at another, more Protestant moment, less so. But I suspect that Eagleton really wants to avoid the doctrine of substitutionary atonement: in this case Jesus takes the punishment that is rightfully ours. Innocent, he takes on the sins of world so that we may not be punished and die.

Skirting the other side of substitutionary atonement is Eagleton's liking for the scapegoat, the tragic dimension of christology: in this case, the scapegoat, or the red heifer in the Hebrew Bible, has the sins of the community symbolically and ritually placed upon it before being banished to the wilderness where it comes to a slow and painful death. As I indicated above, the notion of the scapegoat draws close to the heart of Eagleton's christology in a distinctly political sense. He stays not with the redeemed community (he will return there), but the scapegoat and all who are like it: the rejected, repressed, and banished majority of the earth's population.

Overlapping the notion of the scapegoat but dragged by Eagleton in another direction is sacrifice itself. In his earlier texts, he is more concerned with recovering the sacrificial aspect of the Mass, but that was within the context of the ecclesial institution itself (see BL: 42–49; LRT2: 28–30). Still inside, however uncomfortably, he is much happier with the mystery of the eucharist. The liturgy is the means of transferring Christ's redemptive activity to human beings, through the specific reception of Christ in the elements themselves: "Christ is present in the eucharist, not simply as the risen man who has crossed the frontier of historical reality into heaven, but in the eternal action of his *transitus*; he is present in his sacrificial act of grasping and surpassing the ultimate boundaries of history, submitting to limit in order to transcend it. It is in this that his death is genuinely redemptive" (BL: 44).



But by the early years of the new millennium the question of sacrifice becomes one of self-sacrifice, as I pointed out above. Apart from the obvious political point, the reason why Eagleton is keen on self-sacrifice is that it is closely tied up with free will, a willing sacrifice of oneself for others. However, in the biblical scapegoat, self-sacrifice plays a minor role; instead, its major concern is the appeasement of the gods, the effort to influence the gods who are capricious, precisely the aspect with which Eagleton is not particularly taken. Out of the whole complex of sacrifice—burnt offerings, sin offerings, thanksgiving, animal, grain and drink offerings, scapegoat and atonement—Eagleton fixes on a relatively modern notion, namely self-sacrifice, although one has to work a little harder to find such an element in the scapegoat. In fact, all that seems to be left over in contemporary, Western notions of sacrifice is self-sacrifice: the idea that one of the highest moral acts is to offer oneself up freely, of one's own will, for a higher cause, which most often turns out to be the nation-state in warfare, or perhaps the victims of a bus crash or earth-quake, or the saving of a drowning dog. Gone is any notion of appeasing the gods, of performing the rituals in the correct fashion to avert disaster, of eating the sacrificial victim in a communal meal, even the substitution of a sacrificial victim for the good of the community. But it is a long way from the scapegoat to self-sacrifice, for the scapegoat, sent into the wilderness to die for the community, is hardly a willing victim, one who chooses to do so out of pure altruism.

In this respect the cover illustration of *Sweet Violence* is telling. A detail from Caravaggio's "The Sacrifice of Isaac" from around 1600 CE, it depicts Abraham's knife descending to carve up Isaac's neck. A hand appears from the left, and Abraham's face is averted in the moment that stays the sacrifice itself. I do not want to delve into the intricacies of the narrative of Genesis 22, but the point here is that Isaac is hardly a willing victim.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Abraham can make no sense of Yahweh's command to

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<sup>38</sup> Roland Boer, "Banality and Sacrifice," in *Strange Fire: Reading the Bible after the Holocaust*, ed. Tod Linafelt (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).



go up to Moriah and offer up the son on whom the divine promise of a people rests.

Hardly accidental, then, that when Eagleton does get around to writing of the Akedah (a title which he does not use), he reads not the Hebrew text, but Kierkegaard's discussion in *Fear and Trembling*, and he focuses not on Isaac, the sacrificial victim, but Abraham (see SV: 44-45).<sup>39</sup> Heavily Christianised in a distinctly Lutheran sense, Kierkegaard plays on the paradox of faith: Abraham, the model for any believer (SV: 52; here Eagleton is dependent on Paul in Romans 4), does not retreat from the command to sacrifice his son, knowing full well that once Isaac was dead he would not be restored to him, that the promise of a people from Isaac would come to an end. And yet, precisely because Abraham does not give up on "his desire for the impossible," the desire that Isaac will be restored to him even while he obeys the order to sacrifice, does God come to the rescue, stay the knife on its downward path and point to the ram in the thicket. Unlike many of the critics he cites in *Sweet Violence*, Eagleton is quite taken with this reading of Kierkegaard's,<sup>40</sup> which he lines up with Lacan's interpretation of Antigone and, of course, Christ's crucifixion. Abraham, Antigone, Christ—none of them is socially acceptable or ethically prudent, given to some universal or collective benefit or *telos*. Abraham's faith takes him beyond anything that is acceptable, relinquishing the universal, ethical and rationally political, and even tragedy itself, "abandoning everything, bringing his joy in the world to nothing, without any sure guarantee of a return" (SV: 45). The hand that desperately grasps the end of the rope finally lets go. This is tragedy at its deepest level for Eagleton, one that he will identify at the core of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But what has happened here? To begin with, in the "sacrifice of Abraham" the ethical and social coding of self-sacrifice that I identified initially has gone, for in Eagleton's reliance on Kierkegaard, ethics and

<sup>39</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985).

<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere he is less impressed, he speaks of Kierkegaard's "tragic elitism" (SV: 51) that is not far from T.S. Eliot.



the universal are discarded as so much useless baggage on the way up Mount Moriah. Yet, a profound slippage has taken place in the focus on Abraham: he is not the sacrifice but the one who offers up a sacrifice, Isaac. However, Eagleton insists in taking Abraham as the centre of this story, the one who makes the impossible sacrifice (SV: 60). Eagleton's christocentrism is guilty here, for the ease of the connection between Abraham and Christ may work in terms of tragedy, specifically in the absolute dereliction of both before an inscrutable God. But it does not work in any sacrificial sense: whereas Christ offers himself, Abraham offers his son. If anything, the type of Christ—following the long Christian interpretive strategy of typology between the Old and New Testaments—in Genesis 22 is Isaac, not Abraham, who is not about to roast himself willingly on the altar. Ultimately, the narrative of Genesis 22 offers a somewhat different model of sacrifice, one that ill suits any notion of self-sacrifice. In response to an unfathomable and capricious command from God, Abraham proceeds to offer what is most precious—his “only” son (forgetting Ishmael) in this particular divine economy—in order to appease God. The hook at the end, the ram in the bush, hardly provides a model of faith but one of complete subservience to God.

Neither the scapegoat itself, nor even the Akedah in Genesis 22, can be read in terms of self-sacrifice, in terms of Eagleton's favored martyr living a life in negation of the self. Self-sacrifice, then, must be read in a christological fashion, for which Jesus' willingness to die is crucial. In order to get to this point, Eagleton executes some swift moves through the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. Even though sacrifice hinges, he admits, on appeasing and propitiating the gods, on obsessively doing the right thing in order to curry their favour, this is not what he finds in the Hebrew Bible. Ignoring the vast amount of material on sacrifice as precisely such appeasement, he focuses on a few prophetic texts from Isaiah 1 and Amos 5 where such practices are castigated as mere hypocrisy. Catchcries of the social justice elements of the Christian churches, they are but one dimension of a multifarious and highly contradictory collection of



literature in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>41</sup> But they serve his purpose, since he can then jump to the New Testament, specifically the letters of Paul<sup>42</sup> as well as the letter to the Hebrews. The very high christology of Hebrews (not one that I can see Eagleton being enthused over in its full regalia) offers a handy moment of supersessionism, especially Hebrews 9:12<sup>43</sup> where Christ is both sacrificed and sacrificer, victim and high priest, doing one last time what had gone on unendingly in the Hebrew Bible. In his own death, Christ brings to an abrupt halt the long line of propitiatory sacrifice, yet it allows Eagleton to make his point: “This definitive consigning of ritual sacrifice to the past involves redefining it in ethical rather than cultic terms as a self-giving for others . . . . As a mutual self-giving, it is no longer an esoteric ritual but the structure of sociality” (SV: 277). Anyone who has been to Mass or the eucharist for the first time might beg to differ, but just in case this argument sounds a little too supersessionist, a little too much a Christian reading, he argues that it is consistent with the Jewish law, as any “pious Jew” (SV: 277) would agree. The problem is that he quotes a Jewish scribe from, of all places, the gospel of Mark (not, say, the Hebrew Bible or perhaps a rabbinic source) to make his point: that justice, loving one’s neighbour, is far more important than sacrifice.

And so we have self-sacrifice as the crucial motif of Eagleton’s ethical and political christology. The problem is that as far as the passion narratives of the synoptic gospels are concerned, Jesus is hardly a willing

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<sup>41</sup> Similarly, his suggestion that “the Old Testament is among other things a record of Yahweh’s unenviable struggle to persuade his people that he is not a nature god to be appeased or manipulated, but the god of freedom and justice” (SV: 277) casts a heavy theological hand over a collection of texts in which Yahweh is often but one god among others, and usually in a minority position.

<sup>42</sup> Although he favours Paul’s letter to the Romans elsewhere, he does not specify which letters of Paul—the seven letters of New Testament criticism (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon) or the thirteen of the canon and the Church.

<sup>43</sup> Eagleton lists it as Hebrew 9:11, but his quotation comes from verse 12: “he entered once for all the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood.” Curiously, Eagleton adds “[of sacrifice]” after “Holy Place,” when the text seems to be referring to both to the Holy of Holies in the temple and the metaphorical holy place of heaven.





victim (except perhaps in the gospel of John), following the will of a Father whose command he does not understand. The notion of self-sacrifice selects a small element of the metaphors of the Christ's death in the New Testament and elevates it to a key feature. Other metaphors also abound in the New Testament, such as the court scene, the scapegoat, sacrifice itself in terms of sin offering, but also the cosmic battle with the devil, the notion of Christ as warrior and victor in the battle with death, substitutionary atonement (bearing the sins of the world), the guarantor of eternal life, and the martyred political figure.

A major reason, I would suggest, for Eagleton's fondness for self-sacrifice and martyrdom lies in his two major christological categories, the political and the exemplary. Political figures and models work much better if they are willing victims, dying for a cause in a situation where they have at least chosen to be part of the political movement itself. Their deaths then become a consequence of such a political choice, a martyrdom rather than a death that appeases the powers that be. Lenin, or Christ, or Che Guevara would not be so appealing if they had been press-ganged into their respective political movements, if they had been designated for sacrifice as part of a larger political program in which they had no say. Cannon fodder would perhaps be a better term for this type of sacrifice. By contrast, political martyrs function above all as exemplars, and the old christological motif of *Christus exemplum* renders the life and death of Jesus Christ something we can follow, shaping our lives in light of the paradigm itself. So often this has become a private affair, the realm of the sacrosanct individual who gains his or her individuality by offering his allegiance to the state in a Rousseauesque social contract. Thus, the individual believer must seek to avoid sin, pray to the "Father," be prepared for persecution for their faith, live out their moral life in the context of that supreme collective, the family.

Over against such a privatisation, Eagleton, like others on the Christian Left, refuses to break the link between Christ as exemplar and as political figure, and so the exemplary dimensions of Jesus' life and death become those of an asceticism that symbolises a better world, that stands against a socio-economic evil with ontological depth, that offers



a radical transformation, a metanoia that is as political as it is personal, in which confession, repentance, and forgiveness are political and collective acts rather than purely private ones. With the weight so heavily on the exemplary political leader, Eagleton's christology ends up being one with a strong moral code, a political ethics that shows up how Roman Catholic he still is: "The Judaeo-Christian tradition plucks an ethico-political meaning from the cyclical cult of sacrifice and seasonal round of fertility . . . . The natural now becomes a metaphor for the ethical and historical" (SV: 287). And the prime context for the political and collective dimension of Christ the exemplar becomes the Church, ideally a model in its own right of a just society.

### The Problem of the Personality Cult

In itself there is nothing particularly wrong with Eagleton's focus on certain christological metaphors in order to recover Jesus as a political model or exemplar, apart from the fact that he would like to base such a christology on the historical Jesus. I do, however, have much deeper misgivings about the need for a redeemer figure at all, a mediator that becomes the model for our own political activity. And that problem is one that has bedeviled the Left in terms of the personality cult, or, if you like, redeemer figures.

Political paradigm, moral exemplar, executed political criminal, forerunner to a better world—even in these terms, Jesus is still a redeemer figure for Eagleton. But the problem with redeemer figures is that embarrassing question of the personality cult. Fidel Castro, Lenin, Che Guevara, Mao Zedong, Stalin, Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Emma Goldman, and of course Marx himself, no matter how much part of the collective struggle or effort to establish "actually existing socialism," have ended up iconic figures, sources of hope and targets of vilification. It is not that the personality cult is endemic only to the Left (witness and even larger number on the Right or among liberals), but there is a fundamental problem that arises from Eagleton's christology. Symptomatic, then, is his criticism of Stalinism in terms of tragedy. Taking Stalinism as the name of paradox, "the fact that socialism proved least possible where it



was most necessary” (SV: 240), he argues that all the best intentions of socialism flip over into a martial and oppressive state due to the fact that socialism emerged only in marginal and impoverished places where it became the means of enforced modernisation and not of a step beyond modern capitalism.

For Eagleton, Stalinism is the paradox of actually existing socialism, predicated on the fact that no first world country became communist. But let me take a different tack that does not rely on what might have been, on a situation that does not yet exist. And that other way of formulating the problem is, in theological terms, idolatry. But in order to get there, let me move via Adorno to the Hebrew Bible. I want to make use here of a criticism I will develop more fully in my chapter on Adorno, namely that christology itself is the basis of the problem of the personality cult. The two points from Adorno’s work worth developing are his ban on images and the inverse logic of christology.

Adorno was to take the ban on any graven image (*pheseh*) or likeness (*temumah*) of God, from Exodus 20:4 and Deuteronomy 5:8, and elevate it into the *Bilderverbot*, the ban on images that becomes the empty centre, the non-concept of his aesthetic and utopian theory. It was this disturbing feature of some traditions of Jewish thought (in other traditions the various anthropomorphisms and representations were rife) that Adorno took up in order to trouble the apparently seamless genealogy of ‘Western’ thought from the ancient Greeks through to modern Europe. But the *Bilderverbot* is also a ban on idolatry itself. One of the lesser-known elements of Adorno’s work is his criticism of both secularised and liberal theology in precisely these terms, especially in *The Jargon of Authenticity*.<sup>44</sup>

The way such a ban on images is relevant to christology comes in the discussion of anti-semitism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Here, Adorno and Horkheimer argue not so much that the divinisation of Christ enables the divinisation of other human beings. Rather, it is precisely the humanisation of the absolute in Christ, God becoming a

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<sup>44</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski, and Frederic Will (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973).



human being that facilitates the divinisation of human figures. The argument relies on the christological motif of the fully human and divine natures of Christ, the meeting of immanence and transcendence in one person. In the same way that we may only arrive at immanence through a radical transcendence (Christ), so also transcendence emerges through absolute immanence (personality cult). The dialectic is vicious: only as God could Jesus become a human being, and only as a complete human being can he become God. Thus, in christology itself, the more Christ is humanised, the more he becomes a god, that is, an idol; so also with any other human being.

Thus, in Eagleton's case, the absence of traditional christological doctrines such as the two natures of Christ or Trinitarian ponderings pushes his christology of the executed political criminal inexorably into the dialectical logic of the argument of Horkheimer and Adorno. The political Jesus, exemplar of a revolutionary ethics, whose asceticism, healing of the sick and self-denial of the martyr we can follow as fundamental criticisms of this world and symbols of the world to come, is nothing other than the very human Jesus. Hence the need for a historical Jesus, for observations that he "would no doubt have shared the mythological opinion of his age that suffering could be the work of evil spirits" (SV: 34), for comments on the limits that indicate his humanity. And so it seems that in the act putting before us a human, political Jesus, Eagleton unwittingly divinises him all the more; through the most human of his traits that he becomes God. The same logic applies to his reading of the truly tragic nature of Christ's death and resurrection. As I noted earlier, Eagleton makes the perfectly orthodox theological point that Christ's death can be redemptive only if he plumbed the depths of despair, turned out to be an abject failure whose mission had come to naught. Only as fully human can he be divine, only as fully abandoned on the cross can redemption take place. According to the logic that Adorno and Horkheimer identify at the heart of traditional christological deliberations, Eagleton could not have taken a better path to rendering Christ an idol. It is far more effective than trotting out arguments for the divinity of Christ, the son of God, an equal but distinct person of the Trinity. As



long as he is locked into his resolutely christological reflections, this particular doctrinal history will come back to haunt him.

However, Eagleton's passion for christology and the inherent problem of idolatry is, on one level at least, no different from the Left's proclivity to redeemer figures and the cult of the personality. A futile response, it seems to me, is simply to refuse any manifestation of the personality cult, for we will end up in a trap like that of Eagleton. He has, however, taken a step in the right direction. Explicit in Eagleton and implicit in Adorno is the charge against the Left that its rejection of religion, and specifically the long tradition of theology, puts a halter on informed theoretical reflection. Yet Eagleton's strategy of picking up certain elements from that tradition—especially the political christology that runs through his work—in order to counter the ignorance and myopia of the Left, returns to the snares of theological thought itself. What I want to call Adorno's theological suspicion is to my mind a much better path to follow: theology is far too important to shunt off to a siding, both for understanding the history of the Left and its theoretical deliberations as well as the issues that continue to vex it, but any engagement requires a decent dose of theological suspicion, wary of the traps that open up all too regularly. Thus, in Adorno's more theological moments, in the Kierkegaard study, the lectures on metaphysics and *The Jargon of Authenticity*, we find an interplay between his fascination and suspicion of theology. Adorno's enticement is predicated on his misgivings, and vice versa. But that means that the presence of theology in the various debates and issues of the Left can take place only with such a theological suspicion.

### An Intrinsic Eagleton? (The Question of Ecclesiology)

While I am deeply suspicious of Eagleton's valorisation of christology as a model for Left politics—not so much because of the lifting up of that which is worthless but because of the inherent problems of focusing on redeemer figures and the closely connected cult of the personality of which Marxism has had more than its fair share—one of the most enticing and



puzzling features of his work is his liking for the intrinsic and purposeless. As I paused on my way through the preceding chapter at various theological rest areas, from asceticism to christology itself, the list of items that exist for their own sake, for their own enjoyment or otherwise, grew to include evil, the devil, creation, God, art, literature, and humanity. And if I add Eagleton's reflections in a public lecture given at Monash University on 14 September 2000, entitled "God, the Universe and Communism," communism might avail itself of such a notion of autonomy and autotelism in order to think about an alternative process by which it might emerge.

The more obvious point to make here, and it is one that Eagleton himself trots out on various occasions, is that under a mode of production in which everything must have a function and a purpose, where what is useless becomes waste or subject to some form of absorption into the vast program of instrumentality, to insist on the uselessness and purposelessness of something is itself a significant political move. Thus, Spinoza, who argued for the autotelism of God, Nature, and the human mind, calling for the use of reason and science in a totalising and universalist metaphysics—all taken as objectionable features of modernity—was also a revolutionary humanist who affirmed the value of humanity and participatory democracy (see SV: 204). Similarly, I recall arguing, in response to the questions of incredulous friends, that the reason I studied Classics for my undergraduate degree was either its pointlessness or the need for interpreters at the immigration department when time-machines were invented. Apart from the satisfaction such responses produce, the resistance even to use value (let alone exchange value) on a broader political platform is one that may be affirmed in certain circumstances.

Yet, I still have questions, a number of which come easily to mind. For instance, the strategy of following avenues of resistance to capitalism in Eagleton's fashion conjures up the image in the early part of Adorno's study of Kierkegaard. In his relentless pursuit of Kierkegaard's attempt to banish history from his philosophical system by means of an absolute retreat into inwardness, Adorno famously shows how history haunts Kierkegaard at every turn, until we come upon the autonomous *rentiér*



living on his own. Now Eagleton is hardly Kierkegaard, but his effort to recover Christian theology in terms of the self-sufficient autonomy of God, creation, art, literature, and so on, runs a little too close to Kierkegaard's effort to seal himself off from the emergent capitalism that he regarded with horror. And Eagleton resolutely refuses to follow a dialectical line that Kierkegaard was to seek out and which Adorno gleefully explicated as rattling to pieces under its own contradictions. The deeper danger, it seems to me, of Eagleton's fondness for purposeless activity, done for the heck of it, is that this particular feature drawn from the long tradition of theology has become nothing but a leitmotif of the deeper logic of the liberalism he everywhere seeks to demolish. In a fashion reminiscent of the wholesale recasting of the role of money, or for what passed as private property before capitalism, so also liberalism has taken up to a whole new level the idea of the individual creative being, autonomous and beholden to no-one but himself. The difference is that such activity used to be, by and large, restricted to God.

However, in what follows I would like to pick up Adorno's approach to Kierkegaard: in the same way that he finds history at every turn in Kierkegaard's resolute effort to banish it, I want to ask what is being excluded in Eagleton's espousal of autotelism. And in the same way that Adorno stayed with Kierkegaard's texts, rather than bringing in history from outside, so also will I stay with Eagleton. To begin with, there is his well-known argument that art replaces religion. From there I move on to ethics, theology, and Eagleton himself.

As for art and religion, Eagleton argues—in a way that has mutated little over time—that art itself has come to take on many of the functions of religion as the latter declined in the West. Or at least some of art's major proponents felt that it should and could become the religion of a secular age. Thus, reverence for the aesthetic replaces a religious transcendence lost in the bleary, disenchanted post-Enlightenment world. Both religion and art “are symbolic forms; both distill some of the fundamental meanings of a community; both work by sign, ritual, and sensuous evocation. Both aim to edify, inspire and console, as well as to confront a depth of human despair or depravity which they can nonetheless redeem by form



or grace. Each requires a certain suspension of disbelief, and each links the most intense inwardness to the most unabashedly cosmic of questions” (FD: 96–97). I am not so much interested in the multiplication of parallels—such as that between artistic inspiration and that of the Holy Spirit, or that there is a corporate dimension to art that is as hierarchical and code-governed as the Church—and I am even less interested in the argument that literary interpretation or the modern social and physical sciences have their enabling possibility within theology and biblical interpretation. It is not just that art derives in various ways from religious art, argues Eagleton, but that art is in a strong sense the replacement for religion.

However, what does draw my eye as it glides easily over Eagleton’s endless written pages (perhaps I should catch it and pop it back in), are some crucial slippages and assumptions, but ultimately the defence of religion against art. “Religion” is, of course, a code word for Christianity, which in its turn stands at second remove as the generalising term for Roman Catholicism—an easy point to make by now but one that is worth reiterating given the inveterate tendency for “religion” to return. As for our other term, art, Eagleton surreptitiously slips literature in through a trapdoor at various points without drawing undue attention to its arrival. Now, at one level literature can hardly be separated from the realm of art, but when his examples include Matthew Arnold, F.R. Leavis, Coleridge, Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, I. A. Richards, Henry James, and Iris Murdoch then we cannot help but feel that he is in fact speaking about a very specific English tradition that stands in not only for literature in general, but art itself. By the end of these slippages, we are given not so much an argument that art replaces religion, or at least that some people have tried to do so, but that English literature replaces Christianity.

With this in mind, let me return to the Eagleton’s infatuation with autonomy: “The metaphor of artistic ‘creation’ has always been latently theological, a reenactment of God’s fashioning of the world *ex nihilo*. And just as the world is autonomous of its creator (which is part of what is meant by calling him ‘transcendent’), so the work of art is mysteriously self-generating and self-dependent, conjuring itself up





miraculously out of sheer nothingness, obedient to no law but that of its own unique being” (FD: 97). Art replaces religion, taking on the mantle of autonomy: one intrinsic self-generating system takes the place of another. Or is that English literature replacing Christianity? The whole equation loses altitude when the lofty universals of art and religion crash down to the peculiar and parochial concerns of one religion and one tradition of literature. The problem here is not merely that the emperor finds his flabby body on ludicrous display, but that the slippage itself, from English literature and Christianity to art and religion, is part of a deeper universalising logic that best goes under the name of “catholicity.” And of course both English literature and Christianity have been at the heart of a global empire on which the sun set not so long ago, the most audacious effort to universalise some curious particulars.

What Eagleton misses in this very English discussion is that the burning issue in eighteenth and nineteenth century debates that circled around the questions of Christianity, society and culture was that of morality. With the noticeable decline in Christian observance, marked as Gramsci noted so astutely, by the fact that Christianity was no longer the untranscendable horizon of culture, commentators struggled to find something that would provide the moral undergirding for society. For some, without “religion” chaos would ensue, since there would be no moral codes; for others, a substitute was needed, and one of those suggested was literature, or rather English literature. And it was not so much rampant copulation in the streets, theft, arson, and murder of which they were afraid, but the newly conscious masses of the working class. The issue was rather more crowd control, the coercion, and persuasion of what Gramsci would call hegemony.

The deep debates over morality are a far cry from the autonomous and purposeless nature of both Christianity and English (or even religion and art) on which Eagleton is so keen. But his own defence of “religion,” which we have come to expect, over against art, literature, and cultural studies, invokes not the inherent uselessness of Christianity but the opposite. For Eagleton, history, mass appeal, ecclesiology, and the robustness of theology put it furlongs beyond art or literature, which



turns out to be “too delicate, and too impalpable, to be bent to such ambitious ideological ends” (FD: 99). Which ends? The rendering of art into a political program, finding an alternative mythology, or even a philosophical anthropology: it is simply not up to the task, being not even half as tough as Christianity, which has been and can be all of these things. In the end, Christianity is a mass phenomenon over against an elitist and marginal one, linking high and low culture, an intelligentsia and the people, a symbolic and arcane system with the daily lives of millions. One would have to be a dupe to miss Eagleton’s unequivocal defence, from “history’s most astonishingly successful solution” (FD: 99), through “no secular cultural project has come even remotely close to matching this extraordinary achievement” (FD: 99), to “in terms of compass, appeal and longevity, it is far and away the most important symbolic form which humanity has ever known” (SV: xvi–xvii).

In fact, Eagleton comes close to the concern with morality and ethics that taxed intellectuals and commentators a century or two earlier. As I have noted at various points above, Eagleton is intensely concerned with ethics from his earliest writings. When he argues that salvation depends on how we create community in the world and not our private love for God (SM: 6), and when he invokes the values of self-sacrifice and martyrdom as a life of service to others, the shift from law to an ethics of the heart, or the values of humility, modesty, meekness, altruism, vision, courage, love, and so forth, all coming under the umbrella of the good in opposition to the powers of evil, and especially his profoundly ethical christology of the executed political criminal, then everywhere we look we see yet more virtues. As far as Eagleton is concerned, Christian theology, especially the brand with which he is familiar, provides by far the best resources for what can only be described as a moral or ethical politics.

Yet such an ethical position clanks loudly against his liking for autotelism and the intrinsic nature of God, good, evil, and whatnot. Given his liking for the implicitly anti-capitalist position of the uselessness of certain activities, done purely for themselves with no ultimate purpose in mind, his concern with a political ethics constitutes an almost unworkable contradiction. The whole problem comes crashing together



in an important discussion of Milton, whose *Samson Agonistes* is a sustained denunciation of God's justice: "On a Catholic view, God wills what is good; on a certain Protestant view, things are good because God wills them" (SV: 211). Of course, the latter position is the end-run of autotelism, although characterising it as Protestant is a little too easy. Pure autotelism removes God from any obligation or relation with anything outside himself. And Eagleton clearly does not like the implications: way beyond our sense of justice and love, God's justice would then be like a tarantula that "had some notion of elegance but one light years removed from our own (SV: 210–11). In fact, it produces an entirely arbitrary and capricious God given to a vacuous and tyrannical freedom, one who is beyond rationality and justice since he created it, and, we might add, love, humility, hope, and the other virtues; hence Eagleton's preference for the so-called Roman Catholic position, which is itself as much a caricature as that of the Protestant position. It boils down to the point that there are various autotelic items, from evil to art, in which justice and love must be included. And these, it seems, exist apart from God and to them he is beholden. Is God's freedom constrained, then? You cannot have your autotelic cake and eat it too. A compromised autotelism is no autotelism at all. Either God is completely self-sufficient or he is dependent on something else. The response to this impasse is surprisingly straightforward and comes from theology itself (Anselm for instance, but also Calvin): what is good or just is so because God decrees it to be so; but they can be nothing other than the goodness or justice we know since it is in God's nature to be just and good in precisely these fashions. Even if, to invoke an old distinction, love, justice, goodness, and so on, are attributes of God, they cannot be in contradiction with his nature.

Eagleton's holding back at the last minute, his unwillingness to pursue autotelism to its logical conclusion, is but a signal of another direction for theology in his work. Contrary to his assertions, theology does seem to have a distinct usefulness and purpose, from providing live-giving meaning to collective integration. As his own unannounced shuffle from theology to ecclesiology indicates, theology is not as self-generating or autonomous as it would like to think (or, at least, the God



upon which it bases its reflections, and then the universe he created are not self-sufficient). Apart from existing to explicate and direct the beliefs and practices of the faithful—faith seeking understanding, as Anselm would have it—theology is, for Eagleton at least, inescapably an ecclesiological activity, its efforts ideally directed towards the benefit of the Church, outside of which it would asphyxiate before too long.

As with theology, so also with Eagleton himself: if theology is not as purposeless as he would like to think, operating in the institutional matrix of the Church, riven as it is with the political conflicts that fascinated Gramsci, then Eagleton's theological concerns do not emerge ex nihilo. He is no stranger to the institution itself, having been a founding and then senior editor of the journal *Slant* in the 1960s, organiser of discussion groups, demonstrations and a conference or two in the Catholic Left, as well as a major contributor to the *Slant Manifesto*. Indeed, the exploration of the connections between Roman Catholicism and Marxism, along with the political activism of the Catholic Left that had *Slant* at its centre, was somewhat controversial in the ferment of the sixties. Hardly unaware of the ruckus they were causing—in fact, it seems as though this turmoil was one of *Slant*'s motives (see SM: 14, 51–52)—they were at that stage committed to reforming radically the institution itself.

This is where we find Eagleton's explicit engagement with ecclesiology, when he still felt it necessary to argue why he remained in the Church.<sup>45</sup> Underlying Eagleton's own arguments is the assumption that theology may be understood as the ideology, in all its multifarious manifestations, of a particular institution, namely the Church; in other words, Eagleton's various theological interventions bear with them an implicit ecclesiology. Indeed, if you dig deeply enough then an Eagleton vitally concerned with the institution emerges in a number of places, especially in *The New Left Church* and the last chapter of *The Body as Language* (which first appeared as "Priesthood and Leninism" in 1969 in *Slant* 5:3), as well as one of his contributions to the *Slant Manifesto*, the essay "The Roots of the Christian Crisis." Along with his love for the mystery of the eucha-

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<sup>45</sup> Terry Eagleton, "Why We Are Still in the Church," *Slant* 3, no. 2 (1967a): 25–28.



rist, his desire to see the Roman Catholic Church transformed from within dissipates like the mist in his later recovery of theology, apart from the odd relic.

If anything, the young Eagleton is more intense than Althusser in his desire for an alliance between radical Roman Catholics and the New Left more generally (see especially SM: 46–51). If Althusser called on the various fringe groups of the French Roman Catholic Church to join with the communists, Eagleton and the *Slant* group want to remould the church itself. The *Slant* symposium of 7–11 September 1967, subsequently published as *From Culture to Revolution*, had as its explicit agenda the bringing together of those within and outside the Church.<sup>46</sup> Ecclesiologically, however, Eagleton had two strategies, one an effort to recast the whole notion of priesthood in terms of the Leninist revolutionary vanguard, and the other a historical analysis of the churches (moving beyond the Roman Catholic Church) and revolutionary movements.

As far as the latter is concerned, I am intrigued by the pattern of the argument itself, namely that there is no authentic radical past upon which the Catholic Left may draw. In making his argument, Eagleton falls into the pattern of so many literary critics seeking to write history: like Raymond Williams, he draws evidence from literature such as that of Dickens, and the references to historical materials are desperately thin, quoting a little too often from one text, Kenneth Inglis's *Churches and the Working Class in Victorian England* from 1963. He tries to characterise the history of the churches (for once he does seek to deal with most of the Christian churches) and social movements in England in terms of three patterns: the liberal contradiction of seeking to connect with the working classes for their own “good” and ensure the churches’ survival; the anti-institutionalism of so-called Christian socialism, where “socialism” meant primarily morality, relationships and the inner life over against structural change; and the problem of conservative radicalism, in which opposition to capitalism was cast in reactionary terms. All of these then become past

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<sup>46</sup> Terry Eagleton, and Brian Wicker, ed., *From Culture to Revolution: The Slant Symposium 1967* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968a); Terry Eagleton, “The Slant Symposium,” *Slant* 3, no. 5 (1967b): 8–9.



mistakes from which the Catholic Left must learn in order to become “authentic radicals” (SM: 82). It turns out, then, that the Catholic Left and the work of *Slant* is decidedly new, without precedent. Decidedly untrue, but here already is an early glimmer here of what would become Eagleton’s infatuation with autotelism. Now it takes the shape of the argument that the Catholic Left has emerged emerged *ex nihilo*, without any connection to what has gone before it. We find this feature recurring later, not least in his arguments that the Left would find an engagement with theology beneficial, but now without a whisper concerning his earlier work.

What about the other ecclesiological fragment, the argument that the priesthood should be understood in terms of Lenin’s vanguard? I must confess that even with Eagleton’s caveat—the effort “to meet the alarmed or simply amused incredulity likely to be raised” (BL: 76; PL: 12)—it does not count as one of his better arguments, even if we go back to his earlier argument that the priesthood must become democratic (NLC: 104–17). Certainly, it flows from the argument that if the notion of the *anawim* and of christology itself is one of historical and political death and resurrection, and that if the Church is to become a revolutionary body pointing to a socialist future, then the priesthood may be understood in Lenin’s terms. Further, Eagleton is influenced by at least one of the revolutionary priests in Latin America, as the one and only allusion in all of Eagleton’s writings to liberation theology in the person of Camilo Torres indicates (BL: 93; PL: 17). In the swirl of the sixties anything seemed possible, from the tongue-in-cheek anti-medicine and an anti-hospital in which patients would be able, “under democratic-participatory controls, to infect one another with germs in order to experience the transcendently liberating effects of serious disease”<sup>47</sup> to the presumably less-tongue-in-cheek priesthood as a Leninist vanguard. In the confidence of those years, Marxism was after all “the most elaborated revolutionary theory of our time” (BL: 76; PL: 12).

There are two parts to Eagleton’s argument: that the three-way dialectic

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<sup>47</sup> Terry Eagleton, “Anti-Medicine,” *Slant* 4, no. 4 (1968): 32.



between revolutionary vanguard or party, working class rank and file and society at large is analogous to that between priesthood, laity, and society; and that the priesthood in all its dimensions is a sacrament, a signifier of the Church's engagement with history. He will even valorise the discipline and hierarchy of vanguard and priesthood, "welded together by obedience and authority" (BL: 85; PL: 15) as a necessary feature, although always on guard against becoming a self-serving elite rather than a movement at the service of the people. When we get to this point, what he calls the "sacrament of order" (BL: 85, 86; PL: 15), a hierarchical vanguard that is incongruously necessary for a future "freedom-in-brotherhood" (BL: 85; PL: 15), his argument begins to break down. The last phrase I quoted betrays all of the problems with such a hierarchical and disciplined body such as the priesthood: celibate, male, self-perpetuating, inherently conservative, not to mention indelibly Roman Catholic. Try as he might, stressing incongruity, fallenness, friction, paradox, and withering away, he cannot get around the road-block that he recognises a few years earlier (see SM: 44). Eagleton would once have argued that in this respect the priesthood has failed to live up to his expectations; now, the fact that he has avoided recycling this argument, preferring to torch any remaining copy of the book as a whole, says enough.

Not the most stunning of ecclesiological reflections, no matter how innovative they might have seemed at the time. It is not so strange, then, that his heavy investment in *Slant* and in the Roman Catholic Church itself should receive such scant mention in his memoir, *The Gatekeeper*, or that the elaboration in *Sweet Violence* of the same argument from the sixth chapter of *The Body as Language* on the political implications of Christ's death and resurrection should give no reference to that earlier text.

Yet I do find it strange all the same that there is only the slightest of allusions in his later work.<sup>48</sup> For the Catholic Left and *Slant* were

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<sup>48</sup> Even on his academic web page at the University of Lancaster, in 2011, all one finds is this guarded recognition: "Eagleton's Irishness connects with a Catholicism which is evident not only in very early books like *The New Left Church* (1966) but also such recent works as *Sweet Violence* (2003), *Holy Terror* (2005), and *Trouble with Strangers* (2008)." No mention of the Catholic Left, *Slant* or



clearly important for Eagleton, going by the appearance in almost every issue of the journal of one piece or another by him, his role as general editor before it folded, and the listing of his own address at Jesus College, Cambridge, for correspondence concerning editorial matters. In the memoir, there is much on his role as “gatekeeper” in the convent for enclosed Carmelite nuns, the liberated sisters in the early hey-day of post-Vatican II, his Roman Catholic grammar school or the brief spell at a seminary at the mature age of 13, and especially on the dissonant value of minority Roman Catholics in a Protestant England. On this last matter, he points to the suspicion of the inner glow of private experience and subjectivism, along with the aversion to outward emotion and the Irish passion for the tribe, to the combination of sensuous symbolism and rigorous thought, to the incongruous combination of a deep pessimism about the way things are and a profound hope that they could be immeasurably better. And, like Althusser, he points to the astonishingly easy move from Roman Catholicism to Marxism without the halfway house of liberalism (see GK: 30–37).

Now, we might want to disagree with Eagleton’s association of minority Roman Catholicism and Marxism in England, for British Marxism has as much if not more dissenting and sectarian Protestantism about it than Roman Catholicism. As Andrew Milner pointed out to me, the “habit of bearing witness from the sidelines, whilst denouncing each other as schismatics, was surely passed from the religious to the political sects.”<sup>49</sup> Yet, in light of Eagleton’s suggestion in *The Gatekeeper* that, at least for him, the road from Roman Catholicism to Marxism was indeed wide, the dismissive and passing mention of *Slant* looks odd indeed. He devotes more attention to Lawrence Bright, at whose suggestion *Slant* was established and who was on the editorial committee. As for his complete absorption in the Catholic Left and *Slant* itself, this is all I could find: “The name of the journal, indeed the very same design, was finally adopted by a porno magazine, which Lawrence spotted one day in a Soho shop-

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even *The Body as Language*. See <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/english/profiles/Terry-Eagleton>.

<sup>49</sup> Personal communication.





window and gleefully circulated to the former editors. Nowadays people write the odd doctoral thesis on the Catholic Left, which I suppose is one up from oblivion” (GK: 28). Not a bad dismissal, really, along with, “Years later, when I had some reputation as a leftist theologian. . .” (GK: 7). I am less interested in the motives for Eagleton’s drawing of the curtain across this crucial element of his past, for favouring his involvement with a far-Left political group in the 1980s over the Catholic Left, than in the effect it has on his theological reflections that appear also in the memoir. As I have argued above, there is much that the later Eagleton recycles from his earlier theological writings with nary a whisper of reference to those earlier works: they appear as it were out of nothing, fresh and new, a defence of a political or Left theology that emerges only late in his work. The almost complete erasure of that past, the blacking out of the politically charged Catholic Left that provided the substance of his theological thought, is expressed most clearly in the one significant new interest of these later reflections, namely the intrinsic nature of key theological concepts. Autotelism may then be read as a symptom of this repressed past.

And yet, even if the Catholic Left and the Roman Catholic Church itself in the turmoil of the sixties was the context of most of Eagleton’s theological positions, generated out of a desire to reform the church from within by means of Marxism (see BL: 94–115), this is hardly the context of Eagleton’s return to theology at the turn of the millennium. By that time he had long since left that circumscribed institutional location to become one of the leading Marxist literary and cultural critics. In contrast to his earlier desire to bring Marxism into the Roman Catholic Church, along with the insights of contemporary linguistic theory (especially Barthes, Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein) that characterises *The Body as Language*, the scourge of the establishment seeks to bring theology into the debates within the Left. Hence the curiously idealistic image of the Church and theology that appears in these works. Hence the almost complete absence of references to theological works, especially liberation and political theology, except for one to Herbert McCabe’s *God Matters*<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (London: 1987).



and the dedication of *Sweet Violence* to McCabe, a comrade from the old Catholic Left. One hardly gains the impression of a flawed and often brutal institution from Eagleton's later theological writings. Or rather, when he does recognise the less than idyllic nature of the Church,<sup>51</sup> he is keen to move beyond that which stops so many short at the gates of that institution. His polemical targets are now liberals and conservatives of any ilk rather than those within the Church (see BL: 94–100), the odd postmodernist every now and then, as well as the theologically ill-informed fellow travellers on the Left, rather than positions he opposes within the Church. In this context, it becomes easier to present theology as an autonomous discipline, concerned with itself and in some curious way immune from being implicated in the less than illustrious past of capitalism.

## Conclusion

It remains, then, not so much to summarise my objections to Eagleton's move back into theology after so many years, but to pick up some of the bits and pieces of a materialist theology, and perhaps even a historical materialist philosophy of religion. What is useful in Eagleton will turn out to be not his central concerns—re-interpreting basic Roman Catholic positions for their revolutionary potential, especially christology as well as autotelism—but the peripheral matters, ones that emerged in my critical engagement with his work.

In fact, the list is very brief, since I see no promise at all in Eagleton's major focus, christology. There are two items: the first falls into the orbit of harmatology, namely forgiveness, or political forgive-

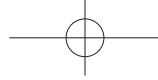
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<sup>51</sup> "Religion, and perhaps Christianity in particular, has wreaked untold havoc in human affairs. Bigotry, false consolation, brutal authoritarianism, sexual oppression: these are only a handful of the characteristics for which it stands condemned at the tribunal of history. Its role, with some honourable exceptions, has been to consecrate pillage and canonize injustice. In many respects, religion today represents one of the most odious forms of political reaction on the planet, a blight on human freedom and a buttress of the rich and powerful. But there are also theological ideas which can be politically illuminating, and this book is among other things an exploration of them" (SV: xvii).



ness. Rather than a moral expectation, a purely private notion of personal forgiveness, and rather than the prime focus of forgiveness as a feature of one's relationship with God, by political forgiveness I refer to the imperative to close down the circuit of revenge and retaliation, of the *lex talionis* that is graven on our social and economic life. This much Eagleton himself says, although I did need to draw out the political implications. He comes up short at the point of dealing with the perpetrators of vast political, economic, and environmental crimes, of genocide and so on. For forgiveness has too easily been used as a device by the ruling classes to justify their abuses of power. Here he equivocates, suggesting that forgiveness is no easy matter, that it requires hard work from both perpetrators and victims, without giving up on the notion of a just punishment for the crime. But the important question I want to ask is: what if forgiveness became the underlying pattern of our legal systems, of our economic and political modes of operating, of the very relations of power themselves? I can hardly see them surviving in any recognisable form if this were the case. A little like the relatively simple demand for full employment, the demand for forgiveness has a whole series of repercussions that would lead to the breakdown of capitalism itself.

Second, I raised the question of transcendence, specifically in my discussion of sin. For it seems to me that we cannot do without some reference to transcendence and its inescapable theological and philosophical partner, immanence. Over against the ontological reserve of Eagleton (autotelism, the categories of sin and goodness and so on), I will argue in the conclusion to this book for a temporal rather than ontological transcendence, one that builds its case out of the eschatology of the Hebrew Bible.





## Chapter Seven

# The Conversion of Slavoj Žižek

Slavoj Žižek has undertaken the monumental task of re-inventing the Protestant Reformation within his own writing. Not only does he discover, in a long and convoluted search that gets lost time and again in various blind alleys and cul-de-sacs, the Protestant doctrine of grace, but he also wants to identify its materialist, political core. On the way he desperately tries to discard, and is successful only fleetingly and partially, the Roman Catholic (or should I say, Lacanian?) emphasis on ethics, law, and love. Given the fundamental place of such a materialist grace in any materialist theology, this chapter traces his arguments in resolute and sustained detail.

In what follows I begin with the challenge that led to Žižek's "conversion," which I will leave in scare quotes until I can speak about it in more detail. For one who held Christianity and Marxism at the end of each arm, Žižek emerges as a proponent of both at the end of the millennium. Thus, after considering his treatment of both Marx and religion more generally (usually through Jewish jokes) in a sample of his earlier work, I turn to the challenge posed to Žižek by Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. While Butler points out that psychoanalysis cannot provide the basis for a viable politics, particularly because it will constantly raise the issue of the constitutive exception to any political move, Laclau picks up on the highly undeveloped status of Žižek's more recent statements in favour of Marxism. And the criticism bites, so much so that it will lead eventually



to his double “conversion,” one to Christ and the other to Marx. While the “conversion” to Marx, or rather Lenin, was not possible without the “conversion” to Christ, or rather Paul, and vice versa, it is not quite so balanced. Whereas Žižek will identify himself openly as a Marxist-Leninist, calling himself a “fighting materialist” like Lenin (FA: 1), brandishing the membership card of a party that has by and large ceased to exist, he will not make the same move for Christianity, although he does dare an occasional “we Christians” or “true Christians.” You will not find him sneaking off to a Reformed Protestant worship service, although he would probably spend the afternoon arguing about the sermon with the minister over a glass of wine and a cigar. However, a major reason for his turn to Pauline Christianity is that it enables Žižek to get out of the closed circuit of Lacan’s psychoanalysis, to dispense in particular with the constitutive exception, no matter how much he might describe such a break in Lacanian terms. As I noted in the previous chapter, Eagleton points to the tension between Žižek’s Lacanian pessimism and his giddy, optimistic style—not in terms of a necessary tension between two extremities called for in our current situation, but as a compensation. I want to suggest that the tension is even more marked between Lacan and Lenin (although Lenin does not usually come through as a bright and sunny individual). How does Žižek get from one to the other? Through the founding figure of Christianity—Paul—a necessary and by no means vanishing mediator who enables the move from one to the other.

Yet he does not get quite so far in the initial responses to Butler and Laclau, for he must first negotiate the insistent challenge from Alain Badiou. Although he will eventually draw the means of the breakout from Badiou’s book on Paul, in his initial engagement with Badiou, Žižek focuses on the challenge Badiou poses for psychoanalysis. And that challenge is that psychoanalysis deals, however well, with our everyday world full of quotidian exploitation, political disappointment and fundamental injustice. In Badiou’s terms, this is the Order of Being, while in Lacan’s terms it is the intertwining of law and desire—terms



that are in fact those of Paul as well as we saw in my discussion of Eagleton. For Badiou, the truth-event—his reading of Paul’s absolute emphasis on grace – inexplicably breaks into this Order of Being, enabling the militant revolutionary movement of which Paul’s early Christians are the prime model. Paul is then the revolutionary figure to whom Badiou reaches back beyond Lenin.<sup>1</sup> Žižek will later move the other way, from Paul to Lenin, but what I focus on in this section is the nature of Žižek’s response to Badiou, particularly in *The Ticklish Subject*. He will answer Badiou in terms of the constitutive exception: every effort at emancipation, every Cause (Žižek’s preferred term for the truth-event) has to face up to the constitutive exception, to the underside that both enables the Cause to get under way in the first place and hobbles it every step of the way. And this argument renders Žižek unable to take up a distinct political position, however much he may wish to do so. What also interests me here is the way Žižek neglects other elements of Badiou’s work, particularly his discussion of materialist grace to which Žižek returns only much later.

But what of the conversion itself? I cast this unapologetically in Protestant terms, namely the gradual and halting realisation of the implications of the theological notion of grace. The crucial distinction here will be that between ethics and the gospel, or law and grace (Pauline terms, although I will dispense with Žižek’s thundering capitals for these theological terms). Time and again, Žižek will glimpse the materialist and political possibilities of grace, only to slip back into the realm of ethics and the law. Again Badiou will be important, more for what Žižek misses. Initially, Žižek comes out squarely on the side of ethics (like Eagleton) and gets caught in the cul-de-sac of love, but then later he attempts to correct this slide into moralising by kicking the lever over onto the gospel itself. In order to locate a materialist version of grace, Žižek finally leaves

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<sup>1</sup> Even Badiou, let alone Žižek, is not the first “to risk the comparison that makes of him [Paul] a Lenin for whom Christ will have been the equivocal Marx.” Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 2. Compare Žižek: “there is no Christ outside Saint Paul; in exactly the same way, there is no ‘authentic’ Marx that can be approached directly, bypassing Lenin” (FA: 2).



Lacan, however reluctantly and momentarily, in the care of the ethicists and philosophers of love and hitches a ride with Lenin where revolutionary grace can flourish. For reasons that will become clear, I find this part of Žižek's argument one of the most intriguing and promising.

Unlike some of the other critics dealt with in this book, Žižek has no discernable past in any Church, nor do buried theological texts threaten to turn up at any moment in some second-hand bookstore on the wrong side of the railway lines. What we have instead is a plate full of later arguments, a brimming political argument placed squarely on my desk before me. So my task shifts from reading sidelined, forgotten and actively neglected works to material that is very much part of theoretical political debate at the moment. I am interested in four main texts by Žižek, and one by Alain Badiou. *The Fragile Absolute* is in many respects the first part of a longer work in which *On Belief* is the second part, the one Roman Catholic, the other Protestant. *The Puppet and the Dwarf* is a mix, summarising the previous two books in consecutive chapters and filling out some gaps, except for the final and somewhat unwitting step in the path to a materialist grace.<sup>2</sup> Along with Alain Badiou's *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*,<sup>3</sup> these books form the fulcrum on which my argument will turn. But then, since Žižek's many volumes may well be read as one continuous text, cut off arbitrarily due to the material limits of paper publication, the subject of the next monograph usually appears towards the close of the preceding one. For this reason I will include in this gathering *The Ticklish Subject* and the dialogues with Laclau and Mouffe in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*.

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say Žižek has not mentioned Christianity, theology or even Paul earlier (see, for instance FTKN: 2, 29, 78 on Paul), but the references are fleeting and tangential. Of course, the title *For They Know Not What They Do* comes from one of the statements put in Christ's mouth on the cross: "Father. Forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Since I first wrote this chapter, Žižek has of course reflected further on theology, but the key positions have not altered to any great extent. See *The Parallax View* from 2006, 68–123, and the exchange with John Milbank in *The Monstrosity of Christ* from 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*.





## The Darkness of Lacan: The Challenge of Butler and Laclau

To put it bluntly, it seems to me that Žižek emerges as a political writer only after the exchange with Ernesto Laclau and Judith Butler in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, and that dispensing the murk of his political credentials in terms of Leninist Marxism could happen only *with* and *by means of* Paul. The second point I will explore in the following sections on Badiou and materialist grace, for it seems to me that it is specifically Badiou's Paul that enables, eventually and with much hesitation, the crucial move for Žižek, namely, the ability to move out of the illuminating but ultimately closed circle of Lacan's theory in order to become a political writer. But that is jumping the gun, for my interest here is with the first point. Judith Butler's criticism is that the Lacanian constitutive exception—the excluded item that is in fact the basis of the system in question—closes down any possibility of taking a political position. In response to Butler, Žižek voices some quite traditional Marxist categories—class conflict, mode of production, the over-arching presence of capitalism—and he comes in for a beating at the hands of Laclau for this move. But Žižek has not always been so openly Marxist. In fact, up until that exchange Žižek always distanced himself from Marxism. It was the subject of jokes or illustrations of a particular Lacanian point, usually in terms of the old communist regimes in the former Yugoslavia or USSR, or in anecdotes about the personal lives of Marx and Engels. Žižek did, after all, hail from a “former” communist country, and so it would not do to identify too closely with the old guard (hence running for president for a liberal reform party). So, in what follows I discuss two instances of this earlier ambivalence over Marx<sup>4</sup>—a Žižek joke and the argument that although Marx invented the notion of the constitutive exception it can only be fulfilled in Lacan—before listening more closely to the dialogues

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<sup>4</sup> Although it seems a little ludicrous to differentiate between earlier and later works for one who has published essays in English since only 1987 and monographs since 1989. The Slovenian works from 1980 are beyond me (see the list in SOI: xi).



with Butler and Laclau, where the hurdle to a political position turns out to be the constitutive exception itself.

Before proceeding, however, I need to distinguish between being a political writer—by this is meant a position that provides a distinct alternative to liberal politics within capitalism—and involvement in politics itself. For Žižek has been involved in politics: *For They Know Not What They Do*, published in 1991, is the revised text of a series of three-hour lectures given over six weeks in the winter semester of 1989–90 in Ljubljana, then still part of Yugoslavia, in the midst of the political upheaval of the end of that decade. As an introductory course on Lacan, their major audience was the motley crew of intellectuals who formed the brains of the movement for “democratic” change. Žižek himself casts it in terms of the New Testament *kairos*, an extraordinary moment comparable to the student unrest in Paris of 1968: “The lectures were delivered in the unique atmosphere of those months: a time of intense political ferment, with ‘free elections’ only weeks ahead, when all options still seemed open, the time of a ‘short circuit’ blending together political activism, the ‘highest’ theory (Hegel, Lacan) and unrestrained enjoyment in the ‘lowest’ popular culture—a unique utopian moment. . .” (FTK: 3). Yet, I cannot help but wonder at how they were received. Over such a long stretch did the audience understand them at all? Did such high theory do anything more than befuddle its recipients? At least one person whom I know personally attended these lectures and found them almost incomprehensible. Unless we were to follow the old Presbyterian adage, that a congregation is never satisfied unless the sermon goes way over their heads, I am not sure that befuddlement makes for the best political agitation.

These lectures, however, already speak of a profound ambivalence concerning Marx. I will content myself here with but one instance, the Žižek joke, whose mode is heavily indebted to Freud’s study (often a Žižek joke is merely a recycled one from Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*). The jokes are more about the former communist bloc countries of Eastern Europe than about Marx himself. Thus, at the beginning of *For They Know Not What They Do* we find Rabinovitch, the



Soviet Jew who seeks to emigrate. The emigration officer inquires concerning his reasons, to which Rabinovitch replies:

“There are two reasons why. The first is that I’m afraid that the Communists will lose power in the Soviet Union, and the new forces will blame us Jews for the Communist crimes. . .” “But,” interrupts the bureaucrat, “this is pure nonsense, the power of the Communists will last for ever!” “Well,” responds Rabinovitch calmly, “that’s my second reason” (FTK: 1)

However, Žižek’s interest in the joke is not in its original form, before the “collapse” of communism in Eastern Europe, but in the turmoil of the false freedom of capitalism that ensued in the years whirling around 1989. Thus, with Jews steadily leaving the Soviet Union and the return of overt anti-Semitism, Žižek imagines a reversal of the joke:

“There are two reasons why. The first is that I know that Communism in Russia will last for ever, nothing will really change here, and this prospect is unbearable for me. . .” “But,” interrupts the bureaucrat, “this is pure nonsense, Communism is disintegrating all around! All those responsible for the Communist crimes will be severely punished!” “That’s my second reason!” responds Rabinovitch (FTKN: 1).

Here we have the characteristic twist that Žižek enacts time and again, the dialectical inversion that is the stamp of his immersion in Hegel, as well as an interest in Judaism that has not abated. From the subject of jokes through efforts to produce a psychoanalytic theory of anti-Semitism, particularly in its Nazi form, to the comparisons between Judaism and Christianity, Judaism and Jews are persistent features of his work. Even the joke itself is perpetually recycled. In its most recent incarnation (PD: 77–78), Žižek suggests that Christianity is the ultimate form of the Rabinovitch joke; that is, in Christianity the point is not to overcome the gap between us and God but to see how this gap is internal to God himself (this is what Christ shows).

But what we find in the joke is that Marx is conveniently sidelined, standing back in at least the second row: not only does Žižek speak of the Soviet Union, the most powerful experiment in socialism except



perhaps for China, but he rewrites the joke in terms of the end of communism itself. Jokes like these bring out most sharply the role of Marx in these earlier texts: one must of course refer to him, especially in the context of the massive changes that took place in the 80s and 90s, but he is in the past, the motivation for a failed economic and political system as well as a step on the way to a preferred theoretical option, namely, Lacan's.

When Marx appears—and this is the second example of Žižek's earlier treatment of Marx—as the direct subject of discussion, he is a proto-Lacanian, one responsible for first formulating, however imperfectly, the crucial Lacanian category of the constitutive exception. In the first chapter of Žižek's first book in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, he frames this in terms of how Marx “invented the notion of the symptom” (SOI: 11), particularly with the well-known discussion in the first part of *Capital* on the fetishism of commodities. Yet, although Žižek credits Marx for his original idea, for setting on its way a category that would bear untold fruit, in the end Marx is but a first step on the way to Lacan, via Freud.

Like Freud who followed him, Marx's insight was to seek the secret of the form, not the content hidden behind the form, let alone the content itself. For Marx, the question was the commodity form: how does it function in providing the key to capitalism as a distinct mode of production? He was not interested in the hidden content of the commodity (human labour), since classical economists had already unearthed that content. Rather, he sought the reason for the form itself. What Marx did was take the anomalies of capitalism, the perceived blockages and distortions of the system, as the secret of the system itself: in short, the constitutive exception. Thus, the cycles of boom and bust, economic crises and wars, are not deviations that stand in the way of the full realisation of capitalism, but symptoms of the system, revealing the fundamentally antagonistic and unstable nature of capitalism. In other words, as Žižek will point out time and again, drawing from Marx's third volume of *Capital*, the limit of capitalism is Capital itself, the capitalist mode of production (see SOI: 51): the limit to the system is that which provides the very possibility of that system. Hence, in light of the constant tension between the forces



and relations of production, the constant need to revolutionise itself to survive, the “normal” state of instability and imbalance, “it is this very immanent limit, this ‘internal contradiction,’ which drives capitalism into permanent development” (SOI: 52). For instance, the dream of open competition sees the great hurdle not merely in terms of tariffs imposed by the governments of various nation-states, but in monopolies. Yet, the desire to outstrip one’s competitors has as its final goal precisely such a market monopoly, which then becomes the condition of possibility, the constitutive limit, of the “free market.” But it is Marx’s focus on the anomalies and disruptions, the excesses that show how the system really works, that is the same as Freud’s method. For the secret to the human psyche lies not in its normal operation, but in the slips and breaks, parapraxes and dreams that provide the glimpses of another, deeper logic. Put succinctly, the questions Marx and Freud sought to answer were: why does the result of human labour take the commodity form, and why have latent-dream thoughts assumed the form they have, appearing in dreams? In the specific form of the symptom, both Marx and Freud make the discovery that will become crucial for Žižek’s work and for my discussion in this chapter, namely, the constitutive exception. It will turn out to be at the centre of his flood of Lacanian insights as well as the source of his difficulty in throwing off Lacan and turning to Lenin by means of Paul’s doctrine of grace.

However, in this chapter from *The Sublime Object of Ideology* we find that Marx quickly drops behind the scenes: when he does appear, he is immediately subjected to re-readings in which Lacan provides the keys. In fact, most of Marx’s positions fall short before the feet of Lacan in what becomes a rather familiar pattern of discerning the function of the constitutive exception. On ideology: for Marx “the ideological gaze is a *partial* gaze overlooking the *totality* of social relations” (SOI: 49), a false universalisation in which a contingent and historically particular position becomes dominant, such as human rights which are in fact the tool of capitalist exploitation, or the generic “man” is in fact the bourgeois individual. By contrast, for Lacan “ideology rather designates a *totality set on effacing the traces of its own impossibility*” (SOI: 49), ex-



amples of which I have already cited—Capital as the limit of capitalism, the extraneous item or anomaly as the secret of the system itself, and so on. On fetishism: for Marx the fetish “conceals the positive network of social relations” (SOI: 49), whereas for psychoanalysis the fetish “conceals the lack (‘castration’) around which the symbolic network is articulated” (SOI: 49). On money: in order to answer the question Marx himself was unable to answer—to specify the sublime material character of money, the indestructible and non-corruptible material of money that endures beyond its immediate material nature—Žižek argues that only the “psychoanalytic notion of money as a ‘pre-phallic,’ ‘anal’ object is acceptable” (SOI: 18), but only if we remember that such a notion of the sublime body depends on the Symbolic order. On surplus value: what Marx failed to see in his theory of surplus value, “the ‘cause’ which sets in motion the capitalist process of production” (SOI: 53), is the function of surplus-enjoyment, the object-cause of desire, the excess that embodies the fundamental lack.

What I want to pick up, however, is the way Žižek turns Marx’s discovery of the symptom back upon him, via Lacan. Even with the few examples I have given, the characteristic Žižekian move becomes clear: the identification of that which is excluded or, even more profoundly, the methodological assumption that what cannot be identified—variously the Real, the surplus object, *objet petit a*, the fetish, woman and so on—provides us with the structural logic of the system, of thought, society, economics or whatever. As far as socialism itself is concerned, the fundamental problem is that socialism is not possible if we stick with Marx’s logic . . . or is that Lacan’s logic? Thus, in light of the argument that the very possibility of a particular system may be found in its limits, or as Judith Butler will put it, its aporias, socialism must therefore operate with similar blockages, anomalies that both forestall the full realisation of socialism and thereby enable its very existence. Or, in terms of the tension between the relations and forces of production, Marx was right when he saw this tension as the very logic of the capitalism itself, the instability and constant revolutionising that are the result of this tension or limit. But Marx was wrong when he argued that a socialist revolution arises when the forces of production



outstrip their relations, and that socialism would rearrange the relations of production in order to release the forces of production. In other words, socialism could not but help replicate capitalism: “Is it not already a commonplace to assert that ‘real socialism’ has rendered possible rapid industrialisation, but that as soon as the productive forces have reached a certain level of development (usually designated by the vague term ‘post-industrial society’), ‘real socialist’ social relations began to constrict their further growth” (SOI: 53)? The ingenuity of Žižek is that he locates the impossibility of socialism squarely with Marx and the contradictions of his various texts—in this case the third volume of *Capital* and the *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. But it is a reading saturated with Lacan; hence Žižek’s preference for the first option, in which the limit of capitalism is Capital itself.

So, we find ourselves with various strategies in which Marx is replaced with jokes, or he is the precursor to Lacan’s constitutive exception, which will then come to our aid by cleaning up Marx’s errors one after the other. And this last point, concerning the constitutive exception, is where Judith Butler’s criticism in the dialogues of *Culture, Hegemony, Universality* gets its grip: Lacanian psychoanalysis in the end closes down any possibility for what is new, for a viable politics beyond capitalism.

At two points in her first contribution to the dialogues, Butler comes back to the argument that psychoanalysis forbids any step out of the system, that the way Žižek’s dialectic works is to generate an impasse at the very point where such a break opens up. First, on the question of hegemony, she recognises the astuteness of Žižek’s many recyclings of this move, which, as I have pointed out above, relies on the notion that the remainder or surplus, that which is left out, comes to be crucial for the construction and viability of whatever is in question. Given that hegemony is not so much a description of the status quo but rather an inquiry into the means of political change—through, as I discussed in the chapter on Gramsci, the combination of force and consent, and then elaborated in the influential text of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*<sup>5</sup>—the key issue is that of opposition to domination.

<sup>5</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Democratic Socialist*



But, according to the Hegelian and Lacanian logic that Žižek employs, what happens is “that that very point of opposition is the instrument through which domination works, and that we have unwittingly enforced the powers of domination through our participation in its opposition” (Butler in CHU: 28).

Butler is puzzled, throwing a series of questions at Žižek that all hinge on the impossibility of political action from within a Lacan read in terms of Hegel: “But where does one go from here?” she asks. “Does the exposition of an aporia, even a constitutive aporia at the level of the linguistic performative, work in the service of a counter-hegemonic project?” (Butler in CHU: 28). Or quite directly, where is the possibility of something new, especially in a social and political direction? In fact, what Žižek does, suggests Butler, is pursue the other dimension of hegemony, namely the myriad ways in which consent operates, particularly to what constrains and limits us:

But what remains less clear to me is how one moves beyond such a dialectical reversal or impasse to something new. How would the new be produced from an analysis of the social field that remains restricted to inversions, aporias and reversals that work regardless of time and place? Do these reversals produce something other than their own structurally identical repetitions (Butler in CHU: 29)?

The second point where Butler reiterates the same criticism is on the question of the subject, particularly the ‘incompletion’ of the subject that is rendered by the bar—\$. And that incompleteness, the impossibility of constituting the subject, is the result of the Lacanian Real, the realm that can never be represented, forever holding an unbridgeable space between the traumatic emergence of the subject and the subject, except that it is precisely this gap, this limit that generates the subject. Butler’s problem here is how such a position might be compatible with hegemony, where the incompleteness of the subject is understood in light of as yet unknown political and social subjects. In terms of hegemony, the in-

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*Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).





completion of the subject is a distinctly historical question, but in Žižek's formulation the barred subject is ahistorical, or, as she puts, structural. Thus, she asks, in a repeat of the first question with which she opens the dialogues (see Butler in CHU: 5): "Can the ahistorical recourse to the Lacanian bar be reconciled with the strategic question that hegemony poses, or does it stand as a quasi-transcendental limitation on all possible subject-formations and strategies and, hence, as fundamentally indifferent to the political field it is said to condition?" (Butler in CHU: 13). Or, more extensively,

If the subject always meets its limit in the selfsame place, then the subject is fundamentally exterior to the history in which it finds itself: there is no historicity to the subject, its limits, its articulability. Moreover, if we accept the notion that all historical struggle is nothing other than a vain effort to displace a founding limit that is structural in status, do we then commit ourselves to a distinction between the historical and the structural domains that subsequently excludes the historical domain from the understanding of opposition? (Butler in CHU: 13)

Butler's questions concern not only the closed circle of Lacanian analysis, in which the break to something new is but another way we are contained within the system, but also the perpetual suspension of the domains of politics and history in the structures of Lacanian thought. In other words, how can Žižek conceive of a viable politics that seeks to have some historical impact and that remains within the aspirations of the Left? My argument here is that Paul, initially via Badiou, provides Žižek with the beginnings of an answer, one that will set him on a path to Lenin.

But first, in the dialogues Žižek responds with a series of points—that Butler has misunderstood Lacan on certain points, that the opposition between a structural, ahistorical Lacan and the historical arena of politics is highly problematic, that we should not succumb to a premature historicising, that Lacan's arguments have a distinctly historical and political dimension to them—but what is noticeable here (when *The Ticklish Subject* was his most recent book and *The Fragile Absolute* had



not yet appeared) is that Butler's criticism bites. Compared to his earlier texts, Žižek writes with a far greater political urgency, sounding more like Jameson than the monogamous (the term is Laclau's in CHU: 76) Lacanian mass cultural aesthete (if such a thing is possible) of some of his earlier material. In the dialogues, Marx is far less the one who sits in the background amongst the jesters or finds himself usurped by Lacan: rather, he is the initial means for a Žižek seeking to respond to the criticisms and thereby become far more directly political.

Now, for Žižek, that which is left out, the unnameable and unrepresentable ground of the political possibilities both Butler and Laclau explore, the conditions for the dispersed and shifting postmodern political subjectivities, the background to Laclau's historical narrative of the move from essentialist Marxism to the contingent politics of postmodernism, or even the context of Butler's account of the shift from sexual essentialism to contingent sexual formation, is capitalism itself. Or rather, what we have here is not "a simple epistemological process but part of the global change in the very nature of capitalist society" (Žižek in CHU: 106). Is this a much more political Lacan? In fact, it is straight Marxist theory illuminated by Lacan: the Real has become that which refuses to be historicised (the stages of capitalism) and politicised (the economy, which simply cannot be changed). What he is after is not the contingency or incompleteness within a particular horizon but the exclusion that constitutes the horizon itself.

For all his detailed response to Butler's criticisms, her point remains valid, it seems to me. Thus, even though he charges Butler herself with being ahistorical (the proper dialectic should be between historical change and the traumatic historical kernel), that she is not historicist enough, since her notion of "passionate attachment" remains the limit of subjectivity, with harbouring a Kantian formalism (gender performativity is her a priori formal model), even though he argues for historicity rather than historicism, or a need to historicise any historicist move—despite all these attempts to correct her perception of psychoanalysis and even of Hegel, the question concerning the political possibilities of Lacanian psychoanalysis remains. As Butler points out in her second essay, Žižek conflates Lacan and Marx: capitalism becomes both the occluded and



unrepresentable Real of hegemonic struggles *and* the specific background of those struggles. Or, in his effort to “patch” Lacan into a Marxist framework, Žižek argues that capitalism is the primary condition for hegemony and that the subject as lack is the primary condition, without any explanation as to how these two primary conditions—the one historicist and the other formalist—relate to each other (see Butler in CHU: 137–9). In other words, when he wants to make a political point, Žižek turns to Marx; Lacan has to fit in somehow.

Laclau makes a similar point, although in more detail. Somewhat nonplussed by Žižek’s overt Marxism in the dialogues, he writes:

I think that Žižek’s political thought suffers from a certain “combined and uneven development.” While his Lacanian tools, together with his insight, have allowed him to make considerable advances in the understanding of ideological processes in contemporary societies, his strictly political thought has not advanced at the same pace, and remains fixed in very traditional categories (Laclau in CHU: 206).

Laclau castigates him for taking terms acritically from the Marxist tradition, or more precisely from the writings of Marx himself and from the period of the Russian Revolution, without any awareness of the subsequent debates and intellectual history of the terms (Gramsci, Trotsky, Austro-Marxism, and so on). Laclau cites the questions of ideology, class, and capitalism, suggesting that Žižek’s assertions have little argument to back them up, and that even then they are at best highly troubled. As far as Laclau is concerned, the Marxist categories appear as a collective *deus ex machina* to render Žižek’s Lacanian framework political—the obverse of Butler’s take, but the point is the same. Laclau is of course much more enamoured with deconstruction than Žižek, and he is suspicious of any Marxist category that has not gone through the deconstructionist grinder (although it seems to me that this is different from being aware of the intellectual and political history of Marxism). But the point remains: Žižek’s “discourse is schizophrenically split between a highly sophisticated Lacanian analysis and an insufficiently deconstructed traditional Marxism” (Laclau in CHU: 205).



Žižek's problem as it emerges in the dialogues lies, I would suggest, in the ambiguity over the 'cure' provided by psychoanalysis. To put it crudely, whereas Freud explicitly sought an end to the analytic process, worrying when such a process failed (as with Dora), for Lacan the possibility of the end remained an open question. Would the analysand finally be cured, or was psychoanalysis a process without end? As Žižek points out in *The Ticklish Subject*, for Lacan psychoanalysis is not psychosynthesis: there is no new harmony, no new beginning for the subject. Instead, the desired moment is the Void, negativity, a wiping the slate clean (see TS: 153–34). However, at the point of the dialogues with Butler and Lacan, Žižek pursues two options. The first is to place the problem within Lacan's own development (see Žižek in CHU: 219–23, 254–55): thus the later Lacan devalues the paternal function and the importance of the Oedipal conflict and stresses that paternal authority is an imposture, a temporary stabilisation. If the early Lacan was given to conservative cultural criticism, then the later Lacan, especially from the 1960s, seeks a way out of this framework, to show that paternal authority, the big Other, the Symbolic order, is a fraud. This is the Lacan of the Real, which shows up the fragility and contingency of every symbolic constellation, that every historical figuration of the limit of the Real is always susceptible to radical breakdown and overhaul. And what is this Real? Capitalism itself. In other words, Lacan himself recognised the problem Butler identifies within his own theory, and his shift to emphasise the Real is his effort to deal with the problem of the closed circuit. But note what has happened here: the Real is capitalism. Even in the very discussion of Lacan, Žižek's second and preferred option for dealing with the problem both Butler and Laclau shows itself, namely the juxtaposition of Marx and Lacan. All of which constitutes a substantial shift from the material I discussed earlier in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. There, in the sections where Marx does come in for analysis, his positions, no matter how illuminating or important, function as useful precursors for crucial points in Lacan, or they are plainly inadequate in light of Lacan. By the end of the nineties, Marx is on his way to a rather spectacular comeback in Žižek's endless monograph.



Even so, Žižek will need to do more than throw Lacan and Marx together; rather than Lacan turning out to be a Marxist (and he will of course continue to defend the viability of Lacanian analysis), or indeed Marx a Lacanian *avant la lettre*, some mediation will need to come into play, some mechanism of transition that will link both Marx and Lacan at a much deeper level. In response to Laclau's criticism that he is insufficiently aware of the Marxist tradition, Žižek will become a Leninist. But, as I have suggested, the step to Lenin, which is at the same time the necessary mediation between Lacan and Marx, is Alain Badiou's reading of Paul. Although Žižek's relies on Badiou in his post-"conversion" books (*The Fragile Absolute* and *On Belief*), the mediation is already in place by the time of the dialogues, although Žižek does not utilise it at that point. I refer, of course, to the introduction of Badiou's Paul in *The Ticklish Subject*.

## Of Truth-Events and Sundry Matters: The Challenge of Badiou

Thus far I have stated my hypothesis quite simply: Žižek needs Christianity, or more specifically Paul and the New Testament to crack the shell of Lacan. Now for some detail to turn that hypothesis into a full-blooded argument, the first step of which is to show how Badiou gives him the strength to so do. Although he refers to Badiou at various points in his earlier works (FTK: 188, 270; PF: 26, 59, 92; TN: 4), only with *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek's first effort at a militantly political book,<sup>6</sup> does Badiou come to the fore. In Žižek's search for the "unacknowledged kernel" (IS: 2) of the Cartesian *cogito* in the book as a whole, Badiou becomes the prime exhibit of the post-Althusserians, those who developed their theories of the subject by touching base with Althusser but then

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<sup>6</sup> "While this book is philosophical in its basic tenor, it is first and foremost an engaged political intervention, addressing the burning question of how we are to reformulate a leftist, anti-capitalist political project in our era of global capitalism and its ideological supplement, liberal-democratic multiculturalism" (IS: 4).



moving on. But what happens here—and this is crucial—is that Žižek will still try to absorb Badiou into Lacan, and when he will not fit, then Lacan will do Badiou one better. Žižek needs to do this, for now at least, since the problem that emerged so clearly in the dialogues with Butler and Laclau is one that, on Žižek's reading, Badiou himself raises: “psychoanalysis is not able to provide the foundation of a new political practice” (TS: 3).

In other words, in Žižek's eyes Badiou challenges him directly with the problem I have been laying out in the previous section, namely whether psychoanalysis remains within the confines of that which is, the normal functioning of things, and cannot provide any break, any possibility of the *Novum*. This is how Žižek formulates the challenge:

For Badiou, what psychoanalysis provides is insight into the morbid intertwining of Life and Death, of Law and desire, an insight into the obscenity of the Law itself as the “truth” of the thought and moral stance that limit themselves to the Order of Being and its discriminatory Laws; as such, psychoanalysis cannot properly render thematic the domain beyond the Law, that is the mode of operation of fidelity to the Truth-Event—the psychoanalytic subject is the divided subject of the (symbolic) Law, *not* the subject divided between Law (which regulates the Order of Being) and Love (as fidelity to the Truth-Event) (TS: 162).

Now, such a quotation risks fading into the mists of obscurity, for it relies upon a whole panoply of Badiou's philosophical and theological terminology, but it is useful both as the recognition by Žižek of the fundamental challenge to any Lacanian politics and as a summary of the terms and categories that are important for Žižek's engagement with Badiou. Even without filling in the content of the various terms in the quotation, the distinctions and relationships between them are quite clear. Distinctions exist between: the Order of Being and the truth-event; law and love; life and death; law and desire; and the doubly split subject. The Order of Being is the realm of the law or rather the law “regulates” this order, whereas the truth-event is characterised by love, that which produces fidelity to the truth-event (I will return to this point



below, for it is a slight misreading of Badiou). Another term has crept in here, namely trust or fidelity (faith?), but I will put that aside. The Order of Being is the writhing mass of law and desire, of life and death. These related but different distinctions come out of Badiou's exegesis of Paul's letter to the Romans, especially the seventh chapter. (I will dispense with the quaint but very Roman Catholic "St." for Paul that Žižek and Badiou insist on using.) The challenge for Žižek is that psychoanalysis, according to Badiou—and as we saw, Butler as well, although in her own terms—is of the domain of Being, of the law and its inextricable relation with desire, life and death. It cannot provide any insight into the "domain beyond the Law," namely the truth-revent, which for Badiou is the location of the political act and subject. As for the subject, we have here a double split, one the split subject of psychoanalysis (in Badiou's terms, the subject caught in the tensions of law and desire) and the other the split political subject of Paul's thought, the one caught between the law and love, between Being and truth-event.

Let us explore these terms a little further, all the while watching for the way Žižek responds to the challenge from Badiou. The key lies with Badiou's distinction between Being and event. Being concerns the "state of things." It is the realm of knowledge, of ontology and mathematics proper (one of Badiou's favoured haunts) and the mathematical problem with which Being is concerned is the relationship between the one and the multiple. Being comprises the pure multiple, as well the endless multitude of everyday experience and the ability to structure, or "count" that experience as one, in terms of society, culture, politics, and so on. Without going into the distinctions between "situation," the "state of the situation," "the state of things," the reduplication of symbolisation that leads both to the void (the realm of the pure multiple before symbolisation) and the two forms of excess, Badiou's notion of Being is a complex and detailed way of speaking about the status quo.

From the midst of the multiplicity of Being bursts forth the event, emerging from another realm entirely. Unforeseen, unpredictable, outside the realm of knowledge, the event is localised, specific and contingent.



It comprises the truth for a particular situation (truth is universal, but in multiples). It can be seen, from the welter of everyday life and experience, only as springing from the void, but in doing so it uncovers the excesses and repressions of the situation. The favoured example here is the French Revolution, an event that could not be predicted from the social, political and economic mix of French society, and yet an event that exposed the lie of the *ancien régime*. However, there is no such thing as an event pure and simple, for it needs the perception and symbolisation of those who follow, a naming of the event that constitutes it as an event, a goal, a political operator that takes the form of militant groups, and the subject. The subject is “the agent who, on behalf of the truth-event, intervenes in the historical multiple of the situation and discerns/identifies in it signs-effects of the Event. What defines the subject is his *fidelity* to the Event: the subject comes after the Event and persists in discerning its traces within his situation” (IS: 130).<sup>7</sup>

Paul is this agent, this subject, the one who names the truth-event, for it can be a truth-event only after the fact, after the event itself has been identified, inscribed into language. For Badiou, Paul provides the primary example of the functioning of the truth-event. That Žižek is enamoured with such an argument shows forth in the way he prepares the path to Paul by peppering his discussion with Christian examples. Thus, the five elements of the truth-event—the event, its naming, goal, operator and subject—may be seen in what is “*the* example of a Truth-Event” (IS: 130): the incarnation and death of Christ is the event, the goal is the Last Judgement, its operator the Church, and the subject is the revolutionary group of believers who act in fidelity to the truth-event. Two elements, however, have slipped out of the example, the

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<sup>7</sup> As Žižek points out on a couple of occasions (IS: 141, 143), Badiou’s truth-event is “uncannily close” (IS: 141) to Althusser’s theory of ideological interpellation, particularly the argument that an individual is interpellated into a subject by a Cause. Žižek hints at the link via the religious “example”: just as Althusser uses the example of the Church, so Badiou speaks of Paul. However, as I argued in my chapter on Althusser, the last section of his ideology essay is less an example than the conclusion to his argument. So also, it seems to me, is Badiou’s “example” of Paul the crucial feature of his argument concerning the truth-event.





naming of the event and the resurrection of Christ, precisely the function and the content of Paul's work. For Paul *names* the central feature of Christ as the *resurrection*. For him this is the truth-event to which he devotes his life and work. All the rest, goal, operator and subject, follow from this constitution of the truth-event.

More significantly, Žižek drops entirely one of Badiou's main emphases: Paul is a "militant figure" (Badiou 2003: 2) who writes occasional pieces, letters, "militant documents" (Badiou 2003: 31), intervening in debates within the new groups he established. In fact, what attracts Badiou to Paul is not merely that he acts like a militant involved in a militant political group (the early Christians), but that he is the militant par excellence, the one who sets the agenda for subsequent militants (And "militant" itself occurs as frequently in Badiou's text as in this sentence). Given that Žižek is, after all, writing a militant political book I find it passing strange that he should abandon Paul the militant. Rather, Paul is an interpreter of an enigmatic "event" that could never have happened. He provides the "interpreting intervention" (TS: 135), the act of one who "speaks from a subjectively engaged position" (TS: 135). To an external observer, the event remains uncertain, it is not clear that there has been an event at all—the resurrection of course provides the best instance—and so the engaged subject, the intervenor, is marked by his fidelity to the event, working tirelessly to discern signs of the event and the persuade others as to its truth. If the event itself is murky to an external observer, one who operates within the realm of knowledge where the event makes no sense, then the language of naming and formulating the truth-event is meaningless from the same perspective: Christian theology, with its terminology of the incarnation and resurrection, of the return of Christ and the Last Judgement, of God and his acts in the world, seems no more than the arcane projections of human beings themselves, pointlessly developing fantasies that relate to no objective reality. But then why do Paul and the other early Christians devote themselves so passionately to such an apparently empty cause?

As Žižek points out, for Badiou Paul provides not merely the ultimate but the *founding* instance of the truth-event. Yet it is not the content



itself—the resurrection—that is the key but the formal conditions of the truth-procedure:

What he provides is the first detailed articulation of how fidelity to a Truth-Event operates in its universal dimension: the excessive, *surnuméraire* Real of a Truth-Event (“Resurrection”) that emerges by Grace (i.e., cannot be accounted for in the terms of the constituents of the given situation) sets in motion, in the subjects who recognize themselves in its call, the militant “work of Love,” that is, the struggle to disseminate, with persistent fidelity, this Truth in its universal scope, as concerning everyone (IS: 143).

Two elements of this quotation will turn out to be crucial in Žižek’s search for a materialist concept of grace. First, the form of Paul’s articulation of the truth-event is more important than the content. Very early in his book, Badiou makes it clear that he is interested in the formal possibilities, the “general procedure” of Paul’s act and position rather than any fabulous content:

If there has been an event, and if truth consists in declaring it and then in being faithful to this declaration, two consequences follow. First, since truth is evental, or of the order of what occurs, it is singular . . . Second, truth being inscribed on the basis of a declaration that is in essence subjective, no preconstituted subset can support it; nothing communitarian or historically established can lend its substance to the process of truth. . . . It is offered to all, or addressed to everyone, without a condition of belonging being able to limit this offer, or this address (Badiou 2003: 14).

Yet, for Badiou the strength of Paul’s central claim—that Jesus is resurrected—is that it is pure fable, that it is not tied to any element of the “earthly” life of Jesus, or, more generally, any historical conditions or causes. It is not falsifiable or verifiable in terms of the order of fact; that is, it is not even a miracle. The formal strength of Paul’s act allows him to structure a subject “devoid of identity and suspended to an event whose only ‘proof’ lies precisely in its having been declared by a subject” (Badiou 2003: 5). In other words, Paul’s breakthrough—the contingency and particularity of the universal—lies precisely in the subject without



identity (through the event, the resurrection, that can be known and named only by a subject) and the law without support (grace).

Here we come across a curious slippage in Badiou's text. If he does not need a historical Jesus, unlike Eagleton, then he very much wants a historical Paul (see Badiou 2003: 16–30). The effort to construct something resembling a biography of the militant Paul relies on the six “authentic” letters (forgetting Philemon in the process, but at the same time eliding the scholarly Paul of the “authentic” letters and the historical individual himself), apart from the extraordinary exception of the account of Paul's “conversion” on the road to Damascus in the book of Acts. Indeed, the brackets of his assertion are telling: “(if, as we believe, in this particular instance one can, for once and once only, trust that fabricated biography of Paul that the New Testament presents under the title Acts of the Apostles)” (Badiou 2003: 17). One cannot help asking why the experience and naming of the truth-event must be wrested from the realm of fable—the “fabricated biography” of Acts—while the event so named, the resurrection, must by definition remain firmly in that realm.

What of Žižek's response to the resurrection? He is much more embarrassed by the resurrection than Badiou himself. He needs to banish, as it were, the content in order to allow the form to shine all the more brightly. Žižek speaks of the resurrection in terms of a semblance of a truth-event, one that is not based upon an actual event—it is a fable, a fake, a regression into obscurantism to insist on such supernatural miracles. Badiou himself does not speak of it in this way: the resurrection may not be open to scientific verification, but it is, in Paul's articulation, a genuine truth-event that is aeons away from what he calls the pseudo-event. In fact, a little earlier Žižek follows Badiou rather closely, using the clearest examples of the October revolution and Nazism to differentiate truth-event and pseudo-event. The difference? The Nazis appeared to change everything so that they could save capitalism, keeping the situation fundamentally the same, whereas the Russian Revolution undermined and overthrew the foundations of capitalism, putting the lie to the situation in which the revolution arose. The key, then, is the way the event relates to its situation rather than anything inherent to the event itself.



However, when he gets to the resurrection and Paul, Žižek can see nothing but a semblance, a fake. The paradox is then that the paradigm of the truth-event should be based upon such a semblance. Žižek pushes Badiou on this question, now comparing the semblance or fake of the resurrection with the Nazi “pseudo-event.” In the same way that Heidegger was seduced by a fake event, so also was Paul. Rather than rendering Badiou’s argument meaningless—for him there is a clear demarcation between a truth-event and a pseudo-event—Žižek suggests that the pseudo-event may point to the actual function of the truth-event. As a purely formal act of decision, the actuality of the event itself becomes irrelevant: one’s faith in the event itself remains, a matter of religious commitment that lies beyond any argument for or against the veracity of the event.

As for the second element of the quotation above from *The Ticklish Subject*, I am intrigued by the parenthetical comment on grace: “(i.e., cannot be accounted for in the terms of the constituents of the given situation)” (TS: 143). I will speak more about grace in the next section, for the main issue in Žižek’s effort to develop a distinct political position is the search for a materialist notion of grace. He is of course echoing Badiou’s language here. Žižek does not write of the entirely undeserved gift of salvation, the irruption of God’s love for entirely inexplicable reasons, but of the inability to account for grace in known terms. Now, even at a formal level this is vital, since it will become the means by which Žižek himself is able to take up a properly political position. What I mean here is that Žižek gradually works himself out of the closed circle of psychoanalysis not merely through Badiou and Paul but quite specifically through the theological category of grace. In the same way that grace is inexplicable, entirely from outside the system, so also Žižek will turn to Lenin in order to provide some political bite. This is the content with which he will replace the theological content of grace, but he uses grace in order to carry out this move.

I have of course wilfully read Žižek’s comment in a particular way, for in his discussion of Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject* he attempts to keep Badiou within his over-arching Lacanianism. However, the parentheses



I discussed in the previous paragraph are telling, a bracketing that threatens to slip away from such a control, a tear in the fabric that will become all-important. For now, Žižek brings to bear his usual panoply of Lacanian categories, and this parenthetical comment can of course be roped into those categories as well. Thus, grace, the truth-event named by Paul, turns out, for now at least, to be “the intrusion of the traumatic Real that shatters the predominant symbolic texture” (IS: 142). In fact, Paul and Lacan are inseparable in Žižek’s discussion, for it is Badiou’s challenge to psychoanalysis, via Paul, that Žižek must meet.

Thus far I have really been concerned with the primary opposition with which I began this section, namely between Being and truth-event. What of the other categories, of life and death, law and desire/sin, law and love, and the double split of the subject? Badiou takes these distinctly Pauline categories and structures the realms of Being and truth-event in their terms (see Badiou 2003: 55–56, 79–84). Thus, death belongs to the order of Being, once we understand that death is not biological death, but a subjective stance, the way of the “flesh,” one that does not know the truth-event of the resurrection of Christ. The subjective stance of life, therefore, is living in light of the truth-event, the life of the “Spirit” that very much includes one’s own body (no Platonic distinctions for Paul). And so we get the wonderful play on these terms in Paul’s insistence that one must “die” to this life, to sin or the life of the “flesh,” in order to gain eternal life and thereby overcome the other, physical, death. This position leads Badiou to dissociate death and resurrection as sharply as Paul separates law and grace. According to Badiou, the resurrection is the key to Paul’s truth-event so that Christ’s death becomes a minor issue, one that merely informs us that God became a human being. There is no necessary connection between Christ’s death and resurrection; the resurrection is the truth-event, the irruption of the New, without any Hegelian mediation of the negative.

The law also, understood by Paul in full sense of the Torah, the law of the Hebrew Bible, also structures the order of Being, the way life operates in its normal, everyday sense. Thus we have a cosmos regulated



by laws and knowledge, society kept together by a web of prohibitions, the order of cosmic justice and so on. Žižek insists in *The Ticklish Subject* on setting the law up against love, the latter then becoming characteristic of the truth-event, or rather, fidelity to it. I shall come back to this in a moment, for it sets him on the way to *The Fragile Absolute* just as he conveniently forgets that Paul's primary opposition is between law and grace.

For now, it is the first split of the subject that intrigues me, namely that between law and desire. This split subject is caught in the order of Being, the realm of the "flesh," of law, death, and sin. In fact, sin becomes the autonomous life of desire, brought to life by the law. It is also, for Badiou, the point at which psychoanalysis touches Paul most closely (see Badiou 2003: 79–84) and thereby and the point where Žižek must answer him. And so we get Romans 7, with its entwinement of law and sin, the subject of the law and his conscious Ego, prohibition and desire, the tension of the desires themselves, conscious obedience and unconscious transgression, in short psychoanalytic *jouissance*. Or, as Badiou puts it with regard to Romans 7, "All of Paul's thinking here points towards a theory of the subjective unconscious, structured through the opposition life/death" (Badiou 2003: 80). Following Badiou, Žižek puts Romans 7 in the foreground, for it brings out starkly Badiou's objection. I quote it in full:<sup>8</sup>

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died; the very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and

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<sup>8</sup> Contrary to Žižek, I quote from the Revised Standard Version, since the RSV does not attempt to provide "inclusive language." Žižek's (or perhaps his publisher's) preferred New Revised Standard Version obfuscates the bias of New Testament Koine Greek, particularly with regard to gender.



by it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.

Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Romans 7:7–24)

The anti-dialectical Badiou pushes this text and others to a radical opposition between law and grace, but he must dispense with Paul's comments that the law is holy and good and just and spiritual, and that sin is at fault rather than the law itself (Žižek omits verses 12–14 and 19–24, while Badiou neglects verse 24).<sup>9</sup> However, I am not so much interested in the validity or otherwise of Badiou's exegesis, nor even in offering a detailed exegesis of the text myself (no matter how tempting that may be), but in the challenge it poses to Žižek. This is why I let the quotation run on to the question in verse 24: "Who will deliver us from this body of death?"

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<sup>9</sup> I have let the whole quotation run on to verse 24, since the omissions of both Žižek and Badiou are telling. At least Žižek has read his Paul, quoting elsewhere in the chapter from Romans 3:5, 7–8 and Romans 7:1–6, along with scattered verses from the rest of Romans and 1 Corinthians.



Soon afterwards Žižek quotes Lacan's gloss on this passage from Romans 7:

Is the Law the Thing? Certainly not. Yet I can only know of the Thing by means of the Law. In effect, I would not have had the idea to covet it if the Law hadn't said: "Thou shalt not covet it." But the Thing finds a way by producing in me all kinds of covetousness thanks to the commandment, for without the Law the Thing is dead. But even without the Law, I was once alive. But when the commandment appeared, the Thing flared up, returned once again, I met my death. And for me, the commandment that was supposed to lead to life turned out to lead to death, for the Thing found a way and thanks to the commandment seduced me; through it I came to desire death.

I believe that for a little while now some of you at least have begun to suspect that it is no longer I who have been speaking. In fact, with one small change, namely, "Thing" for "sin," this is the speech of Saint Paul on the subject of the relations between the law and the sin in the Epistle to the Romans, Chapter 7, paragraph 7 . . .

The relationship between the Thing and the Law could not be better defined than in these terms . . . The dialectical relationship between desire and the Law causes out desire to flare up only in relation to the Law, through which it becomes the desire for death. It is only because of the Law that sin . . . takes on an excessive, hyperbolic character. Freud's discovery—the ethics of psychoanalysis—does it leave us clinging to that dialectic?<sup>10</sup>

Analogous to the question of Paul—"Who will deliver us from this body of death?"—Žižek makes much more of Lacan's question—"Freud's discovery—the ethics of psychoanalysis—does it leave us clinging to that dialectic?" Paul is of course much clearer about the answer: as the verses that immediately precede Romans 7:7 make clear, we must "die to the law through the body of Christ" so that we "serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit" (Romans 7:4–6). It is none

<sup>10</sup> Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 83–84, quoted by Žižek in TS: 152–53.





other than Badiou's truth-event, the lightning bolt that breaks up the order of Being and scatters the writhing mass of law/desire. In Žižek's terms, this is where the second division of the subject comes to the fore, for the first split subject, the one torn between desire and its prohibition, is actually part of the way of death, flesh, and the law. The more fundamental division now comes into play as the way of life, spirit and love overcomes the former. Or in Badiouese, the defining split is between Being and the truth-event itself.

But what of Lacan? How does he answer his own question, which might be paraphrased as "is there an end to psychoanalysis?" Before we turn to Žižek's response, let me point out Badiou's own comment that Žižek seems to neglect. Writing of Paul's insistence that the Christ-event brings the believer to the moment of weakness, the identification as the "refuse" or "offscouring" of the world (Badiou quotes 1 Corinthians 4:13), he then turns to Lacan: "One will note consonance with certain Lacanian themes concerning the ethics of the analyst: at the end of the treatment, the latter must, similarly, consent to occupy the position of refuse so that the analysand may endure some encounter with his or her real" (Badiou 2003: 56). For Badiou's Paul, that "Real" is the object of Christian discourse, namely the pure event itself, that which has no grounding in any known system, which he characterises in terms of the two regimes of discourse, the Jewish and the Greek. In other words, the resurrection is the Real because it is not real, it is mere fable (Badiou 2003: 58).

However close this might be to Lacan, for Žižek it is all too positive (he will charge Badiou with both Platonism and Kantianism). The fundamental difference is that for Badiou this 'Real' breaks down all that has gone before (Being) and constitutes a radically new subjectivity. For Žižek, however, the Real is that which simultaneously threatens and sustains both the order of Being (or the Symbolic) *and* anything new that might arise. Badiou's truth-event will fall foul of the Real; it will simply not be able to break free.

Let me return to the question of end of psychoanalysis in order to explicate Žižek's response more fully: his "aye" to the possibility of the



end of psychoanalysis is less than confident, somewhat muted in fact and a little too close to a “nay.” At first, he brings forth the ethical maxim “*ne pas céder sur son désir*,” don’t give up on your desire, although he needs to redefine desire here not as transgressive desire generated by the law, as the desire that generates *jouissance* but as the ethical duty to be faithful to desire itself. Not so happy with such an answer, he passes quickly to the next, which is that psychoanalysis ultimately seeks to wipe the slate clean, to confront a void, a moment of negativity that both opens up the possibility of something radically new (the “cause” or the “truth-event”) and yet holds a question mark over it. The crucial moment for Lacan is therefore death: what “Death” stands for at its most radical is not merely the passing of earthly life, but the “night of the world,” the self-withdrawal, the absolute contraction of subjectivity, the severing of links with “reality” (IS: 154).

Unbeknown to himself, Žižek draws nigh to Eagleton’s argument for the value of the death of Christ, the *skandalon* that he traces through from the Greek *pharmakos*, the Hebrew scapegoat and ‘*anawim*, to the exploited masses of late capitalism. Žižek will cite similar examples—Oedipus, Antigone, King Lear, and so forth. For Eagleton there is a distinct political value in the utter dereliction and dejection that the passion narrative entails, or, in his favourite phrase, the “shit of the earth.” Except that Žižek is not tempted by Eagleton’s messianism, which makes Christ a distinctly political figure, at least not for now. That moment will come soon enough in *The Fragile Absolute*.

In psychoanalytic terms, the zone beyond the mess of law and desire is the death drive. In his perpetual effort to explicate a particular point of Lacan, Žižek stacks one description on top of another. The death drive functions beyond the status quo; it is the necessary obverse of any truth-event, the void that is much more fundamental than that truth-event: “the uncanny domain beyond the Order of Being is what he calls the domain ‘between the two deaths,’ the pre-ontological domain of monstrous spectral apparitions, the domain that is ‘immortal’” (IS: 154). For Lacan this is the *lamella*, the amoeba-like libido, immortal, ir-



repressible, indestructible, a living “organ” that does not exist.<sup>11</sup> Lacan is a little more flippant than Žižek, who wants to dig into the horrible rotting heap of compost, faeces, and bodies, the heap that constitutes the end of psychoanalysis, the break from what Badiou calls the Order of Being. Like Eagleton, Žižek throws out terms and phrases in order to gain yet another angle on this disgusting clot that seems to clog any possibility of Badiou’s truth-event: indivisible remainder, little piece of the Real, surplus enjoyment, scum of humanity, the excrement that fell out of God’s anus (this is “man” according to Martin Luther), or more bluntly and in an echo of Eagleton, a “mere piece of shit” (IS: 157).

Žižek, however, is not Eagleton, who comes closer to Badiou here: for Eagleton psychoanalysis is a perfect description of the way things are. On this point he is at one with both Alain Badiou and Judith Butler: these two, as we have already seen, cannot draw any political possibilities for either radical democracy (Butler) or a far Left agenda (Badiou) from psychoanalysis. Žižek, however, would like to take his stand with psychoanalysis, at this point at least, and so he edges ever closer to what I will discuss in more detail in the next section, namely the constitutive exception. If he has been skirting this leitmotiv of his work with the domain between the two deaths, the void that is the end of psychoanalysis, the break out of the vicious circle of law and desire, with perhaps an occasional hint (the void always hangs over any new beginning, any cause or truth-event), it rings out clearly when he gets to the subject. For Badiou, Paul is the political subject par excellence, the agent who names the truth-event and constitutes a group of followers marked by their fidelity to the truth-event. For Žižek, however, the subject is constituted by a double-bind: the effort to fill the ontological gap sustains that very gap: “‘Subjectivity’ is a name for this irreducible circularity, for a power which does not fight an external resisting force (say, the inertia of the given substantial order), but an obstacle that is absolutely inherent, which ultimately ‘is’ the subject itself” (IS: 159).

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, vol. X, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), 197–78.



In the end, Žižek opts for a thoroughly dialectical position: no truth-event without its obscene obverse, no subject without the gap that the subject sustains in the very act of attempting to overcome it, and, Butler would argue, no historical and progressive political act without the ahistorical and reactionary bar that destabilises it. For Badiou this is a betrayal of the truth-event, an infidelity that denies the contingent and fragile emergence of the subject through the truth-event, the spy who threatens the formation and direction of the militant group constituted by that event.

The upshot of all this, particularly on the political register at which Žižek is operating and, for that matter, Butler and Badiou, is a negative one. Suspicious of Badiou's notion of the proto-Platonic truth-event, of any notion of the new beginning or the effort at political improvement, Žižek offers a warning that drains the enthusiasm (here understood in its original New Testament sense of being full of the spirit) of any political movement: "If there is an ethico-political lesson of psychoanalysis, it consists in the insight into how the great calamities of our century (from the Holocaust to the Stalinist *désastre*) are not the result of our succumbing to the morbid attraction of this Beyond but, on the contrary, the result of our endeavour to avoid confronting it and to impose the direct rule of the Truth and/or Goodness" (IS: 161).

In his debates with Butler and Laclau, Žižek perpetually returns to this point, although with myriad variations: more fundamental than any political act, or truth-event, is the yawning void, the traumatic encounter with the undead or monstrous Thing, the moment of radical negativity that destabilises any act. So what is the authentic political act? It is one that engages at the level of the void, of the constitutive exception itself. And for Žižek this is none other than the domain of the Real, and so an authentic act can only be negative, one that comes in before the act of naming itself, or the unnameable (*innomable*). Or, to put it in Badiou's terms, the event itself, as the Real that can only be rendered in a fantasmic narrative, simultaneously structures the order of "Being" at the same time that it destabilises it. Less the break from Being, the event is the traumatic moment that enables Being itself. Žižek always risks disappearing



into the ether of theory—although I try to recall at these moments Lukács's point that only the fully abstract becomes concrete—but the final point is crucial for the next step of Žižek's search for a political position.

I cannot help but feel that Žižek is almost at a dead end with the unnameable political act that intervenes in the realm of the Real. I hardly need to point out that he is still locked into the Lacanian universe, which manifests itself in the form of his argument: for any position that someone may put up, there is always a more fundamental element upon which such a position relies. The position in question (here Badiou's) thereby becomes a mode of avoiding or screening what is in effect the constitutive exception. But it does not leave Žižek much room to move.

What happens next is rather astounding: for all his criticism of Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject*, he will follow Badiou into the New Testament in *The Fragile Absolute*. Four points are important in this respect. First, in the dialogues (which, we must remember, follow *The Ticklish Subject*) Judith Butler will repeat, in her own fashion, Badiou's criticisms of psychoanalysis on which Žižek focuses and which he feels compelled to answer in such detail. If in *The Ticklish Subject* he is much more confident of his answers, by the dialogues the criticisms start to bite. That Laclau should come in and point out his rather unsophisticated Marxism adds sting from another quarter.

Second, the crucial question that Žižek has raised again in *The Ticklish Subject*, namely the end of psychoanalysis, will continue to haunt him. In his engagement with Badiou, the issue becomes how one might break out of the order of being, where the interplay of law and desire, prohibition and sin, dominates one's individual and collective life. Over against the truth-event, Žižek stresses the negative, the force of the death drive and so on. In the end, all he can say is that any new political act or movement must remind itself of the morass that the movement itself seeks to obfuscate, the seething underside that will rot the bottom out of the act. *The Fragile Absolute* marks the (mistaken) beginning of a much more positive answer that he is willing to name—Christian love, or *agape*.



Third, I am intrigued by an echo or two of Lacan in Žižek's text. Initially, there is the copied slip from Lacan, with a slight variation. Lacan refers to "the relations between the law and sin in the Epistle to the Romans, Chapter 7, paragraph 7," whereas Žižek writes of "probably the (deservedly) most famous passage in his [Paul's] writings, Chapter 7, verse 7, in the Epistle to the Romans" (IS: 148). Lacan might just get away with his "paragraph 7" but not Žižek with his "verse 7." For Žižek in fact quotes verses 7–11 and 15–18 while Lacan glosses verses 7–11. A trifling point, a slip perhaps, a sign of less than a precise reading of the New Testament? I hardly need to point out that in psychoanalysis the error is more significant than the explicit content of the argument, especially when the pupil exacerbates the slip of the master.

But where does such a slip lead? Parapractically it runs away to a much more substantial misreading of both Paul and Badiou. Thus Lacan writes, "Saint Paul's Epistle is a work that I recommend to you for your vacation reading; you will find it very good company" (Lacan 1979: 84). Žižek has, to all appearances, taken Lacan at his word, although now focused on the master: "everyone who aims at really understanding Lacan's *Écrits* should read the entire text of Romans and Corinthians in detail" (IS: 149). I assume he means 1 and 2 Corinthians, both normally regarded in New Testament scholarship as "authentic" letters. However, note what has happened: Lacan speaks of Paul, the law and ethics directly in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, not *Écrits*. The slip concerning paragraph 7 of Romans 7—aggravated by Žižek—comes from the *Ethics*, as does the warm recommendation from Lacan to read Paul over the holidays. In other words, Paul, especially with his concern over the law, belongs to the domain of ethics. This is an extraordinary move, for Paul is not particularly interested in ethics or, in its more base form, moralising. Surely the issue is grace, not ethics. And yet the problem for Žižek is that any viable politics seems to require an ethical stand, perhaps even a code of ethics. Jameson's well-known refusal of ethics has been well nigh forgotten by the Left today as it scrambles for reformulated political positions. Back to the slip: Žižek's claim that Romans and Corinthians would help one understand the *Écrits* can now be read as Žižek's own effort to hide



the obscene truth of his own position, namely that he will become a Pauline ethicist!

How does such an oxymoron develop in Žižek's work? This brings me to the fourth point. It is telling that when Žižek does finally allow himself a direct political comment in the midst of the heavy theory he speaks of the "ethico-political lesson of psychoanalysis" (IS: 161; see the full sentence quoted above). The connection could hardly be closer: politics is ethics in a hyphenated fashion that merges the two zones. He makes a comparable move when he speaks of Badiou's truth-event. Let me quote him first: "One must thus avoid the pitfalls of the morbid masochist morality that perceives suffering as inherently redeeming: this morality remains within the confines of the law (which demands from us a price for the admission to Eternal Life), and is thus not yet at the level of *the properly Christian notion of Love*" (IS: 146–47; italics mine). And then: "On the other hand, we have the more radical division between this entire domain of the Law/desire, of the prohibition generating its transgression, and *the properly Christian way of Love* which marks a New Beginning, breaking out of the deadlock of Law and its transgressions" (IS: 151; italics mine). In both cases, the contrast between Being and truth-event becomes one between law and love. If the order of Being is the domain of law, then the truth-event and fidelity to it, characterised by Paul and the early Christian communities, belongs to the way of love, or rather "the properly Christian way of Love." (This will turn out, in *The Fragile Absolute*, to be neither *eros* nor *philadelphia* but *agape*.) Innocent enough at first sight, but there has been a profound shift from Badiou's emphasis on grace. As Žižek will admit later, the truth-event is but a laicised or materialist version of grace. And yet in these quotations the point escapes him, for he replaces grace with love. The shift takes place in this sentence: "there is another dimension, the dimension of 'True Life in Love, accessible to all of us through grace'" (IS: 147). Unfortunately, for Paul, as for Badiou, love is not the same as grace. Even as *agape*, as "Christian Love," such love cannot escape the bounds of the law. Love may follow grace, but it is not the same as grace.

The biggest miss, then, of Žižek's discussion of Badiou is grace



itself, particularly in light of Badiou's extensive treatment of grace in his Paul book (see Badiou 2003: 63, 66–67, 74–85). I will return to these pages in the next section. At this point, in Žižek's engagement with Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject*, he is caught up in Badiou's challenge to psychoanalysis. In gathering a psychoanalytic response, Žižek finds that he needs to draw upon the well of Lacanian ethics, even to the point of copying and then expanding the master's errors. And this is the trap, for ethics is hardly the best response to the argument that the law has been overcome by grace. The result: Žižek perpetuates the realm of law with his emphasis on love rather than grace, for love is still an ethical category, one that enjoins appropriate behaviour (so the famous text from 1 Corinthians 13 that Žižek will quote later—"love is patient, love is kind. . ."). Lacan's reading of Paul in his *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, as also Žižek's attempt to produce a political position from Lacan, cannot escape the domain of ethics. There Žižek will remain for the duration of *The Fragile Absolute*.

## Materialist Grace?

Thus far I have not made much of Žižek's Roman Catholic side, which we will find in full swing in *The Fragile Absolute*, particularly in light of its ending in the cul-de-sac of moralising, opting for the ethic of love as the key to Christianity. *On Belief*, however, throws all of this out of the political window, realising that in the previous book he was still locked into the realm of the law. Instead of drawing moral lessons for us from the writings of Paul, Žižek's slogan here may as well be the reformers' slogan, *non sub lege sed sub gratia*, not under the law but under grace. It is as though he has re-enacted the move of the Protestant reformers from the first book to the second. For *On Belief* is a very Protestant, if not Reformed book, one that runs down the doctrine of grace until it blurts out all of its dirty little secrets—human beings cannot effect salvation on their own, there is no profit whatsoever in good works, and the worst thing you can do is look for a political ethics in





theology. *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, however, is a curious amalgam of the positions of the previous two books, revisiting them in many ways. Thus, Žižek immerses himself fully in the question of love in chapter four of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* only to shift to the question of grace in the fifth, where we do in fact find the resolution of his long search for a materialist doctrine of grace.

In these three books, then, we have the Roman Catholic / Protestant divide in all its stark beauty. But the major question for me is the search for a materialist grace. For Žižek, the point to all of this is to find a means to break out of the liberal-capitalist hegemony, as he puts it, a way to cut his way through the absolute ground for any political thought and action, namely capitalism. I have argued above that it is also an effort to extract himself from the political dead-end of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Since this is home territory for me, the very breath and sustenance of a world that has been with me from childhood (although now mutated in so many ways), I will assess Žižek's search for a materialist grace through the filter of Calvinism, where the doctrine of grace receives its most rigorous formulation. Now that Žižek has strayed—no, boldly stepped—into the domain of dour Protestants, I can engage with him much more closely.

However, Žižek's search for that elusive materialist theory of grace emerges earlier, in the lead-up to his discussion of Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject*. Not entirely happy with the results of the search there, missing one of Badiou's great emphases in the same book, waylaid in the Roman Catholic byway of *The Fragile Absolute* (2000), he will find the track again only in *On Belief*. But I will backtrack, returning to the pages of *The Ticklish Subject* that precede his reflections on Badiou. Only then will I move on to the two later books, breaking that discussion with a return to Badiou and his discussion of grace.

### A Glimpse

Žižek begins his search for a materialist theory of grace by attempting to divest grace of its theological content and stressing its purely formal character, although now in a strictly decisionist or voluntarist sense. It



is not the fact that God predestines certain individuals to salvation and others to damnation that is important, but the decision or act itself. Žižek will then attempt to materialise grace in terms of the constitutive exception. Readers of Žižek will be familiar with the endless variations of this idea, usually in terms of the Real, *objet petit a*, and so on.

The problem, at least at this stage, is that I am not sure it works, since he must understand both the Protestant doctrine of grace and texts from the New Testament at a curious slant. As for the former, he unrolls the standard format of the opposition between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism in terms of good works versus predestination, salvation by means of the law or by grace:

In traditional Catholicism, salvation depends on earthly good deeds; in the logic of Protestant predestination, earthly deeds and fortunes (wealth) are at best an ambiguous *sign* of the fact that the subject is already redeemed through the inscrutable divine act—that is, he is not saved because he is rich or did good deeds, he accomplishes good deeds or is rich because he is saved . . . . Crucial here is the shift from act to sign: from the perspective of predestination, a deed becomes a sign of the predestined divine decision (TS: 116).

Not particularly nuanced, but it does capture the fundamental difference between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, at least as that difference came out of the Reformation (Luther's revolt against indulgences, penance, and so forth).<sup>12</sup> I am not sure about Žižek's throwing wealth in along with good deeds as a sign of predestination (I suspect that Weber is responsible for this addition), and I am intrigued by the suggestion that Protestantism, understood particularly in terms of the doctrine of pre-

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<sup>12</sup> Roman Catholics will point out that grace is central there too, although mediated necessarily through the Church, and Protestants will point out that predestination by no means exhausts the possibilities of the reformers' breakthrough. From Arminius through Erasmus to Paul Tillich, Protestants have found predestination unacceptable, for it renders God just a little too arbitrary and allows human beings no scope for the role of free will or indeed the possibility of doing anything on their own. And yet, both Luther (in a milder form) and Calvin asserted the centrality of predestination in any theology worthy of the name. As far as I am concerned, it is the most rigorous and consistent theological doctrine that we can find in the vast and variegated storehouse that is known as the history of theology.



destination, marks the shift from act to sign. I might respond that we can find all of the elements of predestination in the New Testament, or for that matter in the long history of theological reflection before the Reformation, but that does not explain the distinct form the doctrine took in the hands of the reformers, who defined grace in terms of predestination and made it the benchmark of Christianity. However, Žižek's description of the transition from act to sign focuses the question of grace on good works, on obeying the law. To put it crudely, once good works shift from being the means of salvation to the marks, or as it is put traditionally, the fruits of salvation, then one constantly seeks such indications that a person is one of the saved, one of the elect—hence, as we saw in the previous chapter, Eagleton's one-sided characterisation of Protestants as those constantly groping about in the dark for signs.

At times Žižek surprises me, for I would have expected him to make more of the doctrine of election, without which predestination makes little sense. Yet he disposes of it in a quiet corner. For the reformers, predestination is the logical outworking of the theme of election that they found in the Bible. Mention of election, or more commonly “the elect,” is a little like mentioning Marxism. Everyone seems to know what it means, offering a convenient dismissal of such arrogant and self-confident elitism before changing subjects. Election is of course a little subtler than this, emphasising both the unworthiness of those God elects and the burden that election imposes. Stemming from the theme in the Hebrew Bible, where Israel is the least and most insignificant of all the peoples that God might have chosen, the reformers argued that God's election to salvation was entirely undeserved, that those chosen are the last ones anyone would expect to be chosen. But they have a task and that is to be a “light to the nations” as Isaiah would have it or the “light of the world” that Matthew (5:14) puts in Jesus' mouth: they have been chosen for the task of bringing the gospel to the rest of the world. So we have a contradiction: the possibility of proselytising, in fact the source of one of the most vigorous programs of proselytisation, comes from a doctrine that asserts a limited number will in fact be saved, that God has made such a decision before creation. Why bother if the decision



has already been made? Here the constitutive exception takes wing, for it is precisely the fixity of predestination that sets one on the path to convert others. And of course the reason is that my missionary zeal is the means by which that predestination is realised.

Yet, I want to pick up the ambiguity of Žižek's "at best" in the preceding quotation, since it seems to me that we have here the spoor of the central element of the reformers' theology of grace. For what has left its trace on the way out of Žižek's text is the question of salvation. Rather than worry about the status of good works, or even the paradox of election, if we put salvation to the fore, then there is a more fundamental rearrangement: human beings are not responsible for salvation, God is. It is by God's inscrutable act that we are saved and not through any act on our part. And for the reformers, this is grace: we rely entirely on God; salvation comes from outside the system, outside our means, outside any life of virtue. This emphasis is crucial if we want to understand Žižek's search for a materialist theory of grace. No longer the rearrangement of works, grace in this light ceases to be the constitutive exception.

Reading backwards in *The Ticklish Subject* from the quotation I made above, we come to the second problem (his interpretation of biblical texts) with his attempt to develop a materialist grace by means of the constitutive exception. What he seeks is a suspension of the ethical, and this is embodied in the supposed words of Jesus that he quotes from Luke's Gospel: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and his mother, his wife and his children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26, in TS: 115). Žižek's exegesis is intriguing: "Christ calls on his followers to obey and respect their superiors in accordance with established customs *and* to hate and disobey them, that is, to cut all human links with them" (TS: 115). Intriguing, since the verse from Luke has not so much superiors in mind as the ties of blood, and even these are the most immediate ties, the ones that would much later be classified as the nuclear family. Setting the verse in the context of the immediate pericope in Luke would help as well: after the verse that follows Luke 14:26—"Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (Luke



14:27)—we find two examples that focus on the issue of counting the cost of discipleship. Unlike the cautious tower-builder or the judicious king about to go to war against superior forces, a disciple does not weigh up the pros and cons, carefully planning his or her discipleship so that it is workable, that the ledger comes out in his favour. The follower of the movement has no concern for planning or weighing up of gains and losses, for making a decision after careful consideration. Luke has Jesus conclude, “So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). There is little respect for one’s superiors here, unless of course we put Jesus in that category, but that is to draw in an element from later theology.

The same verse in Matthew appears in a more radical context:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s foes will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it (Matt 10:34–39).

One may take the last verse of this quotation from Matthew in the direction Žižek wants, but it is a stretch: losing one’s life for Christ’s sake is not quite the same as rejecting everything that is most precious to us so that “later, we get it back, but as an expression of Christ’s will, mediated by it” (TS: 115). What do we get back? Established ethical norms or *mores*. Everything is the same, except that now Christ dispenses it to us. In fact, both texts—the one from Luke more tempered, the one from Matthew more militant—provide the workings of Badiou’s truth-event, even though Badiou needs Paul to make his argument and Žižek has yet to get to Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject*. But Žižek is on the track of the constitutive exception, one that has appeared before on countless occasions in his never-ending monograph.

Žižek has here quite simply read these New Testament texts in a



Lacanian direction. Later, when he becomes more enamoured with the revolutionary possibilities of Christology and the New Testament, his readings of biblical texts will become either a mix of Lacan and theology, or he will dispense with Lacan entirely and exercise some hitherto unknown theological muscles, however flabby and underused they might be.<sup>13</sup> In other words, for Žižek the biblical texts and theology operate in a seamless continuum, untroubled by any breaks and ruptures, much more so than Bloch or Benjamin whom I considered some time ago. This is a rather odd thing for Žižek to do, given his own liking for subversive readings, ones that break the expected flow and cast a whole new light on a position or an argument. To seek a materialist, atheistic and political reading of a biblical text or theological argument is hardly new in the present situation, for every critic I consider in this book does exactly the same thing. In one respect it is much more difficult to see how the Bible might be theology's bad conscience when dealing with Paul, or certain statements concerning Jesus in the Gospels, for they seem to be saturated with theology. And yet, as my discussion of Žižek's beloved Luke 14:26 shows, the text and theology—at least Žižek's way of doing theology—do not necessarily work together. By and large, however, I am more interested in his theological positions per se, for which the texts become supports or proof-texts. Apart from the fact that this is how Žižek's incessant use of examples operates throughout his work—he picks up one point of a film, or book, or cultural practice or political position in order both to back up his argument and illustrate a theoretical point<sup>14</sup>—it is also the way theology has traditionally operated in order to carry on the fiction that it bases itself on the Bible.

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<sup>13</sup> Underused indeed, for his awareness of biblical criticism is at times decidedly flabby: see his discussion of the Song of Songs, where his various points have been well rehearsed in biblical criticism (PD: 123).

<sup>14</sup> Part of the responsibility for this encyclopaedic pinpointing may also come from the educational system from which Žižek has come: in the former Yugoslavia, if not German-inspired educational systems across Europe, encyclopaedic breadth was the norm, albeit at the expense of depth. For example, a novel has one key idea, which you may glean from a quick read before moving onto another.



So we find that in order to make his argument for a materialist theory of grace stick, Žižek must read the quotation he takes from Luke in this way: Jesus' call to discipleship is another version of the constitutive exception, the renunciation of the substance of social life—a curious expansion on the ties of kin that only now makes sense—is necessary for that substance to exist as such. One can have family, social order, established customs only by rejecting them, for the exception is that which holds the whole shonky system together. Yet again the variations roll out: Lacan's intrusion of the Real, or *objet petit a*, the Master-Signifier, S1, the violent imposition of the rule of law, of the Symbolic order itself, in an act that is grounded not in the law or even the Symbolic but only in itself (here he makes use of Carl Schmitt's decisionist position in his *Political Theory*<sup>15</sup>), and even the Derridean supplement. Except that the invocation of the supplement brings about a sleight of hand in the argument. Žižek argues that Jesus' statement, that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfil it (let me fill in the references that Žižek assumes—Matt 5:17–20), is of the same status as the discipleship-as-renunciation challenge. A quick reference to Paul's comment in Romans 13:10—"love is the fulfilling of the law"—and he can assert that fulfilling the law undermines it, accomplishing the law brings about its suspension. Or, as he points out elsewhere, the most dangerous political act is to obey the law to the letter and not seek to escape it or subvert it from without. We end up with the equivalence between discipleship-as-renunciation and suspension through accomplishment: one establishes the ethical norms through their rejection; the other undermines them through fulfilling them. Except that—and this is my exception—the militant rejection of kin and of oneself in order to be a disciple does not partake of this logic in the two Gospel texts I have discussed above.

This exception will become important as I loop back to the Protestant break. Žižek reads the assertion of grace as a fundamental realignment of good works: the constitutive exception of grace, the

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<sup>15</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theory: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).



inscrutable divine act, is that which establishes the possibility of good works. In fact, Žižek is reworking the whole Protestant Reformation in a materialist, political register, for the Protestant position is the only correct one; the Roman Catholic default position—that salvation is a reward for good works—misses the point. In this light, grace becomes the constitutive exception, that which is outside the system and yet sustains it. Yet his brief dip into the New Testament—a taste of his longer discussion of Badiou to come—hardly sustains his argument, nor indeed does the doctrine of grace itself. For the Protestant point about grace is that salvation comes from entirely outside the human realm, that it is completely undeserved, not that it provides a realignment of the question of good works. Žižek will come to this Protestant position by the time of *On Belief*. However, by then he will need to ditch the over-arching framework of psychoanalysis as a formal parallel to the doctrine of grace itself.

### The Cul-de-Sac of Ethics and Love

The materialist grace on which Žižek has fixed his political hopes has become somewhat slippery. Let us turn, then, to *The Fragile Absolute*, *On Belief* and *The Puppet and the Dwarf*. All three books are very similar in structure, giving over roughly the first half or more to an effort to depict the current situation under global capitalism and then the distinctly political option that Christianity provides. Structurally, then, the three books are very similar to Badiou's *Saint Paul* book, which addresses the urgent need for a new militant political model. If there is a difference between the three books in the first part, it lies in the content: *The Fragile Absolute* concerns itself more with an analysis of the political and economic nature of capitalism, whereas *On Belief* and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* focus on the ideological and spiritual malaise of late capitalism, the mix of “cyberspace reason,” the various bits and pieces of Asiatic spirituality,<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Žižek cites Tao and Western Buddhism, but once we add Feng Shui we can begin to list a whole run of other items that enable one to cope by plugging in to a deeper harmony and inner peace. Responding to various criticisms that his discussion of Buddhism and Hinduism is at best cursory in *On Belief*, Žižek gives them much greater attention in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (especially 13–33).





the ideology of the commodity whose promise is ultimately empty, like the *Kinder Surprise* egg (see PD: 145–55), and the extraordinary tension between excess (drugs, sex, smoking, etc) and ascetic denial—that is, between desire and the law—that comes to its ludicrous conjunction in a whole series of products, such as coffee without caffeine, wine without alcohol, war without casualties and so on (see PD: 95–97).

I do not want to spend too much time on the earlier sections of these books, except to note a profound shift in the way he organises the discussion. The first part of both books is heavily Lacanian *and* Marxist. He answers Laclau's charge that he is split schizophrenically between a highly developed Lacanian analysis and an underdeveloped Marxist one not by becoming more Marxist, but in a much more creative conjunction of the two. In doing so, however, a significant shift takes place in his use of Lacan. In order to track this shift, let us begin with Marx. His major point regarding Marx is that what Marx got right was the analysis of capitalism, what he got wrong was postulating a state beyond capitalism, namely communism, of unfettered production. In fact, Marx's analysis is even more timely now than when he first made it. However, the problem lies with his proposed solution, which is nothing more than the dream of production that has thrown off the fetters of capitalist exploitation, the system dominated by surplus-value.

Thus, Marx's diagnosis was right, but his prognosis wrong. In order to show how Marx's solution cannot work, Žižek revisits the arguments of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, especially the relationship between surplus-value and surplus enjoyment, the inherent obstacle or constitutive exception of capitalism that enables capitalism itself (see FA: 21–39; OB: 18–19). In terms of surplus-value or surplus-enjoyment, the object of desire is then productivity without constraint, while its cause is surplus-value, or the key to capitalism itself. In other words, Marx's mistake was to assume that we can have the former and get rid of the latter. This is the dream of liberal ideology: if only we could get past the current obstacles—state intervention, trade unions, environmental concerns and so on—then we would finally realise pure capitalism. Communism as an impossible ideal can only emerge for Žižek from capitalism itself.



The difference between the earlier material and these “Christian” books is that Lacan does not appear to trump Marx time and again. Rather, just like Marx, Lacan’s theory provides the best theoretical frame for grasping the totality of capitalism, all the way from the perverse forms of postmodern art to the inexorable and internal operation of global capitalism in which transgression is indispensable for the functioning of capitalism. For instance, in the example of the “Young British Artists” with their exhibits of dead animals, excrement, human bodies, and so on, Žižek writes:

It is worth noting that it is Lacanian theory, with its link between surplus-enjoyment and surplus-value, which offers the best theoretical frame for grasping this new trend, with respect to the fact that one of the standard criticisms of Lacan is that his theory is abstract, proto-Kantian, dealing with the ahistorical symbolic system, unaware of the concrete socio-historical conditions of its subject matter. We can see apropos of our example how, in clear contrast to this criticism, the cultural studies which celebrate new multiple perverse forms of artistic production do not take sufficiently into account how these phenomena are grounded in global capitalism, with its accelerated commodification—it is Lacanian theory that enables us fully to conceptualize this link, effectively to rehistoricize the topics of cultural studies (FA: 162–63; see also OB: 19–22, 29–31).

I am not so much interested in quibbling over whether this is a genuinely Lacanian contribution, by means of the constitutive exception, or whether we can find the same argument in earlier Marxist analyses of modernism (it is not that it was once subversive but was then co-opted, but that the very acts of subversion are themselves generated by the system for its very survival.) More interesting by far is that Marx and Lacan share the same space: both are the best analysts of capitalism. But once Lacan has joined Marx in this mutual task, we will also find that Lacan’s prognosis, his search for the end of analysis, suffers the same fate as Marx’s. If Marx succumbs to Lacan’s constitutive exception—the bar to capitalism’s full realisation is precisely that which enables capitalism—then so will Lacan. Only the Christians, especially Paul, will get us out of it.



In *The Fragile Absolute*, before he gets to his Christian response, there is one major argument Žižek makes with this Marxist-Lacanian analysis, namely that capitalism is the Real, the constitutive exception *par excellence*. Of course, he first made this point and was castigated for it in the dialogues with Butler and Laclau. The lengthy analysis here (burning up almost 100 pages of text) functions in many respects as a detailed reply to Laclau and Butler. The Real, then, is the “inexorable ‘abstract’ spectral logic of Capital” (FA: 15), except that now it marks a gap between capital and the reality of people involved in the processes of production and distribution. If the former simply cannot be represented in any way, except through makeshift terms such as “capital,” then the latter is what is everywhere present. And for Žižek it is precisely this gap that is the problem: the violence of capital lies in the abstraction or “spectrality” of a self-enhancing and self-fecundating capital, one that pursues profit with a sheer disregard for the people involved. Unable to represent it in any adequate form, we can at least speak of capitalism’s victims (see FA: 54–63). Žižek reels out a series of Lacanian terms to bolster his main argument: the impossible effort to represent the Real of capitalism relies on a fantasmic and thereby mythic narrative; at various points little pieces of the Real show, such as the *objets petit a* of coke and the electric chair game of Death Row Marv; the masturbatory *jouissance* lifestyle of late capitalism; trauma as the “eternal” event or break in the order of the Symbolic; *Seminar XX* provides the libidinal economy of the society of consumption; and the frenetic rush of cultural examples that seem to take on a life of their own before the main argument reappears out of nowhere.

The question, when Žižek finally gets to the distinct contribution of the Christian legacy in *The Fragile Absolute*, is whether Christianity merely manifests the logic of Lacan’s constitutive exception or whether it breaks out of that logic. This is the question he puts to himself, one that he dares raise only late, perpetually stalling in a book that is supposed to be about Christianity: “Or does it [Christianity] endeavour to break out of the very vicious cycle of Law/sin?” (FA: 113). Again: “Or does Christianity, on the contrary, endeavour to break the very vicious



cycle of prohibition that generates the desire to transgress it, the cycle described by Saint Paul in Romans 7:7?” (FA: 135). And again: “However, this superego dialectic of the transgressive desire engendering guilt is *not* the ultimate horizon of Christianity: as Saint Paul makes clear, the Christian stance, at its most radical, involves precisely the suspension of the vicious cycle of Law and its transgressive desire. How are we to resolve this deadlock?” (FA: 143). This “vicious cycle” is of course quite familiar from Žižek’s engagement with Badiou. It is also a shorthand way of referring to the lengthy discussion of capitalism that precedes this question. But it is difficult to avoid the the incessant repetition. The same questions in exactly the same terms recur again and again, until we get this rush:

What if the split between the symbolic Law and the obscene shadowy supplement of excessive violence that sustains it is *not* the ultimate horizon of our experience? What if this entanglement of Law and its spectral double is precisely what, in the famous passage from Romans 7:7, Saint Paul denounces as that which the intervention of the Christian *agape* (love as charity) enables us to leave behind? What if the Pauline *agape*, the move beyond the mutual implication of Law and sin, is *not* the step towards the full symbolic integration of the particularity of Sin into the universal domain of the Law, but its exact opposite, the unheard-of gesture of leaving behind the domain of the Law itself, of “dying to the Law,” as Saint Paul put it (Romans 7:5)? In other words, what if the Christian wager is *not* Redemption in the sense of the possibility for the domain of the universal Law retroactively to “sublate”—integrate, pacify, erase—its traumatic origins, but something radically different, the cut into the Gordian knot of the vicious cycle of Law and its founding Transgression? (FA: 99–100; italics in original).

Žižek here faces his own trauma—hence the perpetual delay, the incessant repetition of questions—of the limits of psychoanalysis. Behind each question lie the figures of Badiou, Butler, and Laclau. Each time Žižek asks whether this is the ultimate horizon, whether it is possible to leave behind the domain of the law, whether there is a “cut into the



Gordian knot,” whether we can break out of the vicious cycle of law and transgressive desire. Similarly, as *The Fragile Absolute* draws to a close, we get a run of examples, all the way from Stephen King’s “Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption” to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and back again. Even Christ’s crucifixion joins the list, an ominously endless repetitive list of examples of breaking out from the trap of the law. And yet, repetition is the sign of a *failed* effort to deal with trauma. How does Žižek fail in *The Fragile Absolute*? A rift opens up between the Lacanian framework that he cannot leave behind—so much so that we can glimpse Lacan at the back of the worship service, a late arrival—and the notion of *agape* itself. But Žižek refuses to see the rift, or in psychoanalytic terms, the void that opens up.

However, in *The Fragile Absolute* Žižek hauls in love to do the hard work of grace. Thus, love apparently empowers him to break with the constitutive exception, to face the obscene supplement and stare it down, and it allows him to hang on to Lacan and not dump him on a quiet country road. All you need is love, seemingly. But love is not grace—even though we might want to argue for a gracious love, a love that sides with grace—and so it gets Žižek nowhere near the break he seeks, from Lacan and/or from the constitutive exception. But let us look more closely at how this happens in *The Fragile Absolute*, for the specific reason of identifying it as a negative example, something to avoid.

To begin with, Žižek offers exegeses of two biblical texts, the first Luke 14:26 and the second 1 Corinthians 13. The text from Luke is of course the same one that Žižek called on *The Ticklish Subject* (TS: 115, see above). At that moment he reads Jesus’ call to discipleship in terms of the constitutive exception: one must renounce everything for the sake of Christ in order to get it back. Or rather, the necessary condition for social life itself—family, social order, established customs, in short the whole panoply of a Christian society—is its renunciation, which is then the exception that holds everything together. It seems as though Žižek has taken to heart my criticisms of this reading, purely in terms of the context in Luke’s Gospel and then the comparison text in Matthew, for



by now, in *The Fragile Absolute*, Luke 14:26 is not the constitutive exception of the social order but the very means of breaking from it: “it is love itself that enjoins us to ‘unplug’ from the organic community into which we were born” (FA: 121). In a pattern that has become somewhat familiar, Žižek throws together a whole series of variations on this unplugging, uncoupling, or as he will call it in the final section, the “breakout”: it is comparable to the Buddha’s new community that ignored caste; over against pagan wisdom, Christianity clings to that which breaks up the harmony and balance of the universe; one should take it further in Kierkegaard’s sense and hate the beloved out of love (FA: 126); what the Jesus of Luke’s Gospel is *really* speaking about is not “hatred”—“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and his mother. . . .” (Luke 14:26)—but the love of both Galatians 3:28 and of 1 Corinthians 13.

As for 1 Corinthians 13 itself, he will throw it in with Romans 7, so much so that the message of Romans 7 is that of 1 Corinthians 13. In the quotation above, Paul already speaks of *agape* in Romans, at least for Žižek. Of course, Paul does not mention love at all in Romans 7:7 (that Lacanian error once again), let alone in the verses surrounding it in chapter 7 as a whole. By contrast, 1 Corinthians 13 (see FA: 145–6; PD: 114–15) does speak of love. All too familiar from Christian marriage services, one that atheists, agnostics and firm believers can all affirm, Žižek claims that it is Paul’s other paradigmatic passage, one that should be read dialectically with Romans 7. In other words, love (1 Corinthians 13) enables the breakout from the entanglement of law and transgression that Paul maps in the Romans text. Love is quite simply of another order, one that does not compute in the cycle of law and sin. Žižek’s argument can only appear to work if he casts 1 Corinthians 13 in with Romans 7.

Yet, Žižek seems to have forgotten Badiou’s argument that love is fidelity to the event and not the fundamental nature of the event itself. For some strange reason, *agape* has replaced grace. Thus, at one of the few moments when he refers to a theologian apart from Kierkegaard, he confuses grace with love. He quotes Rudolf Bultmann on the opposition of grace and law only to comment that Lutheran theologians like Bultmann



are among the strongest proponents of “this radical opposition between the law and divine love” (PD: 118). The problem is that Bultmann is speaking of grace, not love, a word he mentions not once.<sup>17</sup> But Žižek likes tossing everything into the pot and Badiou’s finely wrought distinctions between Paul and the Christ of the Gospels fade away. Christ’s message, which now loses the mediation of the Gospel writers themselves, is that of Paul. Christ’s “collective of outcasts” (FA: 123) is one with Paul’s focus on the least important in his organicist metaphor of the religious community. Christian love loses its distinction from *eros*, passionate sexual love, as they both become the pulverisers of social hierarchy (FA: 125).

Love has become the disguise for grace—a touch of makeup, café couture replacing wilderness gear—so much so that it gives the impression that Žižek has found the way to break with the law. But as he crawls through the fence and makes a dash for the final perimeter, he finds that he is lugging Lacan along with him. He will not make it this time, for Lacan will trip him up, so Žižek finally gives in and makes the extraordinary claim that “love” in Lacan’s Seminar XX is in fact Christian love (FA: 118; see PD: 116). He will justify this on two related lines. The first is to argue that Lacan undermines the big Other in his later work, so that by the time he gets to the almost dementia-ridden Seminar XX there is no guarantee for the consistency of the symbolic space in which we dwell. In other words, the fundamental unbalancing of Christian love, its threat to cosmic order is the point at which it starts to look the same as Lacan’s notion of love.

But this notion of love as disruption is not quite the break from the cycle of law and desire, so Žižek makes a move that signals the complete breakdown of his focus on love. In the final section of *The*

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<sup>17</sup> Bultmann writes: “the way of the works of the Law and the way of grace and faith are mutually exclusive opposites. . . . Man’s effort to achieve his salvation by keeping the Law only leads him into sin, indeed this effort itself in the end is already sin. . . . The Law brings to light that man is sinful, whether it be that his sinful desire leads him to transgression of the Law or that that desire disguises itself in zeal for keeping the Law.” Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1952), 1:264–65.



*Fragile Absolute*, “The Breakout,” as well as the last pages of the fourth chapter of *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, he suggests that the Christian notion of love may be understood in terms of Lacan’s feminine formulae of sexuation. While the masculine is the domain of the constitutive exception, the realm in which the law-transgression relationship involves a tension between the universal law and its transgressive exception (the latter thereby constituting the former), the feminine is outside this logic. The feminine involves a paradox of the non-All, the non-universal. Let me return to the exegesis of 1 Corinthians 13 I mentioned a little earlier (FA: 145–47; see the repeat of the same passage and exegesis in PD: 114–16), which Žižek reads in terms of the paradox of completion and incompleteness. First, Paul argues that although one might have the gifts of the spirit (tongues and prophecy), all knowledge and the understanding of mysteries, even all faith *and* the ultimate sacrifice of martyrdom, if one does not have love, one is and/or gains nothing. Second, all of these items are incomplete until that eschatological moment of completion, of seeing “face to face.” In the midst of this radical contingency, love is the greatest of the three, faith, hope and love, but only until the mirror clears at the eschaton itself. This paradox of (in)completion makes sense, Žižek argues, only in terms of the feminine formulae of sexuation. Love is therefore “not an exception to the All of knowledge, but precisely that ‘nothing’ which makes even the complete series/field of knowledge incomplete” (FA: 146//PD: 115). Love cannot complete the series—gifts of the spirit, knowledge, understanding, faith and martyrdom—for each of the series is already complete. Rather, love shows them all to be nothing, but now a nothing aware of its own lack. And so, concludes Žižek, only an incomplete, vulnerable and lacking being can love. Yet, this incompleteness is in fact higher than completion and so love is therefore higher, because incomplete, than any complete series. This paradox of the non-all, between the nothingness of completion and the necessary imperfection of love, is what Žižek claims to be characteristic of both the feminine formulae of sexuation and Paul’s excursus on love in 1 Corinthians 13.

What we find, then, is an attempt to hold two positions together:





love enables us the break out of the cycle of law and desire because it seeks to usurp grace; love breaks the law only by means of the feminine formulae of sexuation. But this second position is none other than the one with which he finished his discussion of Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject*, where he argued that the point of breakage is in absolute obedience to the law, following it to the letter, so that it collapses under its own weight. In other words, love is no different to the law (hence Paul's statements in the New Testament concerning the fulfilment of the law). At this point he is absolutely correct, but in a different sense: love is still caught within the realm of the law. But this is hardly the operation of grace, for grace is the radically external interruption into the realm of law, not one that arises from within. If we follow Žižek, we are left with the paradoxical conclusion, following on from the two statements above, that although the feminine formula of sexuation and grace are both forms of love, they are not the same as each other.

The problem, as I have been arguing, is that love is not grace. But the reason Žižek cannot extract himself from love is that he is still too tied to Lacan. Let me cite a couple of other cases where Lacan tags along this Christian path. For instance, Žižek hangs out love on the Imaginary-Symbolic-Real rack, although now closer to the old charity (*caritas*): Christian charity is imaginary compassion for one's neighbour; symbolic charity is formal, the function of trust presupposed in relations with others; but there is another dimension of Christian charity in which it is rare and fragile, something lost and gained time and again (see FA: 118). This charity confronts the Other as real. Or, Christian love is of the order of Lacanian sublimation rather than idealisation: in terms of the latter, love becomes a way of erasing the other and making him or her into a blank screen for our phantasmagorical constructions; but as sublimation love is tough work, a repeating process of breaking free from the social substance in which we find ourselves. This love believes everything and yet is not deceived (see FA: 127–29).

In the end, *The Fragile Absolute* attempts to substitute love for grace. Not only does love enable Žižek to dispense with the constitutive



exception; it is also the very means by which this “spectral obscene supplement” can be suspended (FA: 130). Yet I have argued that this is a failed effort: he attempts to break from this fundamental category that has been present in all his work while dragging Lacan along with him. Almost desperately he wishes to escape, as is shown by the focus on Stephen King’s “Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption,” a story of escape from prison, in the last section of *The Fragile Absolute*. But love cannot do this work of grace, and so his focus on love becomes the sign of this failure. Before he knows it, he slips into the realm of ethics and the law, precisely that zone he attempts to escape by means of love. In fact, Žižek is much more comfortable writing about the superego cycle of law and transgression, readily slipping back into that cycle at any opportunity.

The most telling mark of such a Roman Catholic regression comes when he revisits his response to Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject*. The uncoupling from the law that Žižek sees in love is, he argues, the same as Paul’s argument from 2 Corinthians 5:16–17: being “in Christ,” suggests Paul, brings about a thorough realignment, a “new creation” in which “everything old has passed away.” For Žižek, this is none other than the death drive, the moment of sublimation in which one wipes the slate clean in a moment of terrifying violence in order to make a radically new beginning (FA: 127). Whereas in *The Ticklish Subject*, the death drive places an everlasting question mark over any new start, questioning Badiou’s emphasis on grace, here it becomes a characteristic of love as uncoupling.

We cannot have it both ways. In the end, Žižek’s problem is not merely that he substitutes love for grace, but that he aligns love with ethics (that is, the law). This kind of love is rather popular at the moment—witness the slender volumes on the question of love and ethics appearing on bookshelves at a rapid rate. It seems to me that love as ethics—a little like a list to which one must subscribe, for otherwise “you don’t love me”—quite simply misses the point. What if love is in fact subject to grace, to a radical break from the law?



## The Protestant Turn

Finally, after too many byways and asides, Žižek almost stumbles upon grace. Even though he marks it in passing at certain points, by the time he gets to the end of his discussion of Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject* he has all but forgotten grace, switching for the much more acceptable—at least in Lacan's terms—notion of Christian love. As I pointed out at the close of the previous section, this will lead him into the very Roman Catholic emphasis of *The Fragile Absolute*. Even after his foray into grace in *On Belief*, he cannot seem to keep himself away from love-as-ethics, so much so that I have doubted on more than occasion whether Žižek knows how sharp the distinction is. And so we find an encore in the fourth chapter of *The Puppet and the Dwarf*.

However, before I dive into *On Belief*, where he repeats the discovery of the reformers, let me return to Badiou. I do this in part to show how much Žižek missed in his earlier reading of Badiou, but also to show how much he needs it for *On Belief*. I should say that this part of Badiou's discussion has had the most profound effect upon me. That Calvin continues to peer over my shoulder may have something to do with it, for Badiou states with the reformers's starkness the extraordinary logic and appeal of their position. It seems to me that the doctrine of grace as he reformulates it—that it comes from outside and has nothing to do with the everyday regulations and laws and morals that seem to characterise our lives from the global scene to quotidian individual interactions—must be a cornerstone of any materialist politics as well as a materialist theology. I feel as though I could shake Žižek for the mad rush of thought and writing that wears away the clarity and sharpness of Badiou's arguments. But then the various byways Žižek follows enthusiastically do serve to show where I do not wish to go.

### Badiou, or Militant Gratuitousness

With refreshing directness (Badiou is not one for looping sentences, sliding from one idea to the next), Badiou writes:



The pure event is reducible to this: Jesus died on the cross and resurrected. This event is “grace” (*kharis*). Thus, it is neither a bequest, nor a tradition, nor a teaching. It is supernumerary to all this and presents itself as pure givenness (Badiou 2003: 63).

The contrast is with the Gospels, written *after* Paul and overloaded with stories of Jesus’ life, teaching, miracles, and so forth. Paul will have nothing of this. For Badiou, the key text is Romans 6:14, the reformers’ slogan: “since you are not under law, but under grace.” If the “not” signals the breakdown of the closed circuit of the law and the path of the flesh, then the “but” indicates the suspension of the law and the faithful labour of those opened up as subjects by the event, by grace. This “not . . . but” is the mark of the rupture of the event. And for Badiou this is also the mark, the formal sign, of the universal: “We shall maintain, in effect, that an evental rupture always constitutes its subject in the divided form of a ‘not. . .but,’ and that it is *precisely this form that bears the universal*” (Badiou 2003: 63–64). In other words, in its very particular and contingent break with the order of Being, grace marks the emergence of the subject—a reformed philosophy that would put Kierkegaard to shame.

But how is the resurrection of Jesus grace? As I pointed out earlier, Badiou takes the resurrection, the content of Paul’s proclamation, as a “mythological core” and a “religious confinement” (Badiou 2003: 66). Badiou “cares nothing for the Good News he declares, or the cult dedicated to him” (Badiou 2003: 1). Yet, the fact that it is a fable, that it cannot be verified according to any of the canons of scientific or historical enquiry, is both crucial to Badiou’s argument (the truth-event is beyond such verification) and makes it so much easier to identify the form of Paul’s argument. Badiou’s concern lies with the notion of grace in a purely materialist register. Or, in Badiou’s words, he seeks to “extract a formal, wholly secularized conception of grace” (Badiou 2003: 66). Later he will variously name this a laicised or materialist grace, or the truth-event.

But now comes the crunch: “Everything,” he writes, “hinges on knowing whether an ordinary existence, breaking with time’s cruel routine,



encounters the material chance of serving a truth, thereby becoming, through subjective division and beyond the human animal's survival imperatives, an immortal" (Badiou 2003: 66). This is an extraordinary sentence, fundamental to Badiou's whole argument, so let us pause a moment to exegete it. The key items turn out to be its democratic and contingent nature, but above all the urgent need to tear grace from its theological content and context. Thus, an underlying democratisation<sup>18</sup> runs through the sentence I have quoted (an "ordinary existence"), a point Badiou draws from Paul's argument that Christ's resurrection enables the resurrection of all human beings (Romans 6:4–9; see Badiou 2003: 69–70). It is also very much a part of Badiou's emphasis on the contingency and particularity of truth and the universal—hence "a truth." So, Badiou a little later uses the inclusive "we" and pluralises grace to "certain graces," of which we are all beneficiaries (see Badiou 2003: 66). This much is obvious, for Badiou stresses it time and again. However, I am more interested in the two metaphors, "extract" and more forcefully "tear," that precede and follow the sentence I am exegeting. In order to produce such a materialism of grace, Badiou calls upon "us" to rip, wrench and haul the terminology of grace out from its religious, or more specifically, its theological context. Or, if I may put it in terms of the tension between the Bible and theology, Badiou attempts to divest grace of its theological content by sticking as close as possible to the biblical text, to Paul's letters. In the next chapter, I will trace the way Adorno develops a more sustained theological suspicion that would have come in use here. Back to the metaphors: their forcefulness seems excessive until the weight of the first words of the sentence makes its presence felt: "Everything hinges." What is this everything? Badiou's whole philosophical system? The validity of the truth-event over against Being? Or is it the question of militant politics that hinges on this? In the end, I suspect that Badiou would happily dispense with philosophical systems (is not Paul the great anti-philosopher?) and his own particular contribution, but not the militant politics. At least this is how I read Badiou's gloss on the sentence I have

<sup>18</sup> To be distinguished from capitalist parliamentary democracy, dismissed by Badiou.



been considering until now: “it is incumbent upon us to found a materialism of grace through the strong, simple idea that every existence can one day be seized by what happens to it and subsequently devote itself to that which is valid for all” (Badiou 2003: 66).

Democratised, contingent, but above all materialist: this notion of grace is the much more fundamental challenge that Badiou poses to Žižek. Concerned to throw up the defences of psychoanalysis, to read grace itself in terms of the constitutive exception, Žižek misses the challenge of formulating a properly militant political position, at least until *On Belief*. Let us first see what Badiou makes of it.

Over the last part of his book on Paul, Badiou systematically reworks the great Pauline triad of faith, hope and love from 1 Corinthians 13:13 into a program for militant politics. Žižek will of course focus on the question of love, but Badiou rearranges the three. Over against Paul's order—faith, hope, love—we find faith, love and hope in a distinctly temporal order. None of them can work, however, without the underlying notion of grace. In this respect, he is thoroughly Reformed. As for faith, Badiou picks up Paul's dual opposition between faith/works and grace/law to argue that grace and faith belong to the path of the spirit. But the relationship is closer than that: Badiou draws nigh to the reformers' position of justification by grace through faith. Or, in Badiou's terms, we have “the subjectivation of grace's universal address as pure conviction, or faith” (Badiou 2003: 75). As for love, this becomes fidelity to the truth-event, a post-evental fidelity that produces its own law, the law of the spirit that has nothing to do with the law that the truth-event has overcome. If faith opens up the possibility of a new political movement, then love is absolutely necessary to keep the movement going, a fidelity to the truth that can call other subjects to the cause and thereby universalise. I find it so strange, then, that Žižek makes love bear all of the weight in *The Fragile Absolute*. As for hope, it is quite simply perseverance, endurance, patience. Rather than the objective judgement that separates believers from unbelievers, Badiou takes hope in Paul subjectively: in many respects the continuation of love, hope is the result of passing through suffering victoriously, of facing the ordeal and not giving up one's fidelity to, or love of, the



truth. One does not overcome the ordeal in the name of hope, but hope arises by passing through the ordeal. It is “confidence in the fidelity of the militant” (Badiou 2003: 96).<sup>19</sup>

I am less taken with the reworking of faith, love, and hope, for it seems to me that Badiou has succumbed to the attraction of 1 Corinthians 13. What is important, however, is that he reads this chapter in the light of grace—something that Žižek misses entirely. I am also interested in the mechanism by which Badiou renders grace materialist and militant. It not just that Paul spouted forth a fable, a myth with which we can dispense, nor can we be content with the form of Paul’s formulation. At some point Badiou needs to return to content and he does so by systematically emptying out the theological meaning and re-filling in materialist and political terms—except that of grace itself. Thus, grace remains unchanged, read rather conventionally in terms of pure gift, of that which without being due, without cause: “that which occurs without being couched in any predicate, that which is translegal, that which happens to everyone without an assignable reason” (Badiou 2003: 76–77). What is due, the wage or reward, is bound to the law and works. He will eventually shift the terminology to that of the subject, since the founding of a subject has nothing to do with what is due to it. In other words, that which founds a subject is grace: “Every subject is initiated on the basis of a charisma: every subject is charismatic” (Badiou 2003: 77). Badiou writes not of the abstract subject: his interest is quite specifically in the militant subject. Militantism cannot be anything but gratuitous, of the realm of grace rather than law.

What of the other term with which grace has an inseparable link, namely universalism? Here he readily shifts from Paul’s assertion of the oneness of God—God is God of the Jews and of the Gentiles (Romans 3:27–30)—to that of universalism. Breaking off the “mono” from “monotheism” Badiou argues that the universal is “for all.” This

<sup>19</sup> Badiou favours Romans 5:2 here: “And we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces patience, and patience produces enduring fidelity, and enduring fidelity produces hope, and hope does not disappoint.”



universalism, Paul's "revolutionary conviction" (Badiou 2003: 76), is one of excess, a multiplicity that exceeds itself, superabundant. Not a singular universal that can exist only by exclusion, it includes everyone without differences. Paul's key text here is the problematic Galatians 3:28: "In Christ there is male nor female, neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free." As excessive and superabundant, the universal cannot be separated from grace. So also with love, which is fidelity to the event that makes it available to future subjects; and with hope, the confidence of the militant, each victory is a victory for everyone. But how is this revolutionary? Everyone is addressed, without distinction. In this respect, Badiou is close to Gramsci. As I argued in my discussion of Gramsci, his ecumenism is one that runs against the catholicism of the Roman Catholic Church—for which catholicity can only operate on the basis of exclusion—and seeks a catholicity of inclusion. Badiou and Gramsci are on this point thoroughly Protestant. For Badiou, it is not so much that Luther and Calvin are right (he never mentions them), but that Paul had made this point in the first place.

We can now begin to see how Badiou develops his materialism of grace: apart from grace itself, every other term that Paul uses, overloaded as each one is with theological associations, is recharged with philosophical or materialist content. God becomes universalism, love becomes eventual fidelity, hope the confidence that arises through ordeal, and law becomes the way things are or Being, into which death, sin, desire, and the flesh all dissolve.

It is an old objection, but I am not sure that the theological content can be divested so easily. Does not the form itself maintain a fundamentally theological pattern that remains even if one can hypothetically divest it of its content? In the end, however, I am less interested in seeking some theological residue in Badiou's argument than in asking two other questions. First, why does one need to get rid of the theological content—Badiou's mythological core, religious confinement or fable—in order to develop a militant politics? Although I can think of a host of historical reasons for a distinctly atheistic and materialist stance in such a politics, I can also think of a range of other militants for whom their militancy was unthinkable without the theological content—Paul is of course the prime example





here. Second, and more importantly, a major concern in this book is a materialising theology. And I am approaching such a task in a dialectical fashion: neither the application of Marxist categories, primarily ideology, to the question of theology, nor even a claim on behalf of theology for the empty seat around the Marxist table, I wish to take on board the full implications of the direction of both Badiou's and Žižek's arguments. They move from theology, particularly Paul, to politics, preferably of a militant type. What happens, however, when we move on to theology from this point, from the full divestment of theological content in a militant politics? Or, to use Adorno's language, Badiou and Žižek have not gone far enough, for if we push further in the direction they are headed we will find ourselves back in the realm of theology.

What does this mean for the doctrine of grace? Not only does grace enable Badiou and, finally, Žižek to develop a distinctly Marxist political position, a militant politics, not only is a materialist grace thoroughly militant, it also means that grace itself is an inescapably radical and revolutionary *theological* doctrine as well. In this way I read Badiou's "absolute gratuitousness of militantism" (Badiou 2003: 77), although perhaps not quite as he intended.

### The Grace of V. I. Lenin

Now we can pass, at last, to the substantial argument of *On Belief*. For here, belatedly, Žižek realises the implications of Badiou's laicised grace for a militant politics. And the signal of such a realisation, I suggest, is that only in this book does he become overtly Leninist. But this means that I will need to tighten up my argument concerning Žižek's shift to Leninism: it is not merely Christianity, nor even Paul himself, but quite specifically the concept of grace, in the full sense in which the reformers used the term, that enables him to become a Leninist. So, my discussion zeroes in on those sections of *On Belief* where grace becomes a political category.

I am less interested in the diagnosis of the problem, namely the spiritual and ideological malaise of capitalism that manifests itself in both cyberspace reason and various bowdlerised forms of Asian religions



(I have commented enough on this earlier), nor even in the parallels that he draws with the paganisms within which Christianity first emerged. Rather, the crucial moments are when he dares to speak of Christianity directly, and these moments are relatively few. In fact, I am reminded of the embarrassment we all felt as children and then early teenagers when our parents insisted on praying in public at a picnic or a barbeque or at a lunch stop on a camping trip (what if someone should see or hear this overt Christian identification?). In an analogous fashion Žižek's comments on Christianity are relatively sparse, delaying for as long as he can the explicit points he wishes to make.

So, let me identify what he does say:

A. The “good news” of Christianity involves the possibility of changing eternity, of a thoroughly new beginning;

B. This new beginning is of the same order as Lenin's actual freedom, over against formal freedom;

C. This change involves the suspension and demise of the law;

D. Lest the previous point be taken as anti-Jewish, Judaism has a dialectical relation to Christianity;

E. Christology is crucial:

i. Christ faces up to the constitutive exception and shows it to be empty;

ii. unlike pagan religions in which one seeks to become more like God, in Christianity God becomes human;

iii. like the abandoned Christ, at the moment of being completely cut off from God, we are closest to God;

iv. it shows the fundamental imperfection of God that is the foundation for love beyond mercy.

To my mind, the first two and the fourth points are by far the most important. I am less interested in his efforts to specify the Christian uniqueness over against the various pagan temptations (E.i). And those arguments that merely revisit rather standard theological positions (E.iii) or reiterate points he has made earlier, concerning both the law (C) and love (E.iv) are not so tempting.

Let us begin with a few comments on Judaism, although the whole



discussion of the law in Badiou and Žižek himself is as much about Judaism as it is about Christianity. As with some of his theological arguments, he picks up some standard and questionable positions, particularly the notions that Judaism is part of the history of the West along with ancient Greece and Christianity, the invention of history (as rupture) lies with Jewish and then Christian thought over against the cyclical patterns of paganism, and even the use of typology in which figures from the Old Testament prefigure Christ (Žižek focuses on Job; see PD: 124–26). These are hardly remarkable points, but the over-riding pattern is to oppose Judaism and Christianity, although not necessarily to the detriment of the former. Thus, the negative rendering of the suprasensible dimension (iconoclasm) must be contrasted with Christian immediacy in which Christ is the renunciation of the beyond (see OB: 89). Or, the external legal discourse stands over against the inner turmoil and self-examination of Christianity (OB: 129). The contrasts pile up, as usual: Judaism is, in Hegel's terms, “in-itself” while Christianity is Judaism “for itself”; the ban on images over against Jesus Christ; the change in personal identity whereby God or the law move from being external to internal (Christ); the gap between man and God becomes the split, the impotence, within God himself (the step from Job to Christ). For all this, Judaism does not come out of the contrast in a bad state. I can sense a sneaking admiration in Žižek's casting of Judaism as another means of overcoming the constitutive exception, although this time in terms of the transgressive act of obeying the law to the letter, manifested in the dry, rational debates over regulations that are in fact the beliefs in question (transgression is thereby no longer its basis). No obscene fantasmatic background or superego here (homeland, ecstatic or inner religious life), since what counts are the rules themselves (see OB: 110, 127).

It is almost as though Judaism provides an alternative breakaway from the constitutive exception, the obscene supplement of the law itself, and in his response to Eric Santner in *The Puppet and Dwarf* he argues such a line (see PD: 112–13, 117, 119). Except, of course, in the ban on images: Žižek takes this as the mark of anthropomorphism or personification in Judaism. Precisely because Judaism does have a personal



deity, because he was far too human, because any representation would bring out this unbearable truth, Judaism needs the second commandment against graven images. Here lies the imaginary excess that must be repressed. This excess takes a number of forms: the spectral, fantasmic history (Freud's myth of the patricide of Moses is then an effort to expose such a history; see OB: 129–31; PD: 128) over against explicit symbolic history; the secret horror of divine impotence; the abyss of the Other's desire and so on. At this point Christianity lays the truth bare: Christ is this image, this ordinary creature that Judaism cannot face. Or, as Žižek will argue at greater length in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Christianity exposes, identifies with, shows as empty the fantasmic kernel of Judaism—the messiah has arrived (see PD: 128–30). And so, in the end Žižek prefers the Christian version of “unplugging” in which Christianity faces up to and embraces its own excess. Even though the Jewish version—obeying the law to the letter—looks for all the world like the feminine formulae of sexualization with which he tried to describe the Christian break in *The Fragile Absolute*, he will stay with the elusive search for materialist grace. In fact, what happens in *On Belief* and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* is that the feminine formulae for sexualization, manifested in obedience to the letter of the law as the ultimate mode of undermining it, moves from Christianity to Judaism. Obedience to the law, the concern with ethics, even (dare I write it?) Lacan himself, become Jewish concerns. Obviously, these options are extremely attractive for Žižek, for they open up the possibility of another path for a new beginning. So much so that by the time of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* the split is not between Judaism and Christianity: rather, Judaism and Christianity join forces against pagan initiatory wisdom. The problem with this, however, is that the closer they are to each other, the more Judaism prepares the way, opens up the possibility of Christianity. Without Judaism first identifying and remaining faithful to the fantasmatic kernel, Christianity would not have been able to identify with it and show it to be empty. Without the Jewish community constituted as an ethnic remainder, Paul would not have been able to claim that the whole of humanity is a remainder. All of which ends up being a renewed form of supersessionism: in part a response to Eric Santner,



in part due to the indelible stamp of Judaism on psychoanalysis. I want to suggest however, that the Christian break with Judaism is, in Žižek's work at least, part of his necessary break with Lacan if he is to develop a political position.

What of the other two points I listed above? How do they explicate a political theology of grace? On the last pages of *On Belief* Žižek (seems) to come clean:

Here enters the “good news” of Christianity: the miracle of faith is that it IS possible to traverse the fantasy, to undo this founding decision, to start one's life all over again, from the zero point—in short, to *change Eternity itself* (what we “*always-already*” are). Ultimately, the “rebirth” of which Christianity speaks (when one joins the community of believers, one is born again) is the name for such a new beginning (OB: 148; emphasis in original).

This passage leans heavily towards theological rather than Lacanian terminology (a little earlier he invokes the term “miracle,” quoting Lenin's “in some respects, a revolution is a miracle” (OB: 84)).<sup>20</sup> In fact, the only relic of Lacan lies in the notion of traversing the fantasy, crossing the gap that separates the mundane universe of meaning and its fantasmic support. Christianity dares to bridge this gap, to stare down the horrific and psychotic realm of the living dead that would under normal Lacanian terms result from this collapse of the Real (fantasy) and Symbolic (the universe of meaning): Christianity sends this realm scuttling away into a dark corner. Other than that, in these last pages Lacan has slipped out the back, quietly departing the scene however momentarily. Instead, we find Kierkegaard (and I will need to return to this), Marx, Evelyn Waugh, Brecht, Schelling, and Lenin.

Out of these, Brecht, Marx, and Lenin are for me the most interesting. I begin, as always, with Marx, who now becomes the bearer of the “precious” Christian legacy, albeit on the basis of a gloss. Thesis 11 becomes “Philosophers have been teaching us how to discover (remember)

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<sup>20</sup> Miracle is in fact a central term for Lenin, providing a key to his continual reflection on revolution. See my forthcoming *Lenin and Theology*.



our true Self, but the point is the change it” (OB: 149). We might want a slightly more collective focus, but the anti-pagan polemic is part of the agenda here. The change Žižek is after is at the level of Badiou’s event, the fundamental shake-up of the co-ordinates of existence that means we can never return to what was before.

But I am really after Lenin. In order to get to him I will need to pass by Brecht. Brecht’s poem “The Interrogation of the Good,” is translated by Žižek himself. The poem allows Žižek to stress the suspension of the ethical as the absolute basis of any authentic ethical engagement. Now, of course, we threaten to return here to the constitutive exception—the suspension of ethics as the basis of ethics—until we get to this statement: “And what is the Christian notion of being ‘reborn in faith’ if not the first full-fledged formulation of such an unconditional subjective engagement on account of which we are ready to suspend the very ethical substance of our being?” (OB: 151). This “unconditional subjective engagement” is of a fundamentally different order than ethics, so much so that it can hardly be called an ethical engagement, let alone ethics as such.

Instead, what we have here is the hard-headed and hard-hearted reality of seizing the revolution and holding to it. In other words, Badiou’s militant declarations become in Brecht’s poem the need to execute the obnoxious “good man,” although now with a good bullet from a good gun up against a good wall. This is of course where Žižek’s increasing identification as a Leninist begins to have some bite: over against the contemporary elevation of ethics over politics, a return to Lenin rather than a de-politicised Marx places politics, or more directly a “politics of Truth” (OB: 2), at the centre. Further, like Paul with Christianity and Lacan with psychoanalysis, Lenin is outside the initial Marxist circle (he is Eastern, Russian, Tatar), but this externality allows him to wrench Marxism out of its original context and thereby universalise it (see OB: 2–3). Third, only through such a traumatic displacement can the theory become effective in an explicitly political sense. This is where Lenin’s absolute commitment to the revolutionary cause is the key, the brutal and realistic take-no-prisoners approach (and here the phrase is hardly metaphorical), the full realisation of the consequences of actually taking a political



position, in short the profound suspension of ethics in the name of a revolutionary cause to which *everything* must contribute in order to change the “coordinates of the situation” (OB: 3). The coordinates in question are those of the liberal-capitalist world order. The terminology draws nigh to that which Žižek uses for Christianity at the close of *On Belief* (see above) and to Badiou’s event in the midst of Being.

A materialist notion of grace is beginning to emerge. What we can see is that although Badiou makes the initial connections for Žižek, he reshuffles them in his own fashion. He has of course reversed Badiou’s move from Lenin back to Paul. Instead, Žižek uses Paul to gain access to Lenin, whose refusal of ethics except in terms of the revolution itself, willingness to follow through with the consequences of seizing power, and his assertion of the primacy of politics makes Lenin the militant rather than Paul. As yet, however, I am not sure that we have moved beyond the analogous relationship between Marxism and Christianity: the revolution that shifts the coordinates of the situation is analogous to grace, but it is not yet a properly materialist grace.

That moment comes with the discussion of formal and actual freedom. Quite simply, actual freedom is the ability to step outside or transcend the particular context in question. It questions and overturns the cluster of presuppositions and determinations that constitute in normal circumstances the absolute horizon of thought and action. Formal freedom is then the apparent freedom whose boundaries are in fact set by a certain situation: given the coordinates, the range of choice appears to be endless but is in fact limited. It operates within the terms of the existing power relations. Actual freedom, by contrast, is not the choice between two or more options within a given situation, but the choice of changing the very situation itself. My ability to choose from various products in a supermarket is therefore formal freedom: faced with a bewildering array of choices, I fail to see that the political economic structure that generates supermarkets has already set the boundaries of the range of choice itself. Capitalist freedom, then, is but formal freedom: it does not “rock the system” as the sign at my local railway station warns me to avoid, lest



someone call the “crime-stoppers” phone number and report my seditious activities.

The distinction between actual and formal freedom is openly a Leninist formulation of Badiou’s Being and event, or Paul’s law and grace. Or, in Žižek’s own terms, the “given coordinates” of a situation (Being, law or formal freedom) must be opposed to that which undermines, overthrows and fundamentally rearranges those coordinates (event, actual freedom, and grace). However, Žižek does not let the opposition stand as it is, so he works his way through a thicket of examples from Bill Clinton’s failed health-care reform through the French TV show, “It’s my choice,” to the “collapse” of communism in Eastern Europe in order to argue that, in a situation of forced choice (Eastern Europe’s option either for capitalism or to return to “actually existing socialism”), actual freedom is the precisely the ability to act as though all options are available, that the choice is in fact not forced. Further, Lenin’s insistence on asking whose interest is served by “freedom”—“Freedom—yes, but for whom? To do what?” (see OB: 114)—had the purpose of keeping open the possibility of a real choice, of an actual freedom. Finally, Žižek is inescapably dialectical, and so he will not rest, as does Badiou, with the utter divorce of actual and formal freedom. Rather, actual freedom is what rearranges the coordinates of formal freedom, or in Badiouese, the event embodies within itself an inscription into the order of Being—hence the thoroughly new situation to which the followers remain faithful, living both in terms of fidelity to the event (“love”) and with the confidence that they will win through (“hope”).

In Lenin’s actual freedom Žižek has finally tracked down that elusive materialist grace for which he set out in *The Ticklish Subject*. And this time, for all of his criticism of Badiou’s anti-dialectical stand, he affirms against Badiou’s theologically illiterate critics that the event is a laicised grace (OB: 112). Of course, as I discussed in detail a little earlier, Badiou himself says as much more than once.

Before moving onto some reservations concerning Žižek’s militant Protestantism, let me note what has happened in the argument of *On Belief*. On a minor level, Žižek has collapsed Badiou’s sharp distinction





between Paul and Jesus, preferring to speak of Christianity as such. Far more important is the fact that Lenin has replaced Lacan as the primary point of reference. To be sure, there is plenty of Lacan in *On Belief* (can Žižek write in any other fashion?), and after these books Lacan would be as close as ever to Žižek's heart, but when he gets to the crucial politico-theological points, Christian theological terminology mixes it up with Lenin, but Lacan is nowhere to be found. Gone is the trap of ethics to which Lacan kept him tied in *The Fragile Absolute*, gone is the desperate effort to find political mileage in Lacan, or indeed to interpret the main points of Christian theology by means of Lacanian categories. In their place we find a clear focus on grace, and it is Lenin who emerges as the embodiment of a materialist and political grace.

Grace has, however, become a purely formal category, marking the irruption of something unforeseen and completely new, the unexpected break that overthrows the status quo. The term itself is then translated into Lenin's actual freedom, passing through Badiou's event. But let me pick up the features of grace that I identified a little earlier, especially the concern with salvation rather than good works or even election. In the Protestant understanding, grace is that which comes from entirely outside human agency, from God to be precise. Human beings neither deserve salvation, nor can they in any way effect salvation for themselves: grace becomes the completely undeserved and unearned gift of salvation from God. However, Žižek's Leninist reading hardly has room for God: actual freedom is nothing other than the revolutionary act itself, one that fundamentally breaks up the coordinates of a situation. In other words, human agency returns with a vengeance, and grace becomes an act of human intervention. I want to keep open the possibility that a materialist grace might in fact remove human beings as the agents of change, however difficult such a possibility might be.

### Kierkegaard's Snare

However, Žižek claims that his is a properly Christian reading, that this Leninist position (attained by means of Paul and Christianity more generally) is one with the revolutionary core of Christianity. But



this is not merely pure fiat, something that Žižek brings about through the force of his own argument. Rather, he brings about the Leninist-Christian conjunction by means of a figure that almost escapes our attention, one who peers around the corner of some of the major points of his argument, namely Søren Kierkegaard. Now, Kierkegaard will come in for a beating in my discussion of Adorno in the next chapter, but Žižek utters not one word of criticism of Kierkegaard, citing him approvingly when he needs to peg his argument firmly to the ground. Kierkegaard is, of course, the Protestant, or rather Lutheran philosopher par excellence, and it seems to me that Žižek's own Protestant discovery, the moment of his own Reformation, relies heavily on Kierkegaard. But Kierkegaard, at least on Žižek's reading, is the one who skews his materialist theology of grace in terms of human agency.

On crucial questions, such as the law and transgression, love, the religious suspension of the ethical, the fundamental Christian break, but above all redemption itself, Žižek defers to Kierkegaard. As far as transgression and the law are concerned—the point of Žižek's struggle with Badiou and psychoanalysis—Žižek brings in Kierkegaard to back up an argument he has made before: the most dangerous and subversive act is to follow the law to the letter, to immerse oneself fully, without reservation, in the society/institution/relationship/ideological system in question (see FA: 147–48). This assumes a certain distance between the subject and the system in question, a pause in total identification that is fundamental to the functioning of that system. To close that distance without pause is the act of the prisoner who identifies completely with prison, the soldier who obeys commands to the letter, the citizen of any former Eastern European communist country who actually believes that the state is the full realisation of communism, Christ's fulfilment of the law, and most tellingly, the woman who identifies entirely with her lot as a submissive household chattel. Actually, the last example is not quite Žižek's, but he does argue that total identification is in fact consonant with the feminine formulae for sexualisation, the Jewish form of uncoupling and the radical break of Christianity. And yet the last example is that item in the series that Žižek cannot name, the point at which, it seems to



me, the argument itself breaks down (I have already indicated my doubts about the constellation of love, ethics and Lacan in *The Fragile Absolute* above).

The way in which Kierkegaard comes in here is telling. Žižek quotes from *Works of Love*: “We do not laud the son who said ‘No,’ but we endeavour to learn from the gospel how dangerous it is to say, ‘Sir, I will.’”<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard’s comment applies to Matthew 21:28–31<sup>22</sup> in his own characteristic fashion. Yet the issue is not obedience to the law, to obeying the father’s command: rather, Kierkegaard reads this as the call of the gospel itself, the radical demand that requires that one give up everything in order to follow Christ. Even so, there is a catch with this reading, one that gives the human response great scope and one to which I will return below.

At first it will appear odd that Žižek misses the direction of Kierkegaard’s reading, for is he not himself interested in the radical break that Christianity provides? But this reference to Kierkegaard comes from *The Fragile Absolute*, which I have already argued slips back into the whole question of the law, in which Lacan and ethics find themselves at home. So also on the question of love: no matter how much Žižek or Kierkegaard emphasises the uniqueness of Christian love, *agape*, the prescriptions on love are inescapably ethical. On two other occasions Žižek cites approvingly Kierkegaard’s *Works on Love*. The first comes in a commentary on one of Žižek’s favourite texts from Luke 14:26—the one concerning hatred of father, mother etc.—to suggest that one should in fact “*hate the beloved* out of love and in love.”<sup>23</sup> This is, in fact, the work of love, comparable to Che Guevara’s or Lenin’s revolutionary violence (PD: 30; note the difference with his earlier readings of this same text). And

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<sup>21</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, translated and edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 102 (quoted by Žižek in FA: 148).

<sup>22</sup> “What do you think? A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ And he answered, ‘I will not’; but afterward he repented and went. And he went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father? They said, ‘The first.’” (Matthew 21: 28–31).

<sup>23</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 114 (see Žižek FA: 126).



a little later, in a discussion wholly indebted to Kierkegaard on love and deception, “*love believes everything—and yet is never to be deceived.*”<sup>24</sup>

Yet, for all his comments on love, sequestered away in his private apartment, Kierkegaard is not so silly as to be trapped in the realm of love. He is, after all, a Protestant. And so Žižek will follow him, now in *On Belief* and *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, in arguing for the religious suspension of the ethical. Behind Kierkegaard’s comments, whose importance is in an inverse relationship to the all too brief citations, lie the three spheres of aesthetics, ethics, and religion. As we shall see in the next chapter, there is a distinct hierarchy in which the religious is superior to both the ethical and the aesthetic. Religion, or more particularly Lutheran Protestantism, will then override the other two spheres, suspending them both in the name of the more fundamental category. For Kierkegaard, love may pass through all three spheres, but its truest expression comes with the religious. Or, betrayal may be aesthetic (betrayal of universality for a particular reason) or ethical (betrayal of the particular for a universal such as truth), but the ultimate form is religious betrayal. This is the betrayal out of love, the sacrifice of the other, and thereby of oneself, in order to uncover that element that could only be uncovered by such a betrayal—Christ’s mission is of course the greatest example here (see PD: 17 and 18–19)

The religious suspension or rupture of ethics is but the first element of Žižek’s reliance on Kierkegaard for a formulation of the Christian break,<sup>25</sup> or what he will come to call the fundamental shifting of the coordinates. Two other points are important: this fundamental new beginning is one that we are called upon to repeat for ourselves in contrast to the Socratic process of recollection; and redemption is made possible by the break (Christ’s death) but is not ensured. On the first point, the new beginning

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<sup>24</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 221 (see Žižek FA: 127).

<sup>25</sup> Back in *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek had already identified a break with ethics, only to lose and then recover that insight. He writes: “The notion of belief which fits this paradox of authority was elaborated by Kierkegaard; this is why, for him, religion is eminently modern: the traditional universe is ethical, while the Religious involves a radical disruption of the Old Ways—true religion is a crazy wager on the Impossible we have to make once we lose support in tradition” (IS: 115, after quoting Romans 13:10).



of Christianity, the fundamental shift in eternity it brings about is not, suggests Kierkegaard, like Socratic recollection (learning is therefore the process of recovering what we already knew before birth but lost in the trauma of birth itself). Rather, it is a repetition of that primordial choice that was first made in Christianity (see OB: 148–49). The paradox here is that we can make a new beginning yet again without endangering the uniqueness of that first beginning.

However, the most telling debt to Kierkegaard comes with the notion of redemption. Let me quote Žižek in full:

By taking upon himself all the Sins and then, through his death, paying for them, Christ opens up the way for the redemption of humanity—however, by his death, people are not directly redeemed, but given the POSSIBILITY of redemption, of getting of the excess. This distinction is crucial: Christ does NOT do our work for us, he does not pay our debt, he “merely” GIVES US A CHANCE—with his death, he asserts OUR freedom and responsibility, for us, to redeem ourselves through the “leap into faith,” that is, by way of choosing to “live in Christ” —in *imitatio Christi*, we REPEAT Christ’s gesture of freely assuming the excess of Life, instead of projecting/displacing it onto some figure of the Other. (We put “merely” in quotation marks, because, as was clear to Kierkegaard, the definition of freedom is that possibility is higher than actuality: by giving us a chance to redeem ourselves, Christ does infinitely more than if he were directly to redeem ourselves) (OB: 105).

Apart from the shouting capitals (but do not Slovenians shout at each other, always speaking over the top of each other?), the famous Kierkegaardian “leap into faith” finally appears here. Here again, Christianity overcomes the constitutive exception—we appropriate through Christ the excess of life rather than leaving it with another—but in making this argument a decisive breach opens up with Reformed theology. In pursuing this break, I want to return to a problem with Žižek’s reading of Kierkegaard on the two sons. In response to the call of the gospel, one says “No” and the other “I will,” but the catch is that it seems to leave the final decision up to the human agents. God offers the call; we



have the option of refusing or accepting it, with all the consequences. This is how I read Žižek's argument that Christ's death opens up the possibility, gives us the chance of redemption.

The problem, then, is free will and grace. In his famous and vital debates with Erasmus, Luther argued firmly against any notion of free will, which for him entailed salvation by merit.<sup>26</sup> Grace was an overwhelmingly alien act of God in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Even faith is a gift of God, given through grace, rather than the "symbolic pact" Žižek prefers (OB: 109). There was no room, for Luther, for a natural or gradual path to salvation, nor could human beings play any role in the process of redemption. The necessary corollary of Luther's position is predestination: whatever God wills and foreknows (providence) happens inevitably. Therefore, whatever God wills is willed necessarily. So it is necessarily predetermined who will receive faith by grace and be saved. In short, God justifies some by predestination. Erasmus was hardly one to defend Roman Catholic positions, but he was too much of a humanist to give up entirely on human agency or free will. For Luther, however, free will gave final control back to human beings, who could then choose whether to accept salvation or not.

Žižek's reading of Kierkegaard pushes him closer to Erasmus than Luther, closer to traditional humanism than the decisive Protestant break. Ultimately, I would suggest, it means that he is unwilling, at least in *On Belief*, to take the step that sees at the heart of the doctrine of grace the removal of human agency. Grace, as I have pointed out on a number of occasions, is that which comes undeserved from outside. Human beings cannot earn it or bring it about.

### Revolutionary Grace

If I had high hopes for Žižek's resolute focus on grace in *On Belief*, I am finally disappointed. I feel robbed, denied the insight that the doctrine of grace might have provided for politics. What we find is yet another effort to locate grace in the realm of human effort. Luther

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<sup>26</sup> Martin Luther and Desiderius Erasmus, Luther and Erasmus: *On the Bondage of the Will* and on the *Freedom of the Will*, Library of Christian Classics 17 (London: SCM, 1969).



and Calvin would quickly dismiss this as yet another form of salvation through works and not through grace. However, just when I had given up hope, the curious mix of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* provides that final step, perhaps despite itself. In the midst of Žižek's relapse into and summary of the arguments of *The Fragile Absolute* there is also his return to the question of grace from *On Belief*, with one major difference. Here he discards the reliance on human agency: rather than suggesting that any materialisation of grace shifts grace firmly back into the realm of human decision and activity, in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, especially the fifth chapter, he finally realises the full implications of the doctrine of grace itself (see especially PD: 133–38). A materialist grace is nothing other than the unexpected, *messianic* moment of revolution.

Žižek's debts at this point are a mix of Giorgio Agamben, Walter Benjamin and a return to the central argument of Alain Badiou. From Agamben he draws the point that the reason why Paul is so readable now, why he makes so much sense, is because his notion of the end of time only makes sense in light of the revolutionary state of emergency. From Walter Benjamin comes the whole panoply of messianic designation, although in a distinctly loose and Christian sense. And the return of almost pure Badiou is a belated surprise, since Badiou himself argued that the truth-event, in its utter unexpectedness and contingency, is a materialist form of the doctrine of grace.

Žižek makes a couple of minor points—any revolutionary moment is untimely since there is no right moment, that all the straws in the wind point to an “end time” scenario today—but the key to his argument lies with grace itself and predestination. Although Žižek's text is saturated with the theological language of grace and predestination (Lacan has again disappeared), he makes use of it in two ways: one is the unexpected, unpredictable revolutionary moment that comes entirely from outside; the second is the post-revolutionary task, the responsibility for building from the ground up. It seems to me that for all his byways, choppy arguments and contradictions, Žižek has hit on something here, namely that one of the most complex ways of speaking about revolution does in fact come from theology.



As I have argued throughout this chapter, grace concerns salvation, and this salvation comes from entirely outside the system: it cannot be earned, nor is it deserved. Theologically, of course, the name for such pure externality and contingency is God. Žižek has a good deal to say about God, but he also stresses the analogous impossibility of predicting revolution. We may assess the situation in whatever way we choose in order to understand how a revolution may have taken place, how the social and political situation led up to that moment, but ultimately we cannot answer the questions: why now? Why here? Why these people? Objective analysis will not tell us the time, even in terms of the Marxist crisis of contradictions. The value of speaking about this in theological terms is that it maintains the pure externality of the event.

The doctrine of grace also enables Žižek to wrench himself away from human agency—the point at which he concluded *On Belief*. Grace inverts, or rather undermines, the usual focus on human activity. Rather, the focus is on God. God puts himself on the line, puts himself completely at risk, opening up the New Beginning: “God took upon Himself the risk of putting everything at stake, of fully ‘existentially engaging Himself’ by, as it were, stepping into His own picture, becoming part of creation, exposing Himself to the utter contingency of existence” (PD: 136). After such a moment, we must help God, who now stands for the radically unexpected.

So, a materialist grace is external, unexpected and beyond human agency (which is how we then need to understand “God”). However, the full Protestant turn in Žižek’s work comes only with his appropriation of deepest logic of predestination, without which grace could not be thought. It is not just that God predestines events and that they turn out so in a quiet, linear progression; rather, predestination relies on the wholly contingent, unexpected role of grace. Once we have had the entirely unexpected experience of grace, once we have undeservedly been subject to it, only then does it appear as fore-ordained. So also the revolution: only after the contingent moment of revolution do the objective conditions show up as leading to it. Further, with predestination, one cannot avoid showing signs of the workings of grace, which will then become





apparent in the work necessary for the new post-grace order. So also with revolution: the easy part is the revolution itself; the hard labour comes the morning after when a new society must be constructed from scratch (as Lenin and the Bolsheviks were to find). Or, in Badiouese, the event is pure empty sign, and we have to work to generate its meaning. For Žižek the truth of predestination is here, in the expectation and responsibility that follows the event.

One problem remains. Let me indicate this by the final form of Žižek's appropriation of predestination: the Messiah has already come, and we live in the aftermath. It is the messianic dimension that troubles me, as it did in my discussion of Benjamin and then more pointedly with Eagleton's work. The difference is that Žižek has taken up a distinctly Protestant position. In fact, the problem is not merely one Žižek has generated out of Reformed theology; it is inherent to such a position as well. Although it seems at first that he takes "messianic" in a loose sense, his text speaks otherwise. Over against Badiou's careful delineation of Paul's letters from the New Testament gospels, Žižek runs them together and Christ quickly takes centre stage. Apart from the numerous points where Christ appears in my preceding discussion, let me cite a couple of examples from *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (see PD: 102–4). The first is an attempted solution to the debate over the interpretation of the genitive phrase *pistis Christou* (Romans 3:22, also Galatians 2:16). Žižek suggests that it is a combination of both the "faith of Jesus" and "faith in Jesus"—what we need to do is have faith in his faith, which is then of course characterised by doubt and disbelief, especially on the cross. And then there is the discussion of the two major interpretations of Christ's death in the New Testament, namely sacrificial and participatory. Apart from the fact that this is surprisingly limited—one might list legal (Christ pays the penalty for sin), commercial (a transaction in which the father accepts the price paid by Christ), military (victory over sin) and familial (father-son conflict) as well—I am more interested in the fact that Žižek spends a good deal of time speculating about Christ, particularly in a theological vein. In other words, messianic refers quite specifically to



Christology, especially in light of the repeated argument that in Christ, in the arrival of the messiah, Christianity squarely embraces the exception, faces the void and declares it empty.<sup>27</sup>

Many of my criticisms of Eagleton's dependence on Christology are applicable to Žižek, so I will not rehearse them here in the same detail. In particular, I think of whole problem of idolatry that Adorno raises (I will discuss this in the next chapter), as well as the cult of personality that seems inextricably tied to the reliance on redeemer figures. However, the work of both Eagleton and Žižek raises a question for my search for a materialist philosophy of religion and theology. Many of the writers in this book speak of religion in general while meaning Christianity itself, and the niggling worry is that I will, when my guard is down, simply replicate such a substitution, carrying on the old program of allowing Christianity to set the agenda for religion as such.

## Conclusion

In contrast to the other critics with whom I deal in this book and from whom I have drawn a number of useful items, in Žižek's case I have been on the trail of but one question, the materialist notion of grace: in the face of the disconcerting capacity of capitalism to generate and absorb any effort for political emancipation, the only viable political option for the Left—what has usually been termed “revolution”—lies completely outside the system. As I have pointed out a number of times, the doctrine of grace assumes both the utter futility of human efforts at salvation, usually understood as a reward for good and hard work, and the complete externality of salvation itself. For Badiou this is the truth-event, for Žižek it is Lenin's actual freedom, the revolutionary uncoupling that is completely untimely.

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<sup>27</sup> In this light one should read the echoes of Benjamin: “Messianic time ultimately stands for the intrusion of subjectivity irreducible to the ‘objective’ historical process, which means that things can take a messianic turn, time can become ‘dense,’ at any point” (PD: 134).



On the way to this position, with its various glimpses here and there, Žižek has followed with enthusiasm (does he operate in any other way?) the byways and dead-ends of love-as-ethics, of human agency and even of redeemer figures, but he arrives there nonetheless. However, in order to locate that materialist idea of grace he has had to pass from Lacan to Lenin, via Paul. In other words, one of the most intriguing elements of Žižek's development, particularly in light of his position as the pre-eminent Lacanian cultural critic and philosopher, is that in order to make this Protestant turn he must in the end step beyond psychoanalysis. Only then can he become a fully engaged political thinker, that is, a Leninist. Finally, after much hesitation, Žižek faces the reality of this break with Lacan himself. And he does so by raising the question I have raised earlier, namely the end of psychoanalysis. For psychoanalysis:

the treatment is over when the patient accepts the nonexistence of the big Other. The ideal addressee of our speech, the ideal listener, is the psychoanalyst, the very opposite of the Master-figure that guarantees meaning; what happens at the end of analysis, with the dissolution of transference—that is to say, the fall of the “subject supposed to know”—is that the patient accepts the absence of such a guarantee. No wonder psychoanalysis subverts the very principle of reimbursement: the price the patient pays for the treatment is, by definition, capricious, “unjust,” with no possible equivalence between it and the services rendered for it (PD: 169–70).

Contrary to what we might expect in light of the range of Žižek's work, the end of analysis is not the moment of the Christian breakthrough. Rather, the whole logic is different: “Is not Christianity here, then, *the very opposite of psychoanalysis*? Does it not stand for this logic of reimbursement brought to its extreme: God Himself pays the price for all our sins?” (PD: 170; italics mine). This is an extraordinary admission from a critic who is now perhaps the greatest proponent of psychoanalysis after Lacan. Christianity simply does not follow the logic of psychoanalysis; it breaks all the rules and thereby enables the breakthrough Žižek so desperately seeks across four books. For, even



though Lacanian psychoanalysis is the best way of accounting for our situation within late capitalism, as I pointed out earlier, it cannot provide the means for stepping beyond capitalism. Needless to say, Žižek will by no means discard Lacan in his later writings, for the love affair is too strong, so the break I have identified here is—unfortunately—fleeting and intermittent.

Of course, it is grace that has enabled Žižek to become a political figure, to take a distinct political position. I want to pick up, however, the some preliminary comments I made earlier regarding the theological and materialist dimensions of grace. The bulk of my discussion of Žižek has critiqued his effort to move from theology to politics, to develop a materialist notion of grace by wringing out its theological content. In tracking him along this path, his tendency to veer off into the realms of love-as-ethics, human agency and redeemers has not been persuasive. All the same, I do not feel that it is enough to seek the materialist, political, kernel of Christianity and then feel that the job is complete. We end up with either Badiou's position that Paul's politico-theological message is extremely timely today (a little too close for comfort to either the eternal or situational relevance of the gospel),<sup>28</sup> or Žižek's Bloch-like call for Christianity to be true to its inner logic and divest itself of its institutional form and theological content.<sup>29</sup>

By contrast, a more fruitful approach would be to reverse the flow,

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<sup>28</sup> For Badiou, Paul the militant speaks directly both to the situation of global monetarist capitalism and to the specific situation in France, to the bonds of “monetarist free exchange and its mediocre political appendage, capitalist-parliamentarianism” (SP: 7). Badiou is quite taken with Pasolini's script for a film that was never made. In this film everything but the words of Paul remain unchanged: situated within contemporary capitalism in which New York is Rome, Nazi occupied Paris is Jerusalem and so on, Paul's words from his epistles speak to the situation of war, fascism, American capitalism and petty intellectual debates with extraordinary relevance (SP: 36–39).

<sup>29</sup> “In what is perhaps the highest example of Hegelian *Aufhebung*, it is possible today to redeem this core of Christianity only in the gesture of abandoning the shell of its institutional organization (and, even more so, of its specific religious experience). The gap here is irreducible: either one drops the religious form, or one maintains the form, but loses the essence. That is the ultimate heroic gesture that awaits Christianity: in order to save its treasure, it has to sacrifice itself—like Christ, who had to die so that Christianity could emerge” (PD: 171).



move from politics to theology, but in a distinctly dialectical fashion. This strategy is, as I pointed out earlier, not a case of seeking the theological residue of the discarded content, or arguing for an implicit theology in the midst of Žižek's or Badiou's materialist deliberations. By contrast, something of a beginning of a dialectical reading may be found in the tradition of Marxist thought that finds great affinity between Marxism and religion, specifically Christianity, that reference to the one strengthens the other, that their separation is detrimental. But I will need to go much further than this: the full potential of the move from politics to theology can be realised only if we take the materialist conclusions of Badiou and Žižek on board and push them further than even they are prepared to go. In other words, a dialectical reading that owes much to Adorno is required. Rather than a perpetual oscillation between theology and politics, or even the search for another level that recasts the whole problem in a new way, I want to push the political, materialist conclusions of Badiou and Žižek until they can go no further except to theology.

What are the implications for grace? It means that the concept of grace cannot be anything other than a radical political position: "not under the law, but under grace" is the slogan of a revolutionary politics. I speak not merely of the materialist doctrine of grace Badiou develops in terms of militant gratuitousness or Žižek in terms of Lenin's actual freedom, but also very much of the theological doctrine itself. However, without the necessary materialist component, or rather without the full immersion in materialism, the doctrine of grace could not be a radical political position. Without such a passing through, it would then become nothing more than the benevolent whim of a dictator, a larger-than-life arbitrary tyrant, which it has so often become in the past. Only by overthrowing such a despot by means of a thoroughgoing materialism does grace become a revolutionary position. This includes any redeemer figure that might be tagging along.

As far as the sheer externality of grace is concerned, in the materialist and political positions of Badiou and Žižek it becomes, respectively, the truth-event that breaks into the order of Being entirely unexpectedly



## Criticism of Heaven

and undeservedly, and the unpredictable moment of revolution beyond human agency that follows the logic, responsibility and paradox of predestination. Of course, these positions take the core of the doctrine of grace and convert it into a political position, but what interests me here is that we cannot just leave such a politics behind and return to theology. It comes with us and soon becomes an indelible part of that post-materialist theology. And so the externality, unpredictability and unexpectedness of a political, materialist grace are central to the theological doctrine of grace itself. Perhaps the biggest surprise lies with predestination, a position that one would hesitate long before enlisting with a revolutionary politics. It seems to me that the paradox of predestination gives it such an edge: what is open before the event or act, what offers us a range of crucial choices becomes after the event a preset course of action, a cluster of events that could only have worked out in this way. Again, my argument is that the distinctly political dimension of the idea of predestination could emerge only in its materialist and political register.



## Chapter Eight

### Adorno's Vacillation

Disillusionment at the *false* abolition of something, be it religion, philosophy or art, can induce a reaction in someone that results in vacillation, if not hesitation.<sup>1</sup>

So why would I close this book with Adorno? Partly because these stark and dense texts continue to mesmerise me, the promise of an extraordinary sentence that may well turn up on the next page or in the next paragraph (which is often much longer than a page) keeps me reading and rereading. Partly because he provides the logical, rather than temporary, close to the various positions I have explored in this book. Partly because Adorno teases me, offering a hint, a glimmer of hope in the midst of his perpetual ban on saying anything positive about the future—the occasional phrase or sentence where he drops his guard but for a moment. The main reason, however, is that he produces two of the most astounding categories for any materialist theology: the notion of theological suspicion and his resolute criticism of the secularisation of theology that he saw everywhere around him. Indeed, the latter has been the staple of nearly every critic I have encountered in this book, along with the contemporary recovery of Paul's political philosophy on the Left. I must also admit to a perverse pleasure in reading Adorno's rigorous texts. In fact, "rigorous" would have to be the most common adjective used of his work, but it is one that my own Reformed tradition always insisted was the only way to think and write. Sloppy thinking was

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<sup>1</sup> Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising," 43.



to be shunned, the practice of intellectual slobs: if God gave you a reasonably well-oiled mind, then you had better use it to the best of your ability.

However, in keeping with the nature of the rest of this book, I shall also critique Adorno's own engagement with theology and the Bible (although he deals with that text in the context of his discussions of theology). For Adorno critics, this engagement is a little like a monolith whose upper reaches are open to the elements and the endless cameras of onlookers, but whose subterranean roots are guessed at, perhaps known in some way, but best left to the denizens of the underground. Indeed, it is rarely recognised in critical assessments of Adorno that his rigorous philosophical work began in the realm of theology. For it is his study of Kierkegaard, the *Habilitationsschrift* and first philosophical work, that engages directly with one of the most influential—albeit posthumously—philosophical theologians of the early twentieth century. Yet, despite all the work that has been done on Adorno in the areas of sociology, philosophy, music, German, feminism, ecocriticism, literature and cultural studies, few if any have ventured into Adorno's engagement with theology, especially the Kierkegaard book.<sup>2</sup> This is both understandable, given Adorno's subsequent major works, and perplexing, for the absence in critical analysis of this significant dimension of

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<sup>2</sup> Hullot-Kentor is an exception, although his comments are too few, offering hints when I want to read more (see his "Foreword" to his translation of Adorno's *Kierkegaard*, Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Back to Adorno," *Telos* 81 (1989): 3–30 and Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Notes on Dialectic of Enlightenment: Translating the Odysseus Essay," *New German Critique* 56 (1992): 101–8. As a sample of key works that barely mention theology, see Jameson, *Late Marxism*, and Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought: Theodor W. Adorno* (Lincoln, NA: University of Nebraska Press, 1995). Of lesser note are the works of Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1998), and Martin Jay, *Adorno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984). Of the few critics who have considered the Kierkegaard book, theology is not a major issue in their treatments. As far as the Kierkegaard study is concerned, I have benefited from consulting Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 114–21, and Max Pensky's discussion in *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 140–49, although both give up the task after only the first part of the book—the discussion of the interior. Buck-Morss even admits that she will not follow the "full intricacies of Adorno's argument" (Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 121).





Adorno's work leaves that criticism halting; as Robert Hullot-Kentor points out, "theology is always moving right under the surface of all of Adorno's writings."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, his key ideas and motifs were cut and shaped in a profound interaction with theology, specifically the Lutheran theology of Northern Europe. Various deep motifs, especially those of suffering and disaster through which redemption comes, are central to the tradition of the Lutheran "theology of the cross."<sup>4</sup> I would add his asceticism and iconoclasm of the ban on images, for here his Jewish and Lutheran strains run along similar lines. But above all, especially in light of my discussion of Žižek, we find an underlying insistence on the theology of grace, which cannot be dissipated in the hands of the secular theologians: hence his place here, after the Protestant turn.

Not only is the ostensible content theological, but Adorno also wrote the Kierkegaard book under the direction of the theologian Paul Tillich,<sup>5</sup> who later, in 1939, invited Adorno to give a seminar entitled "Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love" (GS 2: 217–36) at Union Theological Seminary in New York where Tillich was now professor of systematic theology. That Adorno was to find theology wanting and seriously flawed only makes the confrontation with Kierkegaard far more interesting. In this case, I am less interested in the nature of Kierkegaard's writings than in the way Adorno's own arguments move in the text, what the implications might be for his work in light of this sustained treatment of theology. I am therefore going to assume that the main concern of the book is theology, to which aesthetics then becomes a secondary argument.

I have yet to find someone who will argue that the Kierkegaard book is an easy read, one that you would read to relax your mind in the

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Foreword: Critique of the Organic," in *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, by Theodor W. Adorno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), xxi.

<sup>4</sup> So Hullot-Kentor, "Notes on Dialectic of Enlightenment: Translating the Odysseus Essay," 105–6, although to argue that the idea of history as nature, or the critiques of reification and progress are also Lutheran is too facile.

<sup>5</sup> Tillich also had close connections with Horkheimer and Scholem, and thought very highly of Benjamin. See Scholem, ed., *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem: 1932–1940*, 214.



last minutes of the day before dropping off to sleep. One of his most formidable texts—and in my own perverse way *that* is what I find so attractive about it—it perpetually snares me in the labyrinth of Adorno's dense style. It does not help that the youthful Adorno was showing off his formidable philosophical skills.<sup>6</sup> So, quite deliberately, I will go against the spirit of the work and seek a key to the labyrinth, or, if we are going to stay with the classical allusion, the thread that will lead us out again. And that thread is threefold: I have in fact mentioned two already—theological suspicion and the criticism of secularised theology. But the third is a strong desire to stretch Adorno, to push past his self-imposed road block and seek out what theology might contribute, what the possibilities of theology might be.

Let me say a little more on each before plunging into Adorno's texts. As for theological suspicion, I have taken the liberty of coining the term—you will not find Adorno using the term. But it is of course intimately entwined with that venerable Marxist notion of ideological suspicion, and Adorno is perhaps one of its most accomplished practitioners. What is good enough for ideology is good enough for theology, and so I trace the way Adorno carries out a double strategy in his critique of Adorno: he consistently seeks to demythologise Kierkegaard, identifying the mythological underlay of his theology, and then make the move either to history or to the unbearable paradoxes of that system. The particular strategy may change, but theological suspicion must be one of the crucial dimensions of any materialist theology.

Theological suspicion leads me onto the second element I want to draw from Adorno, and that is the criticism of secularised theology. This may come as a surprise to those who have read at least some of the critical appraisal of Adorno's work, for one of the commonplaces is that he too operates with secularised theological terms such as the Fall, redemption and grace. However, a close look at both *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *The Jargon of Authenticity* makes short work of such a position. Intimately related to the criticism of secularised theol-

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<sup>6</sup> Or, as Ken Surin put it in a conversation, "Adorno was a dude."



ogy is the *Bilderverbot* that he drew from the second commandment in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, and I have much to say on the ban on images in this chapter, for it has a direct bearing on the question of the personality cult. So we have a ban on secularised theology that has profound implications for the work of the other Marxists I consider in this book. Apart from Lefebvre, all of them seek to reappropriate theological, biblical, and ecclesiological motifs for Marxism, to move from the criticism of theology to the criticism of politics. Adorno can see nothing but misfortune on this path.

Third, for all his efforts to torch Kierkegaard's thought, I track an ambivalence, a vacillation over the question of theology itself. At one level such an ambivalence appears in the desire for a thoroughly dialectical reading of theology, a search for what he calls the "truth-content" of theology that arises from the act of theological suspicion itself. Indeed, his suspicion regarding the possibility of theology to provide any ostensible basis for philosophy generates the motivation for a dialectics that seeks the truth-content of theology beyond itself. This is where, it seems to me, the tension between his point to Benjamin, that an immanent dialectical method is able to make the most of theology, comes face to face with his devastating criticism of Kierkegaard. But at another level I am fascinated by the glimpses, the moments in which Adorno lets slip a comment or two where theology has another, more positive role. And here I will take Adorno where does not want to go, into the possibilities of theology: my foci are the questions of love (especially from his essay "Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love") and grace.

## Theological Suspicion

Sorely tempted as I am to offer a detailed commentary, line by line, of Adorno's study of Kierkegaard, I find myself taking to heart and applying to Adorno himself the warning he issues against being enchanted with Kierkegaard's texts, producing strategies to avoid being mesmerised as I so often am with these extraordinary arguments. For Adorno, fascination "is the most dangerous power in his work" (K: 11: GS2: 19), and that



fascination comes from the assumption that Kierkegaard appears just as much a poet and storyteller as a philosophical theologian. Hence the poetic spell of his writings.

How does Adorno resist? Through two approaches, one preliminary, the other forming the methodological underlay on his whole study. To begin with, he sends to the margins Kierkegaard-as-poet: Kierkegaard's own writing is not poetry, not aesthetic in itself, he is not a "writer" or "literary aesthete," whether that claim is made somewhat ambivalently by Kierkegaard himself (see K: 5–6; GS2: 11–12) or by others as the key to interpreting his work (K: 6–10; GS2: 13–19). Poetry itself becomes the "stage props" and "ominous decorations" of the private individual, the "determination of the poet's comportment" (K: 8–9; GS2: 16).

But just when we think that Adorno has blown the referee's whistle and sidelined Kierkegaard's poetic seduction so that the game of philosophy may proceed unhindered, that he wants to discard the fancy decorations as so much useless garbage, Adorno brings to bear the second strategy. And that is nothing other than sentence production: *in nuce*, Adorno wants to take Kierkegaard literally, to read his images at face value in order identify their "authentic reality" (K: 13; GS2: 22) and prevent them, as he puts it, from volatilising into metaphor. Various terms come in to characterise such a strategy—the search for truth content or concretion<sup>7</sup>—whose ultimate aim is both to uncover the mythical underlay and resist its pull.

Let me take the most direct statement—if that is possible in Adorno—of his method: "There is no way to meet up with him in the fox kennel of infinitely reflected interiority than to take him at his word; he is to be caught in the traps set by his own hand" (K: 12; GS2: 21). If I tease out this statement, then three elements emerge: infinitely reflected interiority, taking him at his word, and catching him in his own traps. The first will of course become a fundamental argument in the book as

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<sup>7</sup> "Whoever succumbs to it by taking up one of the imposing and inflexible categories he inexhaustibly displays; whoever bows to its grandeur without comparing it with concretion, without ever investigating if it is adequate to concretion, has fallen under its dominion and become the servant of a mythical realm (*mythischen Bereich*)" (K: 11; GS2: 19).



a whole, namely the radical retreat of the bourgeois private individual. I return to this below, but for now the other two items urge my attention. As for the second—taking Kierkegaard at his word—this is none other than holding his images and metaphors to account, allowing the naked bulb in the ascetic interrogation room to do its work until the images finally divulge the truth. But then I want to direct the same question to Adorno, for do not his images (they are in fact metaphors) have their own truth content? What if I were to take him at his word? The fox kennel and its autonomous traps would speak then not only of Kierkegaard—the radical interior of the bourgeois individual—but also of Adorno, who is inescapably also a bourgeois individual, especially if we follow his line on the closed cage of capitalism. But much more importantly than this, I want to suggest that Adorno does not, indeed he cannot, let himself say anything positive about theology. This is the trap of his own fox kennel, or better still his own fox tunnel: even though he will criticise Kierkegaard over and over again for the impossibility of basing a philosophical system in theology, even though he is resolutely opposed to the various patterns of secularising theology, even though he wants to let theology have its head, and even though he lets slip extraordinary glimpses of such a path, he stops short of saying anything more on theology itself. We will see this in a host of theological notions, such as redemption, reconciliation, faith, grace, and love.

All we have left are the traps themselves, set by Kierkegaard's own hand. I will indulge myself a little here, especially in light of my love for biblical interpretation, for the astonishing model for Adorno's method is none other than biblical exegesis. He gets to this point by stating that he will use Kierkegaard's own method in order to read his work (an immanent strategy he developed from Benjamin). And Kierkegaard's method is none other than theological exegesis:

The impulse for the literal examination of Kierkegaard's language does not have to be imported psychoanalytically into his work, although there is more than enough occasion and temptation. It has its precedent in the work itself, in the theological Christian exegesis (*christlich-theologische Exegese*). Like the edifying writings, the pseudonymous *Training in*



*Christianity* is exegetical; and all the pseudonymous writings are interwoven with exegetical sections. No meaningful exegesis can be conceived, however, that is not obligatorily bound to the vocabulary of the text. (K: 12; GS2: 21).

Here the attention to a “literal examination,” to “the vocabulary of the text”—in short the concern with sentence production, with language and terminology that is so characteristic of Adorno’s work after this first text (see NL1: 110–13, 185–99, 263–64; GS2: 129–31, 216–32, 307–8; NL2: 193–210, 233–39; GS2: 536–55, 583–90)—is to be found in Kierkegaard’s own perpetual recourse to biblical exegesis: “at every point Kierkegaard’s statements refer to texts that he held to be holy” (K: 12; GS2: 21). For me, steeped as I am in biblical interpretation and the long traditions of commentary, this is the bread and butter work of literary criticism. Given the emphases of Adorno criticism, especially English-speaking criticism, it is worth emphasising this point, namely that the well-known immanent approach to interpretation begins its long path in Adorno’s work with biblical interpretation. I am tempted to claim Adorno as one of my own, as a biblical critic despite himself, but that may be pushing the argument a little to far (but then, why not?). By the same token, we cannot dismiss this biblical touch as a temporary phase in Adorno’s work, for not only is that work peppered with biblical allusions that exhibit more than a passing knowledge of the biblical text,<sup>8</sup> but he

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<sup>8</sup> Note, as a sample, the following: “Indeed, I feel that our theoretical disagreement is not really a discord between us, and that my own task is to hold your arm steady until the Brechtian sun has finally sunk beneath its exotic waters” (CC: 132; BB: 175). “The hack journalist groaning under his editor’s demands for continuous brilliance, openly gives voice to the law that lurks tacitly behind all the works on the Cosmogonic Eros and kindred mysteries, the metamorphoses of the gods and the secret of the Gospel according to St John” (MM: 66–67; GS4: 73). “The existence of bread factories, turning the prayer that we be given our daily bread into a mere metaphor and an avowal of desperation, argues more strongly against the possibility of Christianity than all the enlightened critiques of the life of Jesus” (MM: 110; GS4: 122–31). “Today, when the abandonment of utopia looks as much like its realization as the Antichrist resembles the paraclete, toad has become a term of abuse among those who are themselves in the depths” (MM: 114; GS4: 128). “The mote in his [Veblen’s] eye becomes a means of perceiving the bloody traces of injustice even in images of happiness” (P: 79; PKG: 74). “In jazz, the Philistines standing over Samson are permanently transfigured” (P: 130; PKG: 129). “Schoenberg’s pause in



was also to use very similar terms in his famous discussion of the essay:

The essay cunningly anchors itself in texts as though they were simply there and had authority. In this way, without the deception of a first principle, the essay gets a ground, however dubious, under its feet, comparable to theological exegeses of sacred texts in earlier times. *Its tendency, however, is the opposite, a critical one:* to shatter culture's claims by confronting texts with their own emphatic concept, with the truth that each one intends even if it does not want to intend it, and to move culture to become mindful of its own untruth, of the ideological illusion in which culture reveals its bondage to nature (NL1: 20; GS2: 29; italics mine).

If we replace "essay" with "biblical criticism," this quotation would be an excellent description of biblical criticism itself.

Yet, in a loop that will bring my indulgence in biblical criticism back to the task at hand, Adorno introduces a variation in his own exegesis of Kierkegaard's texts: "In contrast to Kierkegaard's exegesis, the exegetical method (*das exegetische Verfahren*) must be concerned primarily with metaphor" (K: 12; GS2: 21). And the reason for such a move is that it uncovers the "mythical contents" (*die mythischen Gehalte*) of his philosophy, precisely that which the poetic seduction of Kierkegaard's texts seeks to glide over.

I must admit that I am much more willing to be seduced by poetry than Adorno, especially when it is recited with passion and intense pleasure. But what has turned up here is one of the two great underlying motifs of the Kierkegaard study, namely demythologisation. After all, it is not merely the poetic pull of Kierkegaard that he resists at every struggling step, but the fascination of myth itself. This will be one of the motifs around which I will gather my discussion of Adorno's theological suspicion; the other two are the recourse to history and paradox. They form, to dip into the metaphor I used earlier, part of the thread that will help me negotiate the forbidding turns of the labyrinth. Succinctly put, time and again Adorno levels three charges at Kierkegaard: that his theology slips

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creation, of Biblical length, cannot be adequately explained in terms of his private destiny in the war and inflation" (P: 165; PKG: 167).



into the myth it perpetually represses, that it cannot escape the history it perpetually flees, and that the paradoxes of theology eventually break up the possibility of any system based on theological categories. For Adorno, theology turns out to be a treacherous backer, dissolving into mythology at almost every turn, and then rendered nonsensical by internal paradoxes that fail to respond to the dialectic.

## Demythologisation

My own encounter with demythologisation is from biblical studies, especially the work of Rudolf Bultmann,<sup>9</sup> who will come in for a hammering by Adorno in *The Jargon of Authenticity*. For this New Testament scholar and theologian, the mythical structure of the New Testament and thereby of Christianity itself was hopelessly outdated. Christianity had to wrench itself out of the Hellenistic world—with its three-tiered universe in which Jesus descends from heaven to earth, defeats the devil of the underworld and then returns to heaven above—and remythologise itself with a contemporary world-view. Unfortunately, his choice was existentialism: for Adorno this was the prime instance of the dreadful partial secularisation of liberal theology.

I return to all of this below: for now, and it is a long now, the question is demythologisation and Kierkegaard. Here I step out on a path few have trod (the Kierkegaard book), so let me put out front a couple of key issues. First, I want to ask why Adorno is so adamant that myth is a bane that must be uncovered and countered in whatever way possible. Apart from the obvious point that the Nazi appropriation of myth, in terms of the Blond Beast and of blood and soil, was hardly going to endear myth to a Marxist of Jewish background, there is more to this question. In many respects, we might read demythologisation as an extension of the Marxist program of ideological suspicion, particularly

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<sup>9</sup> See especially “New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Proclamation,” in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, trans. Reginald H. Fuller, ed. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1984), 1–43.





of emancipatory projects and their unavoidable mythical justification. And then, in the correspondence with Benjamin, he explores what myth that has been thoroughly demythologised might look like (CC: 127–28; BB: 168–69). I am keenly interested in the whole problem of myth, as my earlier discussions indicate, and would like to retrieve myth in some sense, especially in the form of political myth. So I will watch Adorno's strictures closely and leave the question open for now.

Second, Adorno is famous for refusing to define a term, preferring to let its multifarious senses appear as the discussion proceeds, so I will outline the main senses of myth in the Kierkegaard book before I go on.<sup>10</sup> Like the perpetual pulse of the base riff that drives through the melody and takes over one's muscles on the dance floor, myth returns in ever more variations: Nordic myths, propitiatory sacrifice, fate, gnosticism, the Orphic myth of the harmony of the spheres, and above all the chthonic myths of nature. All of these vitiate Kierkegaard's effort to break out of myth through theology, for theology is unavoidably mythical. Let me summarise: as for Nordic myth, Adorno traces the myth of Odhinn-Wódhan behind Kierkegaard's discussion of the sacrifice of Christ. The god who is sacrificed to himself, consecrated to himself in an autonomous sacrifice, can never be banished from Kierkegaard's christology. Further, by fixing on the notion of propitiatory atonement (Christ takes the punishment which we deserve for our sins), Kierkegaard slips into a gnostic myth of redemption in which fate dominates: since redemption must entail transcending nature, especially fallen human nature, the only means of doing so is a rescue by spirit (Christ) from a demonised nature. The catch is that the mythical calculus of propitiatory atonement renders meaningless both grace and reconciliation. Finally, Kierkegaard's central notion of the spheres is vitiated by its reliance on Plato's harmony of the spheres, an Orphic moment within a philosophical system.

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<sup>10</sup> An explicit statement comes in his more relaxed lectures on metaphysics: "I believe that while philosophy may well terminate in definitions, it cannot start out from them; and that, in order to understand, to have knowledge of, the content of philosophical concepts themselves—and not simply from the point of view of an external history of ideas or of philosophy—it is necessary to know how concepts have come into being, and what they mean in terms of their origins, their historical dimension" (M: 5).



Nordic myth, propitiatory sacrifice, fate, gnosticism and the myth of the spheres—but I have left out the whole realm of chthonic myth. In fact, nature is a crucial category on its own, zig-zagging its undefined presence throughout this text on Kierkegaard. Again, let me call Adorno to order and list the various senses “nature” takes: the natural state of human beings, the result of the Fall, that which is not God, the physical realm of nature which is also fallen, and the timelessness and abstractness characteristic of nature. In the Kierkegaard study, nature is primarily an anthropological term, using “anthropology” in the traditional theological sense, and in this sense he can milk it for all its worth. For the theological sense of “nature” allows Adorno to speak of certain crucial myths of Christianity: the Fall, the death and resurrection of Christ, the two natures of Christ, the second coming. Yet even this does not exhaust the senses Adorno attaches to nature, for not only is it a metaphysical term deriving from *cism* but also one that invokes the implications of the natural sciences for the understanding of history. Let me turn for a moment to Adorno’s essay “The Idea of Natural History,” where this sense of nature is more explicit. In this respect, Benjamin’s influence is profound, particularly in terms of the “natural history” that Benjamin found problematic: arguing against the classical (an account of the inquiry into nature) and the Kantian (nature itself as unending and infinite creation) senses of the term, Adorno proposes a dialectic between nature and history in which nature emerges at the most historical moment and vice versa, a dialectic that comes from the ambiguity of the term itself, whether the history of nature (nature as historical) or natural history (history as natural).<sup>11</sup> Finally, Adorno later invokes nature with a very different agenda in mind: in *Aesthetic Theory* he attempts to recover the category of natural beauty, over against Hegel, in the context of his analysis of aesthetic modernism. Here nature becomes the irreducible Other, that which will not be subsumed under an anthropocentrism, within Adorno’s non-identitarian theory of knowledge.

The central issues, then, are myth and nature, linked through the

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<sup>11</sup> See Adorno, “The Idea of Natural History.”



underlying rhythm of demythologisation. Adorno's main point, to which he returns over and over again, is that for all Kierkegaard's efforts to overcome myth, for all his strategies to lock myth away in some forgotten corner, it crouches at every doorway, ready to spring back into his carefully structured theological philosophy. Three nodes characterise Adorno's demythologisation—inwardness, sacrifice, and the spheres—but rather than letting Adorno set the agenda, I want to flip these philosophical categories over and tackle the theological ideas that lie on the obverse. And so we have faith (inwardness and history), christology (sacrifice, redemption and reconciliation) and cosmology (the spheres).

### Faith: Inwardness and History

Kierkegaard has the singular fame of coining at least one phrase that has entered into common parlance—the “leap of faith,” loosely used in any exchange that involves some trust, from flying in an aeroplane to trying some new food—although when pressed most would not be able to identify its reclusive author. Adorno has a few points to make directly about faith, and we will come across those in due course, but I suggest that his major discussion of inwardness (*Innerlichkeit*) in Kierkegaard's thought is really a consistent demythologisation of the theological category of faith. It is also one of his best arguments in the book—hence its place here, at the beginning of my analysis of demythologisation in Adorno—albeit with two steps, the one concerned with uncovering the mythological motifs that run through Kierkegaard's radical inwardness, and the second with the historical truth content of inwardness.

For Kierkegaard's retreat to an inner intellectual sanctum has a dual purpose—to outsmart the mythological dimensions of Christianity and to find an alternative way to deal with the problem of history and faith. In social-psychological terms, Kierkegaard is one of those intellectuals who is able to discern out of the welter of contemporary currents the key elements of a new cultural and social direction which subsequently comes to dominance. In Kierkegaard's case inwardness is precisely such an idea, one that was to express the deepest logic of liberal ideology itself,



let alone theology, but only after his death. It is not for nothing that the full appreciation and critique of Kierkegaard took place only in the twentieth century.

Let us begin with myth itself: in the pursuit of inwardness, Kierkegaard falls headlong into the realm of spiritualism. Is not spiritualism the favoured form of religious expression of the private individual, especially in our post-secular world where “spirituality” is everywhere valorised? You can be “spiritual,” but God forbid that you might be “religious,” for that is tainted with just a little too much of traditional Christianity. But spiritualism has an older sense upon which Adorno plays—the realm of séances, communicating with the dead, the occult and so on—and this enables him to point out that the spiritual is also very much the demonic. The Devil is, after all, as much a spirit as God, as indeed are the myriad demons and angels that populate the supersensual world, but as soon as we allow this point we are immediately in the realm of myth. Is not talk of God versus the Devil anything but myth, Kierkegaard’s theological protestations notwithstanding?

The trap Kierkegaard has set with his own hand is about to be sprung, for even if he arrives breathlessly in the deepest recesses of the tunnel of inwardness only to find that myth awaits him there in the enticing shape of the Devil, then he can always escape, he can always make that famous leap to God, ontology and then to other human beings. Now the trap closes: such a leap can only be conjuration, the magician’s trick by which he attempts to escape inwardness (see K: 57–58; GS2: 85–86). Faith turns out to be nothing more than superstition; a reliance on magic that can manipulate the universe through peculiar acts that, when carried out correctly and in the right quantity, produce the desired result—hence the “formulaic brevity” and repetition of Kierkegaard’s writings, their pattern of “entreaty” and “conjuration.”

For all his efforts to bar the door to myth in the inner room of his soul, Kierkegaard finds, at least as far as Adorno is concerned, that myth is quietly waiting for him after he has frantically secured the last lock *and* that myth will be his only means of escape. But why should myth be such a problem? Kierkegaard needs to be free from myth in order



to be open to religiosity: in other words, one can encounter God only when the last trappings of myth have been discarded, whether these are inherent to Christianity or part of the incessant pattern of appropriation of pagan elements into Christianity. So at this level Adorno is correct: should the inward realm be subject to myth, then Kierkegaard's system collapses, the core of existential faith turns out to be empty. The deeper point of all this is that inwardness is itself mythical, a fundamental myth of bourgeois ideology, but I will have more to say on this in a few moments. The question I want to ask here, however, is why Adorno, for all his relentless criticism of Kierkegaard, should buy Kierkegaard's abhorrence of myth. Would not the step beyond Kierkegaard, beyond showing how his philosophical theology breaks down at every point, be to ask what the implications might be of taking myth as potentially benevolent rather than baleful? Rather than seeking a reality that is either beyond myth (Kierkegaard) or as the truth content of myth (Adorno), what happens if we take myth as a necessary fable, and, to go beyond Badiou and back to Bloch, as a potentially liberating fable?

Spiritualism, conjuration, and superstition: thus far three elements in the mythical underlay of Kierkegaard's radical inwardness. The last item before I turn to the question of history itself is subjectivity: if we grant Kierkegaard his inwardness, then the subject is its own ground. It cannot be established on anything but itself, and the movement of subjectivity can involve only an oscillation, out and back in again, in what is a poor substitute for the dialectic. Or rather, Kierkegaard's inversion of Hegel's dialectic is not materialist (Marx), but idealist, based on a radical interiority. The problem is that Kierkegaard is forced to wipe out subjectivity despite himself, and the reasons are as follows: according to his theoretical need for radical inwardness, the subject can be constituted only by itself. However, such an inwardness is inescapably mythical, and so, if Kierkegaard seeks to banish myth from his philosophical theology, then the subject must go with it. Here we are simply at an irresolvable paradox: the subjectivity of radical inwardness relies on a myth that is unacceptable for the system in question. Adorno's verdict is final: any idealist system such as Kierkegaard's cannot contain its mythical core forever, for in



“the final products of the idealist spirit, the mythical content simply breaks through the cells of the systematically developed concept, where philosophical criticism has banished it, and takes possession of the old images” (K: 57; GS2: 84).

Nonetheless, all this sniffing out of myth in every last corner of Kierkegaard’s most treasured space, his inner sanctum, is but the first logical step of demythologisation. I must admit that I have actually inverted the sequence of Adorno’s argument, for the whole question of history that follows comes first in Adorno’s text, before undressing Kierkegaard and finding him decked out in mythical underwear. Yet logically history comes second, after such a disrobing, for here Adorno pushes the whole agenda of demythologisation to its next step.

For one who has agonised over Adorno’s text, reading a page ten times in English and ten more in German before hazarding an interpretation, the section on inwardness and history is one of the more lucid sections of the book. I do of course have my own peccadillo of biblical studies to blame for my warmth about this section, for it involves a sustained assessment of the figure of Adam from the book of Genesis, but at a deeper level the whole question of history is crucial for Kierkegaard precisely because of the Bible. Kierkegaard’s problem is: if history is so central to Christianity—Christ’s life, death, and resurrection must constitute in some senses a historical event and not fable or myth—then why is it so difficult to connect with a history that continually eludes our grasp? For Kierkegaard, the answer lies with the processes of “objectless inwardness” that provide a radically alternative contact with history. That is, the history Kierkegaard seeks is an alternative history of the inner self, an extraordinary retreat into the individual interior from where contact with the lost and enciphered meaning of the archaic text of the Bible may once again be made.

However, for Adorno this is nothing other than a flight from history, but he makes his point with the biblical figure of Adam and the theological problem of original sin. I am tempted to use the image of the terrier, but that does not quite capture Adorno: perhaps a cougar, for it is not so much the persistence but the patient thoroughness, the need to cover



all possible angles and possibilities, a coverage more than comprehensive. Adorno's point, or at least his initial one, is that Kierkegaard cannot escape "external history," for his resolute focus on the "inner history" of objectless inwardness operates by means of the external category of 'race', specifically the human race. Even though Kierkegaard tries to set up a dialectical opposition between individual and race, he cannot help but absorb objective history into "the enclaves of isolated inwardness" (K: 33; GS2: 50). How does this work with Adam? This first man's wilful sin sets up the condition of sinfulness, which is then the cause of sin for every other "man"; yet such an objective or constant history puts Adam outside the human race, for he sins in a way different from other men. The alternative—that each person begins to sin, enacts original sin yet again like Adam, makes Adam one of the human race—denies any sense of history as a continuous and constitutive feature of the race. But Kierkegaard cannot escape external history, so his conclusion, albeit temporary, contradicts his initial position: continuous renewal is not possible, so sinfulness does in fact have a continuous history. The upshot? Adam must be out of history.

How does Kierkegaard avoid the trap? He wants to maintain the continuous history of the race and yet that forces Adam outside of that history. In an effort to sidestep the problem, the question of Adam turns from his relationship to the human race to one of historical uniqueness. As we saw, for Kierkegaard history must be fundamentally continuous, must operate within time. This would force him into the position that Adam is thereby a prototypical, extra-historical example that sets history on its path. And yet, Kierkegaard simply cannot accept this position, since uniqueness automatically excludes one from history—thereby rejecting "the irreversible and irreducible uniqueness of the historical fact" (K: 33; GS2: 51), which is for Adorno the key to authentic history. Now that Kierkegaard has discarded historical uniqueness in one form, he tries to recover it by means of his well-known notion of the leap or the beginning: Adam becomes the first moment of a new beginning, not in the sense of uniqueness but as an inauguration. The leap, in other words, constitutes a beginning that is within continuous history and not outside it;



for Adorno, this position gives up on historical uniqueness and thereby significance. And if historical significance disappears—is not Adam’s sin precisely such a significant “event”?—then history itself threatens to fade away. At this point the two are at loggerheads—Kierkegaard will not give up on historical continuity and seeks a place for uniqueness within continuity, whereas Adorno takes the very uniqueness and significance of events as the basis of history.

A third time (I almost expect the cock to crow at this point), Adorno worries away at the tension between the singularity of Adam’s sin and its place in history, now from the side of language. The problem with sin is that it is both ontologically prior *and* historically determined through language: although there is an understanding of what sin itself means as a word, although there is a concept of sin that carries through from generation to generation, each person must also enter sin through a “qualitative leap” in order to maintain its ontological and qualitative singularity. Is not sin, after, an ontological affront to God that is unique and primary? Yet we know what sin is, what thoughts and acts constitute sin. Kierkegaard wants to hold onto both, although he tries to squirm out of the paradox by suggesting that the word “sin” has no content on each new occasion, being filled anew with the sense it has always carried. All of this is of course yet another permutation on the tension between inwardness and history: Adorno’s point is not merely that Kierkegaard’s attempts to produce an alternative history by means of radical inwardness, one that connects us with Adam’s sin through the qualitative leap that enables us to touch that inaccessible history; he is also keen to point out that for all Kierkegaard’s efforts to escape objective history he simply cannot do so. It returns through the objective history of language (the meaning of the word “sin”), through the effort to incorporate Adam’s uniqueness within history (by means of an inaugural leap), and the actual history of the sinfulness of the human race (which leaves Adam outside history).

Those who venture into the Kierkegaard book call it a day, as I pointed out earlier, with this section, and even then they rush to Adorno’s socio-economic point. But Adorno is the last one to make





rushed vulgar Marxist connections with the base. He is the master of delayed satisfaction, holding off the pleasure of the socio-economic point in a way that makes it all the more pleasurable when it arrives (and I too, as is my wont, will take my time). So he tarries long with the logical tensions of Kierkegaard's efforts to block out objective history and find a new path through inwardness.

Even when he has explored as many problems within Kierkegaard's argument as he can, still Adorno holds off, for what he wants to do first is locate in Kierkegaard's writings an awareness, blocked before it becomes articulate, of the historical conditioning of objectless inwardness itself. The traces of history in Kierkegaard's writing appear in various forms, whether in the act itself whereby subjectivity recedes and closes in on itself even further in response to the external world, or in the political opinions that are responses to the "painful intrusions of reality into the objectless interior" (K: 38; GS2: 58). At this point Adorno grants Kierkegaard an insight, even if it is despite himself, for Kierkegaard's responses are not merely reactionary, but absorb and give expression to the social situation of their production. And in this process, particularly in his critique of the Church, Kierkegaard draws on the Left Hegelians for a materialist critique: Kierkegaard himself cannot avoid realising that the efficient cause of the social situation that generates his life and writing, especially ideas such as inwardness itself, "is none other than the knowledge of the reification of social life, the alienation of the individual from a world that comes into focus as a mere commodity" (K: 39; GS2: 59). In the end, this is the "history" of which Adorno has been speaking, which is at the same time the truth-content of theology. It is precisely Kierkegaard's response to such a process of reification that functions as a signal of the history he perpetually seeks to reject. Of course, Kierkegaard's idealist response, namely that Christianity is the cure for reification, is entirely inadequate, but at least he recognises the problem in the first place.

For Adorno, Kierkegaard does therefore identify a certain existential and ideological crisis of capitalism: the perceived unauthenticity of the



capitalist world, the anxiety and desolation of the individual burgher in this situation. For all Kierkegaard's solitary posturing, Adorno pushes his existential "pure inwardness" until it yields its material and social content: "This ideology-critical examination of the traditional problems of bourgeois thought thus redeems their truth content—that moment in them which pertains to the *antagonistic structure of reality itself* (and not merely to the structure of *thought*)—and annihilates the ideological veil of reconciliation which afflicts all merely conceptual solutions."<sup>12</sup>

Only now, after having worked through all of the internal problems of Kierkegaard's thought—all of which hinge on showing that the logic of Kierkegaard's philosophical theology operates with a profound tension between the effort at absolute retreat into inwardness and the inability to close history out completely—may Adorno have the extraordinary pleasure of the Marxist recourse to Kierkegaard's social and economic situation. By this time—and this is the magic of Adorno's analysis—Kierkegaard himself demands such an analysis (see K: 49; GS2: 72). Here Adorno makes the famous point that Kierkegaard's work cannot be understood without the crucial role in his written and personal life of the spacious and fortress-like "bourgeois *intérieur* of the nineteenth century" (K: 41; GS2: 61). This *intérieur* is both metaphor and physical location: Kierkegaard was a *rentier*, an individual who lived off an inheritance, working on his own in a room isolated from outside. Yet, this apparent rejection of capitalism, down to the refusal to put his money out to interest, embodies the logic of capitalism itself: the autonomy of the isolated individual working to his own agenda—for Kierkegaard in theoretical and personal retreat—expresses the deepest logic of liberalism. For in such a contradictory way liberalism has its collective power: although each individual believes he or she is working entirely independently, perhaps even polemically in opposition to the evils of capitalism, the very act of doing so makes them part of a larger whole.

To cap it off, Adorno's moment of the truth-content of theology loops back to suggest not only that space rather than time is the key

<sup>12</sup> Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 172.



to Kierkegaard's philosophy and theology, but that the "situation," Christianity, goes hand in hand with the modern apartment; one cannot be thought, in Kierkegaard, without the other. Kierkegaard's Christianity in the context of a Christian Europe is itself part of the ideology of liberalism, as is Kierkegaard's own very liberal response, namely the isolation and reification of the private individual. His theoretical answer—radical inwardness—is now at one with historical situation, a situation saturated with the legacy of Christianity without which capitalism would not have been possible.

It is a brilliant argument in itself, but also because we see here that the inner workings of his famous immanent critique were honed on the theological matter of Kierkegaard's writings. Built into the critique of Kierkegaard's objectless inwardness is an effort to show how a dialectical reading of theology might work—something he so much hoped Benjamin would do. But we should not forget that it is also the end run of a thorough process of demythologisation: the mythical underlay of Kierkegaard's thought has its basis in a distinct historical situation.

And yet, and yet . . . I am not quite satisfied. Adorno, it seems to me, does not go far enough, for we need to go beyond the point of unmasking. It is all very well to uncover the way myth permeates Kierkegaard's thought (and we will see more of that below), and of course we need to ask always the socio-economic question at the appropriate moment. But what are the implications of Adorno's criticism of radical inwardness? Kierkegaard's retreat into inwardness may be read as one of the most philosophically consistent expressions of what we might call the privatisation of faith that now permeates Christianity so much that it is hardly imaginable without it. Faith is, after all, an inescapably private affair, a relationship between me and my god that no manner of external circumstances may challenge or corrode. At this level, Adorno's analysis shows just how inconsistent and historically conditioned such a privatised faith is, but we need to ask for the implications of his critique. Is not the appropriate response some form of collective faith, a faith that is not possible without the collective, rather than dispensing with faith itself? I think here not of the church, which has been the traditional



location of such a collectivity, but of an activist political collective where such a faith takes on as yet unimagined forms.

## Christology

Regrettably, Adorno makes the historical move only with the argument concerning radical inwardness. I found myself wanting it badly in the other arguments of the book, especially those on sacrifice (christology) and the spheres (cosmology). Instead, he adopts the dominant pattern in the book, namely a dual critique that moves from myth to paradox: the moment of identifying the mythic patterns of various items in Kierkegaard's thought gives way to the irresolvable paradoxes of these same items. And in Adorno's eyes these paradoxes rattle Kierkegaard's system into crumbling ruins. This strategy is crucial for the notion of theological suspicion that I wish to draw from Adorno's work for a materialist theology, although I must admit I would have liked a historical move or two more.

In what follows I pick up the two key moments: christology and sacrifice, which will then allow me to focus on the key theological question of reconciliation. As for christology—and this topic has become a bit of a refrain in my study, appearing yet again after Eagleton and Žižek—Adorno makes much of the mythical core of propitiatory atonement (Christ takes the punishment for our sins upon himself), the key to Kierkegaard's christology. On the face of it, there is nothing earth shattering here, since many theologians and biblical critics have made and continue to make the same point. As I pointed out in my discussion of Eagleton, in the New Testament and early Christian theology a range of themes were used in order to render the death and resurrection of Christ usable: a legal notion whereby Christ takes the punishment in place of human beings; the financial paying of a debt; a military victory over Satan and death; a process of reconciliation between God and human beings; substitutional atonement in which the victim becomes a scapegoat for the people as a whole; and the sacrificial theme in which potentially hostile and arbitrary gods are mollified. Of course, these various themes run together, but



the notion of a propitiatory sacrifice is very much part of the mix.

Of course, myth is indispensable to christology as such, but Adorno's argument is more astute than the banal point that christology is inescapably mythical. Rather, his criticism is that propitiatory atonement renders grace useless—and here Adorno is a thoroughly Lutheran thinker. I will turn to grace below, save to pick up Adorno's point here that such a christology operates according to a "graceless mythical calculus" (K: 111; GS2: 157), a calculus whereby Christ becomes a substitute for human beings, a sacrifice so that humans do not need to suffer the consequences of their acts. That this becomes the basis of the search for meaning, the point at which transcendence touches individual lives, where Christ and man meet, is the nub of the problem, for in the absence of grace the whole notion of reconciliation makes a hasty exit from the theological scene. But note what has happened here! Instead of uncovering yet another moment of myth, Adorno has resorted to theology itself to make his argument: without grace reconciliation is meaningless. This is the Adorno that intrigues me in these arguments, the moments he lets us glimpse the possibilities for theology after theological suspicion has done its work. But that moment is yet to come in my argument.

For now I am more intrigued by Adorno's further argument that Kierkegaard's christology suffers from a lethal dose of gnosticism, the mythical core of propitiatory atonement. For Adorno, gnosis "erupts in late idealism when—through spiritualism—mythical thought gains power over Christian thought, and, in spite of all talk of grace, draws Christianity into the graceless immanence of the course of nature" (K: 112; GS2: 159). I am going to take Adorno to task later for his assumption that nature entails a "graceless immanence," but let us stay with gnosis for a few moments. As he outlines the various, albeit masked, gnostic doctrines of Kierkegaard, Adorno characteristically defines gnosis indirectly, drawing it out by means of his immanent criticism. And he prefers "gnosis" to gnostic or gnosticism. But this does not in the end avoid the problem of the sheer variety of gnosticisms that flourished in the early centuries of the Christian era and carried on in a range of half-lives as the consistent underside of theology ever since.



By restricting his usage to “gnosis,” Adorno implies the defining feature of gnosticism as saving knowledge, a secret knowing—code words, the truth about existence, a radical dualism between evil matter and the spark of the soul that has been trapped in nature and forgotten itself, the salvation of the spirit through imparting a restricted knowledge—that enables the soul to escape the realm of nature and matter. Christologically, this means that Christ’s soul did not die; his material body or a substitute was left on the cross, thereby fooling the evil hordes, or even the creator demiurge of the Old Testament, who all believed they had killed God himself. The link for Adorno—although this content is not made explicit—is with Kierkegaard’s abhorrence of nature in all its senses. Nature is that from which the follower escapes by means of Christ’s propitiatory death, and yet this escape is doomed before it may begin. Thus, the “real basis” of Kierkegaard’s mythology lies in his gnostic doctrines, which now connect with the questions of fate and propitiation: neither Christ nor God can prevent the fate of Christ’s death, since this, precisely as propitiatory atonement, becomes a necessary step for redemption that simultaneously robs it of any efficacy. Further, this death becomes an “offence,” not merely because it is a propitiation for sinful human beings, but for what lies beyond human sin itself, namely the realm of evil nature from which Christ promises a futile rescue.

This point is very astute on Adorno’s part, for propitiatory atonement is indeed a doctrine that trades on certain features of gnostic thought. Not only are human souls trapped within nature, but God himself is similarly imprisoned, particularly in the incarnation, or enfleshment, his binding in human nature. Yet, this is the ultimate expression of necessity, for God cannot help but succumb to such a fate—God *must* be incarnated in Christ, in nature, so that the punishment due to human beings may be taken by Christ, so that, in other words, redemption can take place. The sheer necessity of this particular schema of redemption puts God at the mercy of fate, but the problem for Adorno is that Kierkegaard’s evocation of God’s own fate sucks all the air out of the prison of nature where he is caught. In this environment, where fate—a force outside God—renders God helpless, such a God fades from existence: “Mythical



dialectic consumes Kierkegaard's god, as did Kronos his children" (K: 113; GS2: 161).

I am more than willing to grant Adorno's point, since it has always seemed to me that the emphasis on propitiatory atonement in Reformed thought is highly problematic when viewed in the context of grace. That such a doctrine cuts off theology itself—without God in some sense, how can there be a theology?—is simply a tour de force. But again, I want more from Adorno, especially on grace itself, but that will have to wait.

Nonetheless, identifying myth is but the first step; Adorno then moves on, not to history so much as to the problem of paradox. Here Kierkegaard is inescapably a theologian, for theology deals with myriad paradoxes, such as the dual nature of Christ (fully God and fully human), transcendence and immanence, punctual time and eternity, and the bind of theodicy (the tension between evil, God's omnipotence and love). Indeed, for Adorno this is precisely the problem with Kierkegaard and with theology more generally: while his understanding of dialectics must have paradox as the starting point, Kierkegaard annoyingly insists that paradox is the answer, the end point of the argument that loudly proclaims the limits of human thought. Adorno will worry away at this assumption for most of the book: "The paradox is Kierkegaard's fundamental, categorical form" (K: 115; GS2: 164). Adorno is not going to let Kierkegaard get away with it.

Out of the density of Adorno's text, I am going to choose one instance of christological paradox—time and eternity. The point Adorno wants to make is that paradoxes like these are the fertile ground in which the dialectic may and should take root. Except for Kierkegaard the dance of the dialectic falters—a misstep here, a falter there, one partner begins dancing to different beat and soon they give up altogether to find another drink. The fatal problem with Kierkegaard's discussion of time and eternity is the recurring problem of nature: nature, especially fallen nature, has for Kierkegaard no history, whereas time is that which distinguishes human existence from nature. The problem is that Kierkegaard attributes timelessness, a feature of nature, to Christ, in direct contradiction with



his insistence on the historicity of God's appearance in Christ. Adorno picks up on Kierkegaard's phrase "this nota bene on a page of universal history" to argue that this is precisely a signal of the lack of historical specificity in regard to Christ's incarnation: he might have appeared at any moment in time, interchangeable with any other. Thus, rather than marking in a unique fashion the possibility of history itself—Adorno's very definition of history, as we saw a little earlier—the life of Christ becomes timeless, falling back into nature. And this nature is specifically "fallen nature," the state of human beings in the world after the Fall. Of course, this means that Christ cannot bring about any redemption: trapped in nature as timeless, he has no way of extracting himself from nature, let alone anyone else who may be interested in redemption. For Kierkegaard, this is a real problem, since he desperately wants to get himself out of such a fallen nature; and for the Adorno of this early work, nature is not a particularly desirable state. I will want to ask Adorno—a little later—why this is a problem, why redemption from within nature is not in fact a viable theological possibility.

### Sacrifice

All of this is only a warm up, a few stretches before taking on the massive weights of what Adorno regards as the central category of Kierkegaard's thought—sacrifice. And he attacks Kierkegaard on both counts, showing how sacrifice is both mythical and paradoxical, so much so that it leads to the sacrifice of reason itself. As for myth, Adorno is beginning to enjoy himself, flexing his dialectical muscles: all Kierkegaard's bans on myth, he points out, are but screens for myth: "Blinded, however, it escapes him that the image of sacrifice is itself mythical and occupies the innermost cell of his thought, accessible equally by way of his philosophy as by his theology" (K: 110; GS2: 156). Using Kierkegaard's dialectic against him, Adorno argues that in the very effort to remove the mythical origin of sacrifice he makes use of sacrifice. However much he exploits the ambiguity of myth to extirpate





myth, he cannot escape it.<sup>13</sup>

But what is the myth that riddles Kierkegaard's notion of sacrifice? It is none other than the Nordic myth of Odhinn-Wódhan, the god who rules over all things but sacrifices himself for himself. Patron of the *jarl* (nobles), possessor of the great spear Gungnir, a treacherous and untrustworthy god of war and the brotherhoods of warriors, also of poetry, magic, wisdom (especially in war) and runes, Odhinn's creatures were the raven and the wolf that fed on the bodies of the slain. Dweller of Valhalla, he welcomed warriors fallen in battle, but also demanded human and animal sacrifices which the jarl provided for him by raiding the villages of the *karl* (free-men, whose god was Thor). These sacrifices were hung from trees and stabbed with spears, often around temples, in memory of Odhinn's own hanging: strung from the world-tree Yggdrasil for nine days, bearing a spear-wound, he sacrifices himself for the secret of the runes, for knowledge itself. In the *Hávamál* Odhinn speaks thus:

I know I hung  
On the windswept Tree,  
Through nine days and nights.  
I was stuck with a spear  
and given to Odhinn,  
myself given to myself.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The criticism of Nietzsche is similar: "Without hope, the idea of truth would be scarcely even thinkable, and it is the cardinal untruth, having recognized existence to be bad, to present it as truth simply because it has been recognized. Here, rather than in the opposite, lies the crime of theology that Nietzsche arraigned without ever reaching the final court. In one of the most powerful passages of his critique he charges Christianity with mythology: 'The guilt sacrifice, in its most repulsive and most barbaric form: the sacrifice of the innocent for the sins of the guilty! What appalling paganism!' Nothing other, however, is love of fate [Nietzsche's *amor fati*], the absolute sanctioning of an infinity of such sacrifice. Myth debars Nietzsche's critique of myth from truth" (MM: 98; GS4: 108).

<sup>14</sup> H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1964), 143–44.



For Adorno, this is the key—“myself given to myself”—to Kierkegaard’s theory of sacrifice (although I have had to overcome Adorno’s obtuseness here with a few details). And the point is that the myth of Odhinn’s self-sacrifice gives us the essence of Kierkegaard’s idealism, the rash claim that thought itself, reason, is able to generate not only reality but redemption itself. Yet, does not Kierkegaard seek to overcome idealism through sacrifice? Ostensibly yes, but the myth betrays him, for his use of Christ’s sacrifice is saturated with the myth of Odhinn’s sacrifice. This means, for Adorno, that Kierkegaard seeks both to transcend his idealist system and, by the same act, hold it together; he both denies and radically affirms idealism, negates all its claims and then grasps them.

Let me exegete for a moment a key quotation from Adorno, one that is typically overlaid with multiple levels. It reads: “The model of this sacrifice is paradox: a movement of thought, completed in our thought, and negated as totality in this movement of thought, in order, sacrificed, to draw toward itself the ‘strictly different,’ its absolute contrary” (K: 113; GS2: 161). The ghost of Odhinn haunts this sentence, the paradox of the god who sacrifices himself for knowledge (thought itself), but then idealism itself comes to the fore: thought is both completed and negated in order to draw in the contrary, the other that it believes it has constituted through the power of thought alone. But such an idealist dialectic has about as much chance of connecting with the other (Hegel’s moment of the negative) as Odhinn has of being reliable and trustworthy. Finally, reconciliation peers out from beneath the words: any effort at reconciliation, the effort to reconcile oneself with any other, can hardly proceed from and return to oneself, gathering the other in the process. Idealism, staring at the onset of immanent collapse, has no access to such reconciliation, cannot achieve the cathartic reconciliation promised by sacrifice, since reconciliation is precisely that category excluded by the realm of pure thought that characterises idealism. Or, if we replace “thought” with “nature,” redemption that comes from nature can never rise above nature; it must fall back, exhausted, into nature: reconciliation thereby becomes “the



imperceptible gesture in which guilty nature renews itself historically as created nature” (K: 120; GS2: 172).

The key paradox, then, is idealism, although all of Kierkegaard's much beloved paradoxes also come into play—revelation/mystery, happiness/suffering, certainty/uncertainty, ease/difficulty of religious truth/absurdity. Kierkegaard's problem is that he tries to overcome the primary paradox of idealism by means of sacrifice; unfortunately for him, this sacrifice is caught in the myth of Odhinn that replicates the idealist paradox. Hence, sacrifice is the “essence (*Gehalt*) of paradoxy” (K: 116; GS2: 165). And with the incessant rattling of this idealist paradox, Kierkegaard's system falls apart: what appears to be a dialectic is one in name only. Or rather, he is closer to Hegel than he cares to think. In all his opposition, Kierkegaard replicates the idealism of Hegel, suffering an inverse fate: “Reason, which in Hegel as infinite reason produces actuality out of itself, is in Kierkegaard, again as infinite reason, the negation of all finite knowledge: if the former is mythical by its claim to universal sovereignty, the latter becomes mythical through universal annihilation” (K: 119; GS2: 169). Odhinn's final battle at Ragnarok, when Loki and the wolf Fenrir are let loose, marks the collapse of Kierkegaard's system. This is the “sacrifice of reason” to which Adorno has been working, the sheer inability of reason to function in any capacity in Kierkegaard's thought. In the end, sacrifice becomes not merely a signal of the inability of reason to function in any capacity, but also the very means by which reason is rendered incapable. The effort to hold his system together through sacrifice fails spectacularly, going every which way in a shower of sparks.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer make a very similar argument regarding the paradox of faith and reason, this time from the side of faith. If faith renders reason futile, so also does the link with reason make faith impossible. They mark a transition from a pre-capitalist distinction between the enchantment or aura of art—where art itself takes over the older patterns of primitive magic—and the needs of knowledge and utility (thus Plato banned art from the Republic) to that between knowledge and faith. The latter is characteristic of the bourgeois world, where the suspicion of art means that knowledge is not restricted for its sake, but rather for faith. Now the paradoxes of faith come thick and fast; as a “privative concept” (DE: 19; GS3: 36), particularly in a bourgeois context, it cannot exist without opposing knowledge. Yet, it also conforms to knowledge: based on the restriction of knowledge, it is itself restricted, and any effort to overcome the opposition merely reinforces it. The problem is therefore in the



Not a bad argument, particularly in the way the uncovering of myth and identification of paradox mesh with one another, but again I am left wanting more, especially on the question of reconciliation. Adorno refuses to say anything more on reconciliation, and even then I have had to spell it out—the reconciliation of myself with the other, with what is “strictly different.” Does he mean reconciliation between human beings and God—this would in fact be the primary theological meaning of the word—or between human beings themselves—the subsidiary theological point? If so, he does not say so. I would like to include nature here, as Adorno indeed does in his later work, as both what is thoroughly different in the human-nature divide and that with which reconciliation is sought. My suspicion is that spelling out what he means by reconciliation would draw him too far into theology, although he could always answer that the ban on images comes into play here, that we cannot know or say what reconciliation is since we have not as yet experienced it, at least on a political and social level.

### Cosmology: The Spheres

It is all beginning to read like a thorough demolition job; indeed, the subtitle of the Kierkegaard study may well have read “all I leave are the memories.” I do find this somewhat troubling, not so much because I have a soft spot for Kierkegaard (although I should, given his deeply Protestant thought, even if it is Lutheran rather than Calvinist), but because it is, to be blunt, a betrayal of the dialectic. Would not a more dialectical reading have been to draw Kierkegaard up into a wider problematic, to recast his questions and problems into another set of questions? At least Adorno should have asked: what are the implications for theology

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opposition, for as long as faith remains tied to knowledge it perpetually betrays itself as limited, as unfaith. In other words, the fanaticism of the struggle to overcome knowledge shows up faith to be anything but faith: without knowledge faith cannot exist, and yet it asserts that the sign of faith is that one must have faith without knowledge. Caught in such an impossible bind, it becomes an instrumental justification for a string of excesses: “The paradoxical nature of faith ultimately degenerates into a swindle, and becomes the myth of the twentieth century; and its irrationality turns into an instrument of rational administration by the wholly enlightened as they steer society toward barbarism” (DE: 20; GS3: 37).



and philosophy, given the inadequacies of Kierkegaard's thought? I have already attempted this move spasmodically and will try to do so more systematically a little later where I explore the possibilities of theology.

But for now Adorno razes Kierkegaard to ground one more time, on the question of the spheres, or as I have recast it, a demythologisation of cosmology. So let us see what he does here. Kierkegaard's famous spheres—the aesthetic, ethical and religious—are both hierarchically and dialectical related, mediated by irony and humour. Again two phases characterise Adorno's argument, the one that they are ultimately theological and therefore mythical, and the other that the dialectic of the spheres fails to achieve the desired unity, becoming a "totality of ruins" (K: 90; GS2: 130) due to the inherent idealism of Kierkegaard's dialectic in which they become ruling "ideas."

Theologically, the spheres operate within a vertical world between heaven and hell, eternity and damnation, with the aesthetic at the lowest point, moving between despair and objective damnation. Irony mediates, as a *confinien*, between it and the ethical, the middle realm, which then moves to the religious via humour, at which point the holy or apostolic life may be found. But the relationship is also dialectical, with all three spheres rubbing up against one another, although there is precious little sensuality about such stroking and touching.

As for myth, Adorno's dialectical reading moves from the spheres as distinct entities to their status as concepts to their magical and hypostatised forms. The initial signal of myth's presence in the dialectic of the spheres is language itself, for the nomenclature of the spheres is astral. The spheres, apart from assuring Kant's notion of the moral law beneath the starry heavens, both echo and derive from the Pythagorean/Orphic music of the spheres that Plato found so appealing. Here the mythical element takes astrological form and Adorno argues that Kierkegaard's formulations themselves betray such a linguistic debt. Echoing Kierkegaard, Adorno writes:

The most universal concepts, posited by consciousness to order its multifarious contents, appear to consciousness as alien, meaning conferring powers



that define their own course. They direct the individual's fate the more completely the stranger they become to him; the more hidden their human origins; the more, that is, that abstraction progresses in them (K: 91; GS2: 131).

Like astrology, in which inanimate pieces of rock affect one's individual characteristics and personal decisions and events, the spheres become alien bodies, dictating one's life according to the logic of fate. Although Kierkegaard would hardly believe *this*, for Adorno he ends up holding that universal concepts fall under the sway of astrology.

By now Adorno has become a little impatient with stripping Kierkegaard down to his mythological underwear: with the spheres he is far more interested in the logical paradoxes they pose for the dialectic. To begin with, Kierkegaard's own model of the spheres is riven, somewhat ironically, with a tension between "a dialectic immanent to the spheres and one between the spheres" (K: 98; GS2: 140). This tension produces its own contradiction between a Hegelian immanent dialectic and one of the leap across the abyss between the spheres that transforms one into the other—from the lowest, the aesthetic, through ethics to the highest, the religious, mediated by the fluid boundaries (*confinien*) of irony and humour and occasionally the "interesting" or even the ethical itself. In order to explicate the contradiction, Adorno resorts yet again to a theological problem that highlights the problem, namely, "miracle."

At first this might seem like a strange way to open up the contradictions in Kierkegaard's dialectic of the spheres. But let us see what Adorno does with them: miracles are caught in Kierkegaard's system between believer and non-believer, for in neither case do they "work," despite Kierkegaard's claims. For the non-believer, miracles can make him "attentive," but not compel belief. In fact, he may equally decide to accept or reject the faith towards which miracles point. This means that miracles can be only for believers, but this falls away from the paradox of belief, fixing it as an eternal proof of faith. Yet they cannot be for Kierkegaard proofs of faith, since faith can happen only through the leap. In either case, the categories are mutually exclusive, but Kierkegaard's point is that



the tension can be resolved through a qualitative dialectic that scorns Hegelian *Vermittlung*, mediation, as nothing more than “interposition” (*Mediation*). Now Adorno pounces, for it is not possible, he argues, to operate a dialectical argument without mediation (*Vermittlung*). There are two possible outcomes in this situation: without mediation, the paradox of miracle becomes a pure negation, absolute difference, and then the dialectic freezes, closing down into a “simple limiting condition” (K: 99; GS2: 141). Alternatively, the paradox of the miracles is in fact mediated and miracles work for both the believer as signs of the life of faith and for the non-believer as signs of how one might enter this life. But let us pause for a moment and backtrack to the leap, to the means of avoiding mediation: if the leap, as the only entry into faith, overcomes the paradox of miracles, how does one enter faith via the leap? Here the ambivalence and difficulty of the whole dialectic of the spheres emerges:

Where the conception of this dialectic is defined by the categories of the leap, the absolutely different and the paradox, there can be no room for the authentic dialectic. As a movement, the “leap” is not commensurable with any dialectical movement immanent to the sphere; it is not demonstrable in any act of consciousness. Paradoxical in itself and otherworldly, the leap reveals itself to be an act of election: the consummation of an irrational doctrine of predestination that is perhaps the foundation of Kierkegaard's “Baroque” (K: 99; GS2: 142).

Kierkegaard has merely replaced one paradox with another, this time between the leap of faith and the election of believers, or, between free will and grace—the topic, as I pointed out in my discussion of Žižek, of a major debate between Erasmus and Luther. It is, in other words, the old theological paradox whereby what seems to be an act of pure choice, above all a decision for God rather than against, turns out in hindsight to be a manifestation of election. And theological paradox is the death of the dialectic, as far as Adorno is concerned, for such paradoxes are the end of the run rather than its inaugural moment. In its stronger terms, the issue is predestination, to which Luther and the Lutheran tradition were bound; in the light of predestination—which, as I have pointed out before,



I find an extraordinarily rich doctrine—Kierkegaard’s notion of the leap becomes nonsensical, for there is no longer any risk or uncertainty, the key to the leap itself.

As the spheres begin to break up in Adorno’s hands, he extricates the unbearable tension between dialectics and hierarchy. For the spheres themselves run in descending order, from the religious through the ethical to the aesthetic, which for Kierkegaard implies a certain unintelligibility between the spheres: the lower spheres cannot make intelligible that which appears in higher spheres. But Adorno is after something more: on these terms, any dialectic will break down, whether through the leap or through intrigue. By the leap one may pass from one sphere to the other, but only by intrigue, argues Kierkegaard, may the hierarchy of the spheres relate to each other. The effort to overcome this paradox by means of the notion of “projection,” in which the higher spheres seek to project themselves into the lower spheres, only generates further problems. In fact, these efforts at the projection of one sphere into another fail abysmally, for it is not possible to move downwards in the hierarchy, since higher spheres cannot be understood by lower ones, and so the hierarchy itself fails to be ordered. Any religious item cannot be understood in the ethical or the aesthetic, nor can the ethical be comprehended in the aesthetic. But where is Adorno going with this argument?

In Kierkegaard “higher” spheres may not be arbitrarily depicted in “lower” spheres; the “leap” precludes adequate projection, and in the necessity of dissimulations the system of the spheres shows itself as a totality in fragments. The projection of the phenomena of a higher sphere into a lower means falsification and, therefore, every statement of the “religious” sphere remains incomprehensible for the aesthetic sphere because it is already falsified by mere depiction (K: 103; GS2: 147).

Not only does the dialectic of the spheres collapse, but Kierkegaard’s own thought precludes any effort to base aesthetics or ethics in theology—both spheres lower than the religious—for all that results is the falsification of the theological categories in the effort to produce an aesthetics or ethics.

What of the reverse process, from the lower spheres to the





higher? Over against intrigue and dissimulation for the step downward, transcendence refers to the reverse, the way the spheres move out of themselves. Here Kierkegaard concentrates on the way the aesthetic may move into the religious and Adorno follows through the various modes by which this happens: the extreme moment of decisiveness for the aesthetic (in contrast to the ever-present leap for the religious), and the “exception” as the moment of that transcendence (the poet, marriage, feminine romanticism, or human being as such). Decisiveness and the exception then mark such a movement upwards, but it is Kierkegaard's characterisation of this movement towards transcendence that is most intriguing. He seeks this transcendence in incommensurable moments or situations in which aesthetics points beyond itself, where there is no ostensible reason for its expression. This is Kierkegaard's “concretion,” the inward and simple expression of a value that can speak incommensurably of transcendence, such as poetry or love. In fact, it would seem that we owe to Kierkegaard such a notion of transcendence through the “concretion” of the exception. Who has not felt, in that unguarded or passing moment, the sense of wonder at birds unselfconsciously playing in a tree, or the wombat that looks at you quizzically—as if to ask “what the hell are *you* doing here?”—or the momentary look in a lover's eyes that speaks of yearning and desire?

Enigmatic as ever, Adorno mentions the “concrete” or “concretion” a few times before passing on to his next point, but I want to grab Adorno by the collar and hold him in his tracks for a few moments. By concrete, Adorno refers not only to Kierkegaard's notion (and remember, Adorno *will not* be seduced by Kierkegaard's poetry) but also to a more Marxist sense where the concrete indicates the specificity of political economics and historical location. And it is this concrete that Kierkegaard cannot avoid and yet seeks to negate through his alternative sense of “concrete” as the transcendent exception; for the first sense of concrete appears all the more insistently the more Kierkegaard tries to escape it, particularly with the escape into radical inwardness. Here lies the irresolvable paradox of Kierkegaard's notion of concretion: the very possibility of his alternative notion of concretion as exception relies upon the historical sense of the



term, a sense he deeply wants to banish.

I am not so sure about Adorno's argument at this point. I have already admitted that I am quite willing, in fact more than willing, to be seduced by poetry, but can Kierkegaard's notion of the exception be located purely in his retreat into inwardness? Adorno is of course concerned to show how the dialectic of the spheres faces innumerable contradictions, but his effort to identify another paradox—in this case between Kierkegaard's concrete and the concrete reality of his socio-economic situation—suggests that he may be trying just a little too hard to make his point. He is really after a total annihilation of Kierkegaard's system at every point, and while we do not need the theory of the spheres to make sense of the exception, why is it not possible to admit that such transcendence may indeed be valid? The problem is that Adorno, at least at this point, closes down any possibility of engagement with human beings by that which is more-than-human—hence my earlier examples from that much-pilloried notion of nature.

But Adorno is not content to rest, slipping out of my grasp to get on his way, and so he turns the contradiction of concretion and Kierkegaard's resistance to it into a mark of the system itself, namely the "ultimate contradiction" of the whole dialectic that Kierkegaard tries to establish. Why does Kierkegaard's effort at a dialectics fail? In the end, paradox begs for an adequate dialectic, something that Adorno himself is keen to establish. Although paradox lies at the heart of Kierkegaard's philosophy, the problem is that rather than taking paradox as a dialectical category par excellence, as the object that allows the dialectic to begin its work, Kierkegaard falls victim to the theological treatment of paradox. That is, the mere arrival at paradox—doctrine of the Trinity, the nature of Christ, time and eternity, transcendence and immanence, free will and grace, miracle, etc.—is the signal of the end of inquiry rather than its beginning, for here lies theological truth. The problem with Kierkegaard is that the paradoxes of theology are themselves not open to dialectical analysis, however much he may protest otherwise. The theological propositions with which Kierkegaard works are external, revealed "truth contents" which appear in the highest sphere, the religious. This means that the



various phenomena of the spheres—religious, ethical and aesthetic—do not arise from within the system itself, but externally. With the externally revealed truths of theology, Kierkegaard's system fails as a dialectical one because there is no mediation—a category that will remain central to Adorno's exercise of the dialectic.<sup>16</sup> Even the use of the ethical sphere itself as a mediation between the religious and the aesthetic fails, for these two crush the ethical between them as a mode of passing from one to the other: "Theological truth crashes down to human level as aesthetic truth and reveals itself to man as a sign of hope" (K: 104; GS2: 148), except that such a "hope" becomes feeble due to the abruptness of the crash.

Even though I have voiced my doubts about the need for stamping Kierkegaard's system to dust and then scattering it in the brook nearby, the critique of theological paradox is a pertinent one. Kierkegaard gives precedence to theology—and theological readings, as Adorno points out, are entirely correct to focus on paradox as the key to Kierkegaard's work—at the expense of an adequate or workable philosophy or aesthetics. And yet, despite his profound suspicion of Kierkegaard's theology as entirely false within itself, Adorno only just hints at a way in which theology would have a legitimate place: when the paradoxes of theology become the beginning of dialectics, rather than the final answer of a system of thought, then the "truth content" of theology may begin to appear, however different it may be from its ostensible content.

I have by and large done with the Kierkegaard book. Apart from carefully sinking into the text itself, with its tight and unrelenting sentences, I have also been on the lookout for the workings of what I have called Adorno's theological suspicion. If I have found the study wanting at certain points—too concerned with undertaking a complete demolition job on Kierkegaard, unwilling to pursue guarded hints, and assuming a little too much from Kierkegaard, especially concerning myth and nature—then I also want to hold to the necessity of theological suspicion, especially where paradox is the final word, the terminus of any theological argument

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<sup>16</sup> "The materialist determination of cultural traits is only possible if it is mediated through the *total social process*" (CC: 283; BB: 367), the lack of which he also accuses Benjamin.



rather than the beginning of a far more interesting dialectic. Yet, such a theological suspicion does not mean that we can turn our backs on theology, brushing the dust from our sandals before we set out on the road. Theological suspicion is here to stay, not merely for theology itself, but for political thought as well.

## Secularised Theology

I feel as though I have circumnavigated a vast continent of thought and then traversed its tough and rugged interior. But before I can get too carried away with my sense of achievement, all I need to do is remind myself is that this is only the first philosophical book (I was going to write “merely the first” but I just cannot see that “merely” applies in any way to the Kierkegaard study). And so I turn that other central category that I want to draw from Adorno for a materialist theology, namely the criticism of secularised theology. I am quite aware that this will come as a contested surprise to those who work on Adorno: does he not, after all, make use of terms such as reconciliation, redemption and above all the ban on images? Indeed, Adorno is often credited with the suggestion that theology must undergo a radical purge of its bowels so that its language and ways of thinking may be invested with a clean, new and thoroughly secularised content.<sup>17</sup> Less an observation about a process that had already

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<sup>17</sup> So, among many others, Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 141. In this respect Albrecht Wellmer is fundamentally mistaken when he argues that Adorno attempted to outdo Marx’s critique of religion through a materialist appropriation of theology, a secularising of the transcending impulse; see “Metaphysics at the Moment of Its Fall,” in *Literary Theory Today*, ed. Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 38–40. So also Hanssen (*Walter Benjamin’s Other History*, 81): “As a method and interpretation, negative dialectics—as Adorno had in fact posited early on in his study—was to be thought of as the secularisation of the holy scriptures.” Jameson’s observation (*Late Marxism*, 118) that the ban on images is the means by which Adorno’s own secularisation of theology moves over to a concern with the body, misses the point that both the ban and the body comprise not so much theology emptied of content as theological categories themselves. By contrast, Habermas is as perceptive as always: “Adorno (atheistic like Benjamin—although not in the same way) opposes the false abolition of religion with a restoration of utopian contents that constitute a ferment for uncompromising critical thought, though this specifically avoids taking the form of a universalized secular illumination” (Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising,” 43).



been underway from the Enlightenment, it is read as prescription of dialectics itself, a radical flushing out and remoulding for the purpose of contemporary radical thought. If this is the case—that Adorno is a secular theologian—then he is hardly alone, as the various critics I have discussed in this book or the new wave of political theology at the beginning of the new millennium makes abundantly clear.

Now I could argue that Adorno never makes use of a secularised theological concept, and indeed I am tempted to do so, but let me take the more modest position that although he has a propensity to slip into such a mode at times, he also develops an extraordinary criticism of such secularised theology (what Marx would call the passage from the criticism of theology to the criticism of politics). So, let me track that critique of secularised theology rather closely. The catch is that the criticism of secularised theology is inseparable from the famous ban on images or *Bilderverbot*: while the ban itself is in many respects the basis for the criticism, the criticism of secularised theology raises the question as to what the ban is if it is not a secularised theological category. So I begin with the criticism of secularised theology itself, before passing on to consider the ban on images.

In doing so I trawl through another of Adorno's less read books, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, originally intended to be part of *Negative Dialectics*, as well as the more recently unearthed lectures on metaphysics translated as *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*.<sup>18</sup> Out of these texts three moments of the criticism of secularised theology emerge, two from the jargon book and one from the metaphysics lectures: the attack on existentialism and especially Adorno's favourite punching bag, Heidegger;<sup>19</sup> the danger of a metaphysics that seeks to base its authority in thought alone; and the partial secularisation of liberal theology.

<sup>18</sup> The hand of Rolf Tiedemann is heavy on these lectures. As he openly admits in the "Editor's Afterword" (M: 191–98), the quality of the tapes is poor and the transcriber seemed to have little sense of the lectures, let alone the many Greek terms. Thus, Tiedemann often needed to reconstruct sentences and the meaning itself of the text.

<sup>19</sup> I often imagine that to relieve his frustration Adorno would turn to the face of Heidegger plastered on a boxer's training bag and thump the living daylights out of it.



As for the *Jargon of Authenticity*, Adorno wants to do the same to existentialism as he tried to do to Kierkegaard—raze it to the ground, and, this time like the Romans in Carthage, sow it liberally with salt for good measure. That the existentialism of the early twentieth century was in many respects Kierkegaard's legacy did not help Adorno's appreciation, but at another level the rejection of Hegelian reason and Marxist political solutions represented everything about liberal ideology to which the Frankfurt School was opposed. I am, however, listening with different ears to this text, attuned to the theological cadences that run side by side with those of existentialism: so, even though Adorno takes on Jaspers and Heidegger in the book, I pursue the theological questions, references to figures such as Martin Buber and Paul Tillich, but above all the argument that the early Heidegger's use of secularised theological concepts leaves the foundations of existentialism termite-ridden.

I shall give Adorno his head for a few moments, since we need to let him give the early Heidegger's existentialism a good shove before we can pick up the problem of secularised theology. The argument of *The Jargon of Authenticity* is that in the name of a critique of alienation and the ways hitherto used to overcome it, existentialism in fact became a mystification of that very process of domination and oppression, and it did so through its inherent idealism, the self-experience and self-production of subjectivity that loses or negates the crucial relationship between the existential subject and its objective historical content and context. Nothing that had not been argued earlier, except that in *The Jargon of Authenticity* the argument runs a different course. It passes through the terminology of existentialism, a particular language that became a widespread jargon—in theology, pedagogy, youth organisations, business, and administration—which closes down the possibility that language will relate in some way to truth. By “truth” Adorno quite explicitly refers to the reality not so much of the political and economic situation to which language relates as to the dialectical and mediated relation between language and political economics, all of which can then reveal the function of ideology itself. Adorno's own argument is then a model for such an



identification of truth in the very act of criticising existentialism's inability to do so. Thus, the "truth" of the jargon is that it is a form of ideology, in this case a specific mode of language and thinking that serves, by positing its message through its own nature, to oppress rather than liberate.

The thickest sections of *The Jargon of Authenticity* are given over to Jaspers and Heidegger, the latter especially appearing time and again for another punishing bout. But it is the earlier pages that register on my mental radar, given the central role of theologians within existentialism. Indeed, the first pages of *The Jargon of Authenticity* deal with the twist given to the theological legacy of Kierkegaard. For "a number of people active in philosophy, sociology, and theology" (JA: 3; JE: 7) had decided that it was not so much the content of religion, or more specifically theology, but the act of conviction itself that was the key. Although named on only one or two occasions, the letters between Adorno and Tillich indicate that Adorno had his good friend and mentor Tillich primarily in mind. Proposed as a way to move beyond the specificity of Christianity so as to incorporate any form of religious belief, Adorno saw it as a renewed form of mystification, the exacerbation of all the vilest enchantments of Kierkegaard's thought. The problem for Adorno was not the loss of an external referent for theology but the turn inward, the legitimacy rendered to the act of believing by an autonomous subject. For only this act could be "authentic" in the jargon of existentialism.

The religious streams of existentialism were not restricted to Christianity, especially the liberal theology of which Tillich was the most distinctive representative.<sup>20</sup> It included Martin Buber, whose work—along with that of Kierkegaard and Tillich—continues to be influential, brings a Jewish bent to existentialism. I remember Buber's name still invoked with reverence in my theological classes of the 1980s, especially the widely cited *I and Thou*. Buber's appeal lay in providing a greater metaphysical and theological depth to the act rather than the object of belief. The I-Thou relationship supersedes the I-It relationship—although it constantly threatens to fall back into reification—not by emphasis on the object of the relationship but on the relationship itself in all its intimacy. It matters

<sup>20</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951–63).



not whether the relationship is with God, another human being, or indeed any other animate being. For Buber, while the prime relationship is with God, such transcendence comes from below, from the relationship between “man and man.”

Adorno finds the appropriation of Buber into Christian theology and then existentialism a warmed up irrationalism, a founding of metaphysics on stupidity, the result of removing Kierkegaard’s christology from his theory of existence and universalising it. Theology thereby breaks down its crucial demarcations between natural and supernatural, immanence and transcendence, life and death, losing any viable position, becoming warm and fuzzy. This is where Adorno’s criticism bites, for Buber’s warmed up irrationalism becomes central to the jargon in which Heidegger took up Buber. It is Heidegger who, with his “diminished theological tone” (JA: 5; JE: 8; translation modified), provides the theoretical and systematic depth to the more vague aspirations of existentialism. Had Heidegger not existed, he would have had to be invented in any case, at least in his earlier incarnation, for his appeal and popularity lay in the clear articulation of the hazy thoughts of “the dark drives of the intelligentsia before 1933” (JA: 5; JE: 8).

Heidegger’s effort in *Being and Time* to develop a metaphysics by appropriating theological notions of experience without theology—for Heidegger the structures of the experience of death become the structures of *Dasein*—is for Adorno the most ideological part of Heidegger’s work. His sleight-of-hand lies in the effort to develop a non-theological concept of death: in explicit recognition of the decline of positive religion, this effort ends up being a subtle manoeuvre to reintroduce theological concepts. The problem is that the experience that theology posited—in this case death—is no longer possible without theology. Yet, the attempt to posit such experiences without theology is doomed to fail, for Heidegger must then smuggle in theology once again (see M: 107). Thus, Heidegger tries to refill the empty theological pots with a non-theological mix—in short, to espouse a secularised theology.

A further feature of such a fateful secularisation is the shift to religion as religion, to the act of belief itself. For “the jargon secularizes the





German readiness to view men's positive relation to religion as something immediately positive, even when the religion has disintegrated and been exposed as something untrue" (JA: 21; JE: 21). For Adorno—and I cannot emphasise this enough—any notion of a secularised theology is an “insult not only to thought but also to religion” (JA: 25; JE: 24). The insult to thought we can readily understand, but what intrigues me to no end is the insult to religion: I will assume he means theology here, but this means that theology itself is badly done by with such a secularised theology. Indeed, Adorno finds the assumed pervasiveness of secularised theology such a bane to theology itself.

Apart from the criticism of the transformation of progress into a secular concept, a process already implicit in Augustine's *Civitas Dei*, as one of idolisation (see CM: 146–47; SKM: 32–33), we can see also a critique of Marxist efforts to secularise the Bible or theology, as most of the critics I have discussed in this book try to do. In the end, this will mean for Adorno not merely a slippage into the alienating patterns embedded in the language of such a secularised theology, but the amplification of the worst of such systems while anything that might have acted as a check is jettisoned.

In part due to the centrality of Kierkegaard in existentialism, Adorno finds the theological residue poisonous: its “addictions” have “seeped into the language,” a language which “molds thought” (JA: 5; JE: 8). And this is the problem: it is not as though the content floats free of its container, language, but that language itself has its own shaping, content-producing function. The language of theology, appropriated by the early Heidegger and existentialism, has the distinct ideological role of producing patterns of subordination to an absolute authority, which is now fascism rather than God and the Church. The theological language of existentialism—which drew its sacredness from the cult of authenticity rather than Christianity—becomes an ideological schema particularly suited to fascism. In the case of fascism, existentialism functioned not so much as an explicit statement, but as a “refuge,” a mystification that gave voice to an ostensible salvation from alienation that functioned as



a virulent justification of oppression, the “smoldering evil” (JA: 5; JE: 9) of fascism.

At around the same time Adorno was working on *The Jargon of Authenticity* and *Negative Dialectics* (of which the jargon was originally meant to be a part), he was also delivering his lectures on metaphysics. So here I want to switch to the lectures themselves, especially since a somewhat similar criticism as the one I have just traced emerges against metaphysics. An intricate path weaves its way through the lectures, one that accounts for both the long-standing love affair between theology and metaphysics and yet their inability to live together, the deep suspicion and jealousy that occasionally explodes into a winner-takes-all fight, often after a bottle of squabble-wine. But what interests me is the deeper source of this tension, apart from the tactical alliances and the points where they touch (especially on the question of the absolute).

The difference between the two is as follows: what theology posits by revelation, metaphysics does by concepts, through reason. Metaphysics “no longer does so in a belief in the direct experience of the sensible perceptibility or the substantial existence of the divinities or divinity, but *on the basis of conceptual thought*” (M: 88; italics in original). But this is the beginning of a problem and not merely a statement of the *status quo*. Let me dig out the problem further by exegeting a sentence and a half from *Negative Dialectics*: metaphysics is “not only theology secularized into a concept. It preserves theology in its critique, by uncovering the possibility of what theology may force upon men and thus desecrate” (ND: 397; GS6: 389). The very problem with the notion of a secularised theology is contained in this statement, for such a move by metaphysics merely replicates the authority structures of theology, or to put it in the terms of *Negative Dialectics*, the return to first principles that theology took up with gusto (ND: 136; GS6: 140). Instead of revealed dogma, insured by the institution of the Church, conceptual thought becomes the authority, the legal basis for metaphysics. The result—as in all ontologies and rationalist philosophies—is that the structure of being is nothing other than the structure of thought: the elevation of thought to the key elements of the universe, so to speak. In order to



avoid such a move for authority, particularly in the transition from theology to metaphysics where thought becomes the justification and jurisdiction over metaphysics, where it claims that thought is in fact metaphysics—in order to avoid such a transference of theology's claims to authority into philosophy, Adorno suggests that “metaphysics can no longer be anything other than a *thinking* about metaphysics” (M: 99), a critical self-reflection that perpetually questions the fundamental assumption of the whole metaphysical tradition, that “thought and its constitutive forms are *in fact* the absolute” (M: 99). In this perpetually self-reflective mode of metaphysics—as the thinking about metaphysics—Adorno tries to squeeze past the “no road” sign over metaphysics usurping the position of theology in an even more insidious fashion. If metaphysics has any chance whatsoever, it is not as secularised theology, not as a rescue of theology in another register, but as a perpetual criticism that is wary of its own ground.

Adorno does not offer so much in the third moment of his criticism of secularised theology, namely the damning assessment of liberal theology, which was once for me such an oasis. Long the way in which Christian theology made itself palatable to the “modern world,” its role was to give space to those who, like myself in an earlier incarnation, found the pious claptrap of the Church unbearable and yet could see no way to live outside the institution. So it became possible to dispense, one after another, with the virgin birth of Christ, the physical resurrection, the notion that Christ is God's son, the parousia, hell, and so on, and yet remain a card-carrying member. Hardly one to support a conservative opposition to liberal theology—the conflict that continues to set the boundaries of institutional and ideological life in the Church—Adorno argues that the “theological freeing of the numinous from ossified dogma has, ever since Kierkegaard, involuntarily come to mean its partial secularization” (JA: 31; JE: 29). The key to such liberal theology is its peculiar brand of mysticism, the emphasis shifting to the relationship itself rather than any ostensible content or definition, which can only result in reification. It is therefore “commitment”—a central term in the jargon—that counts, with no need to commit to any person or thing, or indeed speculation about such content. The terms of the jargon have become “sacred without



sacred content, as frozen emanations” (JA: 9; JE: 12); in this way, the refusal of reification becomes reified itself.

This theological move, the partial secularisation characteristic of liberal theology, provides one of the main avenues into the jargon of authenticity, which may be summed up in terms of the role of language as ideology and the positing power of the subject. The key terms themselves bear a theological residue—“existential,” “in the decision,” “commission,” “appeal,” “encounter,” “genuine dialogue,” “statement,” “concern”—although in the end, “what remains after the removal of existential bombast are religious customs cut off from their religious context” (JA: 25; JE: 24). For instance, “commitment,” removed from any subordination to revelation or the law, becomes a category of mental hygiene, a “medicine against nihilism” (JA: 70; JE: 60) that obscures precisely the element of subordination that is so objectionable in religion itself. Or the “doctrine of Man,” derived from the theological notion of human beings created in the image of God: secularised, closed off from its theological origin, the notion of “man” becomes a persuasive and unassailable term. The transcendence that separated man and God collapses, and man becomes divine, full of wonder, incapable of sin or evil, the image of itself for which the jargon acts as the language of worship and reverence. The subtlety of the jargon is that it worships not greatness but a universalised nothingness and powerlessness, precisely the means of ensuring acquiescence to, rather than criticism and rebellion against, the historical and political conditions of oppression. Thus, suffering, evil and death should be accepted, not in the hope of eternal life (itself highly problematic), but as part of the current state of affairs, with no hope of change, no challenge to authority. In this respect, the secularised theology of existentialism is a more potent ideology than theology. It vitiates any critique, any notion of the division of labour, and any protest.

Does Adorno want a return to theology untainted by such secularisation? Not quite, for theology hardly needs to be recovered, nor do its claims to transcendence, the transformation of death, or the desire to speak about God have anything inherently beneficial about them. The warm and irrational feeling about religion per se, the affirmation of belief



itself, functions not only as an ideology that masks the oppression and alienation of capitalism, but it also obfuscates, by appearing to discard the embarrassing and virulent content, the alienation of religion. Such irrationalism, inherited by the jargon of authenticity, is like “the childish manner of Latin primers which praise the love of fatherland in-itself—which praise the *virī patriae amantes*, even when the fatherland in question covers up the most atrocious deeds” (JA: 21; JE: 21). The jargon transposes into capitalism, now raised to a new exponential level, the ideological effect of theology, both of which make attractive something unbearable and disgusting: “dead cells of religiosity in the midst of the secular, however, become poisonous” (JA: 22; JE: 22).

The implications of Adorno's argument in *The Jargon of Authenticity* reach far, for one of the commonplaces of the self-justification of biblical criticism and theology, and one acknowledged in many other places, is that both disciplines provide the enabling conditions for a whole swathe of disciplines from literature studies to the sciences. And then there is the usual point that Western culture itself is unimaginable without Christian theology. For a criticism of Adorno's calibre, this situation constitutes not only a recognition of the importance of theology for any criticism but also a profound problem, only some of which Adorno has explored. Here the need for a theological suspicion becomes paramount, precisely at the point of secularised theology, but it also leaves wide open the question as to what Adorno wants, what role he sees for theology. If it is not to be secularised, should it be restored to its former glory, or should it undergo a thoroughly dialectical treatment that will take it to places it hardly imagined or perhaps that it really does not want to go? I will leave that question unanswered for the time being, since what I shall do now is explore what has been lurking beneath my discussion of secularised theology, namely the criticism of idolatry, or, as it has been more commonly known in critical work on Adorno, the ban on images.

## Judaism and the Ban on Images

Surely the *Bilderverbot* is immediately susceptible to the charge that



it is a form of secularised theology, drawing a motif from the Hebrew Bible and raising it to a philosophical leitmotiv. The catch is, as I suggested earlier, that the criticism of secularised theology is part of the whole *Bilderverbot* package, for it relies upon the ban itself. The ban is a more slippery notion than at first appears, offering a self-criticism of the very process of its emergence. For at the moment we suspect that we have a secularised theological notion, the ban comes into place, negating such a possibility before it comes into being.

I will come back to this problem, but first the ban on images: a prohibition on making (*'sh*) any hewn or cut image (*pesel*), it forms the second commandment in Exodus 20:4 and then Deuteronomy 5:8. Just to ensure that the ban is comprehensive, the commandment specifies that the image should not be in the form (*temunah*) of anything in the heavens, on earth or in the seas beneath the earth. More importantly, however, it follows the first commandment, “you shall not have other gods before my face” (Exodus 20:3; my translation): neither gods in the first commandment nor their images in the second commandment, nor even an image of Yahweh. But in the very proximity of the first and second commandments a slippage takes place between god and image that will become extremely important in Adorno’s own discussion.

But what interests me for now is what Adorno makes of this (and again I have supplied some of the background). Well known from *Negative Dialectics* and his thinking on aesthetics, the ban on images emerges most clearly in the anti-Semitism section of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Thus, in opposition to Enlightenment nominalism:

In Jewish religion, in which the idea of the patriarchate culminates in the destruction of myth, *the bond between name and being is still recognized in the ban on pronouncing the name of God*. The disenchanted world of Judaism conciliates magic by negating it in the idea of God. Jewish religion allows no word that would alleviate the despair of all that is mortal. It associates hope only with *the prohibition against calling on what is false as God, against invoking the finite as infinite, lies as truth*. The guarantee of salvation lies in the rejection of any belief that would replace it: it is



knowledge obtained in the denunciation of illusion (DE: 23; GS3: 40; italics added).

The echo of Benjamin's argument concerning the language of naming should not be missed here (although Adorno is more interested in the criticism of contemporary linguistic theories of communication),<sup>21</sup> but the implications run into the philosophy of language, the theory of knowledge, the nature of myth, and the nature of religion itself.

But let me exegete the passage a little further, especially the sections I have placed in italics. As for the "ban on pronouncing the name of God," he picks up the obvious point that the name of God is of course itself an image, especially a graven image, even when one has no other images of wood or stone or metal. It had been well established—by well over a millennium—by the time Adorno and Horkheimer were discussing the points of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that Gretel was noting down: every time a devout Jew came across the Tetragrammaton YHWH he would read *Hashem*, "the name." Indeed, I recall my first Hebrew teacher pronouncing *Hashem* every time we read the Hebrew Bible in his flat overlooking Bondi Beach in Sydney. One could not, for the risk of idolatry, read 'Adonai, "my Lord," even though this was itself an effort to avoid pronouncing *Yahweh*, the name of God in the Hebrew Bible. This change goes back into the very tension between consonantal and pointed (vocalised) texts, for the consonants *YHWH* appear with the vowels for 'Adonai in the oldest manuscript we have, the Leningrad Codex from the tenth century CE.<sup>22</sup>

But Adorno is hardly one to leave it at that, and so he will push the ban until it becomes "the prohibition against calling on what is false as God, against invoking the finite as infinite, lies as truth" (DE: 23; GS3: 40). Here the first and second commandments enfold each other, the

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<sup>21</sup> See Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "Adorno: The Discourse of Philosophy and the Problem of Language," in *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*, ed. Max Pensky (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> See my comments on *Qere/Ketib* in my discussion of Eagleton: *YHWH* is *Ketib*, "what is written," whereas 'Adonai is *Qere*, "what is read."



prohibition on making any hewn or cut image blending into the ban on other gods. At this point, we are clearly in the realm of idolatry: as the image that represents god becomes god (the signifying link having been broken), it then becomes possible to raise up any finite thing—in the heavens or on earth or in the waters beneath the earth—to become a deity. The catch with all of this is that it is a distinct idea of idolatry that emerges only from the Hebrew Bible, especially with its imposition, by late scribes, of monotheism on earlier texts. Let me take the example of the polemic against idols in Isaiah (40:19–20; 41:6–7; 42:17; 44:9–20; 45:16–17 and 46:1–2, 5–7): here the political satire operates on the basis that these images could not represent some deity since that deity or deities do not exist; therefore, the one who worships his or her god through the image is actually worshipping the image, for there is nothing beyond the image. Thus, he or she is a fool. Once this logic is in place, we can then move to the notion that the making of graven images is really the raising of what is contingent and not God into the place of God. This is what Adorno will not have—finite replacing the infinite, lies instead of truth, falsehood in the place of God, and, as he goes on to write, illusion instead of knowledge and belief in lieu of salvation. It is an extraordinary extension of the second commandment into a philosophical principle, in which a consistent demystification is a given, where one always hesitates to name utopia and hope, searching instead for shards in the negative: one must adhere to the “the commandment not to ‘depict’ utopia or the commandment not to conceive certain utopias in detail” (UFAL: 10–11). This is the deepest level at which Jewish thought provides Adorno with a lever outside the tradition of Western philosophy. But what catches my eye is the penultimate point in the list: “the guarantee of salvation lies in the rejection of any belief that would replace it” (DE: 23; GS3: 40). We are back in the realm of grace, but more of that later.

However tempting it may be, I am going to resist following the various paths of the *Bilderverbot* in Adorno’s work, since I am concerned with his more theological dealings. So I will focus on two instances of the ban on images, both of them drawing upon the criticism of idolatry that lies at its heart: the criticism of christology and the personality cult,





and then the relationship between metaphysics and theology.

As for christology, I have rehearsed this criticism with my criticism of Eagleton earlier in this book, but here I can finally lay out the theoretical background. Boldly put, the dialectic of christology enables the personality cult: only through the logic of the God-human, that is Christ, does it become possible to raise another human being to divine status. In other words, precisely because God becomes a human being in Jesus Christ (if we push the divinity far enough we end up with the very human Christ and vice versa), can a human being become god—not just Christ, but any human being. I need to spin this out somewhat, especially in the context of the anti-Semitism section of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

The role of Judaism would have to be one of the most enigmatic dimensions of Adorno's work, closely tied up with the ethical, metaphysical and even autobiographical absolute of Auschwitz in his later texts. Of course the Jews, along with women and nature, are the necessary underside of a Christian Europe, and it is the anti-Semitism chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that indicates the central place of the Jews in Adorno's thought. The chapter itself runs through a number of angles in a search for the reasons and nature of anti-Semitism: class analysis in which anti-Semitism is an inseparable feature of bourgeois class identity, where "today race is the self-assertion of the bourgeois individual integrated within a barbaric collective" (DE: 169; GS3: 193; translation modified); a ritual outlet of hatred whose mark is blindness and lack of purpose; an economic argument in terms of the concealment of bourgeois domination of production by scapegoating the Jews; a psychoanalytic analysis which sees anti-Semitism as a rationalised idiosyncrasy that cannot face its own mimesis of all that is hated in the Jews, and which argues that anti-Semitism is a false projection and the "morbid expression of repressed mimesis"—"If mimesis imitates the environment, then projection makes the environment like itself" (DE: 187; GS3: 212; translation modified)—as well as the expression of paranoia; and the final argument that under the modern capitalist state in which the individual is absorbed into the machinery of production, anti-Semitism becomes not an individual position but a plank in the platform of bourgeois politics. In light of the



subsequent development of psychoanalytic theory, these early efforts to understand anti-Semitism by means of a creative encounter between psychoanalytic and Marxist terms look decidedly preliminary. Lacan's constitutive exception would become a much more fruitful way of dealing with anti-Semitism in the hands of Žižek. Yet if we project backwards we can see this in the work of Horkheimer and Adorno: in their theological analysis, the image of the Jew becomes the ever-present outsider, the one who is the necessary reject that enables bourgeois capitalism to function.

Out of all of these items, I am most interested in the theological analysis. Despite the waning of religious zeal in persecuting the Jews—the motive for almost two millennia—and the consequent playing-down of religious dimensions for fascist anti-Semitism, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the vehemence of the denial of religious tradition is one protest too many. Here they make use of a very similar argument to the one Adorno elaborates in his criticism of secularised theology: anti-Semitism sublates theological factors in favour of cultural ones, but this renders those ideas and positions even more pernicious than when they were more overt. With only the external forms of religion left, with the old authority structures of theology discarded and the truth of religious claims now forlorn, the longing for a better life is transformed into nationalistic fervour, religious fanaticism finds expression in blood, soil and patriotism, and the hatred of unbelievers is unabated: “Anti-Semitism is all that the German Christians have retained of the religion of love” (DE: 176; GS3: 201).<sup>23</sup>

In the very differences between Christianity and Judaism—one that breeds hatred of the Father by the followers of the Son—lie the theological roots of anti-Semitism. The paradox is that although Christianity, in New Testament and Reformation terms that were so influential in Lutheran Germany, marks a shift from the law to a grace that was inherent in the Hebrew covenant, replacing a religion of sin and guilt, of abstract horror and duty, with one of love, it is precisely in Christianity that idolatry comes

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<sup>23</sup> So also: “The New Testament words, ‘He who is not for me is against me,’ lay bare the heart of anti-Semitism down the centuries” (MM: 131; GS: 147).



back with renewed force. And this is where christology becomes the culprit, particularly in its early formulation at the intersection of Hebrew and Greek thought.

To begin with, christology is the “pretense on the part of the finite” (DE: 177; GS3: 202), the elevation of the tangible, fleshly human Christ to divine status. In Christ, the worship of a human figure receives religious sanction. But this is only the surface of the problem, the first and most obvious step, for the more dialectical point is one that comes straight out of christology itself: to the same degree that the absolute is humanised, so other human figures may be deified like Christ. What we have is an inverse ratio: only through the humanisation of the divine in Christ does it become possible to divinise other human beings—dictators, despots, pop-stars and sundry megalomaniacs. The deep dialectic of christology gives us the logic of the personality cult, for only when Christ is most completely God—as one of the trinity, dwelling in heaven, an all-powerful creator, omniscient, the source of love and so on—only then does his humanity push its way through all the theological categories, through all of the attributes of God, and claim its presence. So also with his divinity: when the humanity of Christ is dragged to the remotest and most inaccessible point, when it can travel no further and is nature in all of its senses, then the divinity of Christ begins to show up, finally and way past its last deadline. The first step enables the second, which is where the personality cult picks up the dialectical swing, for only as a human being can Christ become God, which then sets up the possibility for anyone else. The finite stands in for the infinite, the lie for truth, the illusion for knowledge.

The immediate context of this argument is the section on anti-Semitism, particularly the Nazi proclivity for the personality cult of Hitler, but it extends well beyond that analysis to the personality cult that bedevils politics on the Left and right. I want to extend Adorno in my conclusion, arguing against redeemer figures in religion and politics, and thereby questioning the retrieval of the messianic in much political thought today. But for now my criticism moves in a different direction, namely the curious mix of insight and blindness, the exclusions generated by the ban itself of women and nature.



It is exactly at the points where Adorno can retrieve something, however paradoxically negative it may be, from the Bible and from Judaism, that he closes down other possibilities. As far as women are concerned, he and Horkheimer are the first to argue that women, like the Jews, have been systematically locked out of Western culture and society. In fact, they give as much space to how misogyny is constitutive of this status quo as they do to the Jews: “As with the oppressed aboriginal inhabitants in early national states, or the colonial natives whose organisation and weapons are primitive compared with those of their conquerors, or the Jews among the ‘Aryans,’ women’s defencelessness is the legal title of their oppression” (DE: 110; GS3: 130–31). Notice here the extraordinary conjunction of colonialism, anti-Semitism and misogyny, well before any postcolonial criticism (I will of course emphasise at this point the ability of Marxist analysis to make such connections). But—and this the genius of Adorno—theological issues are by no means secondary: such a matrix of oppression finds its ideological justification in the Lutheran emphasis on the Word as the essence of the Gospel, which “equates spiritual freedom with actual oppression” (DE: 110; GS3: 130). Deviously, Christianity oppresses women through reverence (Mary), conceals a lurking and compulsive hatred for women through the notion of love for one’s neighbour, venerates the Madonna while burning witches, hides a withering scorn in the admiration of beauty.

Adorno and Horkheimer trace the bourgeois modes of control through chastity and propriety, cleanliness and appearance, puritan domesticity—all of which generates images of the demure housewife, the prostitute and the shrew who enacts her revenge in the tradition of the Furies. If they are uncomfortably sympathetic to Bachofen’s untenable thesis of a long-lost and almost forgotten matriarchate, they also look forward to debates that would emerge later, especially in a remarkable passage:

Women have no personal part in the efficiency on which this civilization is based. It is man has to go out into an unfriendly world, who has to struggle and produce. Woman is not a being in her own right, a subject



[*Die Frau ist nicht Subjekt*]. She produces nothing but looks after those who do; she is a living monument to a long-vanished era when the domestic economy was self-contained. The division of labor imposed on her by man brought her little that was worthwhile. She became the embodiment of the biological function, the image of nature, the subjugation of which constituted civilization's title to fame (DE: 247–48; GS3: 285).

If *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has become a central text in German feminism, albeit debated and critiqued as well as developed further,<sup>24</sup> it has also had a profound effect on the Greens, especially in a nation-state where *die Grünen* were one of the first viable environmental political parties. Thus in the anti-Semitism section they link anti-Semitism with the domination of nature, for one of the contradictions of anti-Semitism is that the Jew is both the agent of the alienation from nature and abject nature itself—as vermin they threaten to undo civilisation (witness Nazi propaganda films in which Jews are depicted as rats overrunning Europe in a direct evocation of the black plague). And then in another first, Adorno and Horkheimer show how women were equated with nature, the realm of animals, and that in the first division of labour along lines of sexual difference women and nature became the objects of domination: the mastery of nature, of the irrational, of the weaker, was realised in conjunction with the domination of women, which is consistent from Plato to the Church. Now the last sentence of my quotation above takes a whole new resonance: “She became the embodiment of the biological function, the image of nature, the subjugation of which constituted civilization's title to fame” (DE: 248; GS3: 285).

Yet, despite the extraordinary promise of the conjunction of anti-Semitism, misogyny and the destruction of nature, Adorno and Horkheimer cannot take the argument any further. Unlike Adorno's dialectical recovery of a biblical motif for his own use, the ban on images, they cannot work the dialectic so that there is something positive to say about either women or nature, or indeed their connection, as both Sigrid

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<sup>24</sup> See Silke and Kate Rigby Beinssen-Hesse, *Out of the Shadows: Contemporary German Feminism* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 1–17.



Wiegel and Andrew Hewitt have suggested, among others.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, their analysis still leaves women and nature locked in the position of the imaginary Other of enlightenment. And this is contrary to the logic of their own argument: the foundational exclusions of Western thought and society provide another angle, a distinct critique that is both part of the system and yet outside it.

But let me stretch Adorno here, precisely on the question of the ban on images, for it seems to me that the ban itself dialectically includes nature and women as much as the Jews. This takes place, very much in the spirit of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in the process of reworking the question of reification in light of ban on images—something that I suggested earlier is begging for an analysis in the book. Reification is of course the mutual transfer of living relations to things and the rendering of such living relations between human beings and nature as lifeless and objectified. The next step is to connect reification with the ban on images by going back to the root of the ban itself in the critique of idolatry, and here I draw in some other biblical texts from Isaiah (40:19–20; 41:6–7; 42:17; 44:9–20; 45:16–17 and 46:1–2, 5–7) where we find a dual critique of idolatry: on a more obvious level, the lifeless object is given a life of its own, while the maker and worshipper transform themselves into lifeless things. The worshipper can gain life only by submission to the idol which now imparts life. But the critique runs deeper than this, since the idol, at least in the eyes of its makers and worshippers, is meant to represent a god; it is a sensory form that mediates God to the believer. The problem is that when the shaped image gains a life that is not its own, when the symbol becomes an idol, then God becomes fixed as a static, lifeless object in the very form of the idol. Now—and it is a big now—“God” is in many

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<sup>25</sup> “However, when it comes to the history omitted from their text, when it comes to woman’s desire for a subject position, and to a speaking position located as it were on the reverse side of enlightenment, it soon becomes tangible how the dialectic is then set in motion in such a way that it is not easy to gain a secure foothold.” Wiegel, *Body- and Image-Space*, 67. Even though “Horkheimer and Adorno are aware of the exclusion of women as a condition of possibility of the philosophical discourse within and against which they work. . . women are included in this work—somewhat paradoxically—precisely by their exclusion” (Andrew Hewitt, “A Feminine Dialectic of Enlightenment?” *New German Critique* 56 (1992): 147).



respects shorthand for the non-human, conventionally understood as the suprasensory, supernatural domain beyond human knowledge. But must it not also include all else that is non-human, namely the natural world of which human beings are a part and yet engage in a profound process of transformation? This is where the criticism of idolatry gains a whole new dimension, for it applies not only to the conventional senses of “God”—indelibly stamped with a Greek ontological heritage—but to the whole non-human realm as well which very much includes nature and indeed the heavens beyond this particular globe, this third rock from the sun. Thus, in the idol, nature itself, the source of the materials from which the idol is made, becomes a static form at the moment the idol takes on a life of its own, that is, nature becomes reified. Let me now go back to the ban on images in Exodus 20/Deuteronomy 5 and recall the phrase that follows the prohibition on graven images: “whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Exodus 20:4). From here the images are drawn, the idols constructed, dead objects given life while all that is in the heavens, earth and sea become lifeless things. Idolatry then is also the process of reifying the natural world, of producing an item that becomes an object of worship, of containing, controlling and objectifying that which cannot be contained, controlled and objectified—in short, cannot be rendered a lifeless thing.

Nature has begun to make its way, albeit briefly, into the extraordinarily fruitful notion of the ban on images, but what about women? This is where the work of Christina von Braun becomes pertinent,<sup>26</sup> whose *Nicht Ich* is one of the most innovative and influential developments of the dialectic of enlightenment.<sup>27</sup> Von Braun argues that the domination and displacement of nature through an ever-increasing abstraction (in the simulacrum) began with writing and then by the twentieth century had generated a second-order reality that has completely obliterated material

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<sup>26</sup> Christina von Braun, *Nicht Ich: Logik, Lüge, Libido* (Frankfurt am Main: Neue Kritik, 1985).

<sup>27</sup> See Beinssen-Hesse, *Out of the Shadows*, 12–13.



reality. Nature, body and woman no longer “exist” as such, except as projections of that abstract *logos* that has now become “flesh.” For von Braun, bodily and fleshly resistance to such a process has shown up historically in hysteria, the female disease that marks a historical resistance to abstraction, and then anorexia nervosa as the denial of the fake/false/phallic body. What we have here, especially in light of my argument in the preceding paragraph, is a raising of the critique of idolatry and the theory of reification to yet another level. For now the ban becomes both an expression of such a narrative of abstraction *and* a necessary strategy for dealing with it, for what is banned is precisely such an abstraction, such a process of reification and therefore of idolatry. One therefore refuses, bans, the abstract, idolatrous images of nature, woman or body precisely because they no longer have any material reality.

## The Possibilities of Theology

Unlike my usual Protestant proclivity for delayed satisfaction, I have already been pushing Adorno over the line of his refusal to say anything positive. Now I am simply going to drop down low on the handlebars, leave the brakes alone and go like the wind, especially now that I have focused on his two great critical categories—theological suspicion and the criticism of secularised theology.

In fact, I do not always need to drag Adorno along, desperately grabbing doorposts and railings, on the way to some constructive suggestions, for the leftovers of a more positive Adorno lie scattered in various strategies of reading and smaller pieces of written text. In any scan of his pessimistic brilliance, the hints of promise shine all the more brightly in the gloom. I return, then, to my concerns of the chapter on Žižek, especially the questions of love and grace, but now with Adorno’s own particular cadence. Before I do, however, let me pick up the extraordinary wavering in the Kierkegaard book, the moments when the demolition machinery wavers before theology itself.

By now the overall argument of the Kierkegaard study should be





clear: theology, in this case the theology of Kierkegaard, is saturated with mythology and paradoxes and therefore constitutes a shaky basis upon which to build a philosophical system. Yet even in his relentless criticism of Kierkegaard, Adorno wavers, letting slip occasional hints that have the potential to run elsewhere, little foxes that run riot in the vineyard. These occur at moments of terminological slippage, of alternate modes of expression in which he distinguishes between Christian doctrines and Kierkegaard's transformations:<sup>28</sup> Kierkegaard "transforms (*wandelt*) the Christian doctrine of reconciliation into the mythical" (K: 110; GS2: 156); "Christ's death is for Kierkegaard not so much an act of reconciliation as a propitiatory sacrifice" (K: 110; GS2: 156); "Thus the story is mythically reduced (*schrumpft*) to a sacrifice" (K: 111; GS2: 158); "A border-guard mentality, unchallengeable discipline, the power of fascination—these the deluded Kierkegaard owes not, as he claims, to the purity of his Christian doctrine, but to its mythical reinterpretation (*mythischer Umdeutung*) in the paradox" (K: 119; GS2: 170).

The terms here suggest an alternate path—transform (*abwandeln*), reduce (*schrumpfen*), reinterpretation (*Umdeutung*)—in which Kierkegaard systematically warps theology, producing something that is at best a caricature. Passing comments that they are, they are close to his criticism of secularised theology, particularly the half-baked efforts of liberal theology to render theology relevant, to transform it through encounters with contemporary philosophy. He would rather have theology stand on its own rich tradition, but not for its own sake; rather, he espies another side to theology, for he wishes to submit theology to the same dialectical moves that he applies to everything else, namely that the "truth-content" of theology must be sought in its dialectical other without which it cannot exist or operate. Yet this truth content can be located only through theology and not be imported from outside; this entails an intense immersion in theology

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<sup>28</sup> A comparable move may be found in the slippage from the "first mythology" of monotheism to the "second mythology" of occultism or what we might now dub New Age (see MM: 238–44; GS: 271–78). For Adorno the second is far worse than the first, as with the transformation of the profundity of death under Christianity to a comic issue of hygiene (MM: 231–33; GS4: 262–64).



that locates its contradictions and then works through them. What does theology look like after its thorough secularisation in politics, now again as theology?

## Love

Let me strengthen the flow of these various hints and glimpses, now by revisiting Kierkegaard, or rather following Adorno back to Kierkegaard. For some reason, Kierkegaard continues to weigh on Adorno's mind, returning in a little known paper simply called "Kierkegaards Lehre von die Liebe [Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love]", presented at the invitation of Paul Tillich at Union Theological Seminary while Adorno was in exile in the USA.<sup>29</sup> Here the tension lies between the doctrine of love—and its outcome in reconciliation—and Kierkegaard's radical inwardness. As a profoundly inward category in Kierkegaard's hands, such a notion of love—an inner and universal *agape* that transcends carnal *eros*—could only ground itself on itself. And yet the catch is that inwardness vitiates any notion of love, for the reifications of capitalism – an insight Adorno credits to Kierkegaard—that Kierkegaard sought to overcome through the radical inwardness of the doctrine of love could only become much more vicious the more Kierkegaard withdraws. In other words, the radical retreat from the reification of social relations under capitalism expresses the deepest logic of capitalism itself: the pursuit of one's own personal agenda, the priority of the individual subject over all others, and the subsequent treatment of other human beings as objects of use and exchange, are fundamental if contradictory features of capitalism. Love becomes then a concern for oneself at the expense of others. This forms the first tension of Kierkegaard's doctrine of love: if Kierkegaard attempts to escape reification by retreating inward, desperately attempting to produce an abstract and universal doctrine of love that overcomes reification through reconciliation, then such a doctrine runs up against a subject that is reified in its very act of escape from reification. Further, the

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<sup>29</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Kierkegaards Lehre von die Liebe," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 8 (1939): 413–32; see GS2: 217–36.



doctrine itself is reified, let alone the subject to whom it pertains, based as it is on a reifying and abstracting process.

The second tension is closely related: reification begins with the transference between human social relations and relation between things, that is, commodities. In the process, commodities seem to be given life, a simulatenously fantastical and yet real process that was for Marx the fetishism of commodities. According to this logic, the solutions to the problems of capitalism may apparently be found in the living, social relations of commodities rather than in human interaction—market forces, rather than human intervention, provide the resolution. In this respect, Kierkegaard's doctrine of love—in its universalising attempt at reconciliation that is far removed from natural and physical eros—is itself a similar ideological mystification characteristic of the process of reification. It produces its own mask, its own ideology that seeks to provide a solution to the depredations of capitalism that can only be a further justification and exacerbation of those same problems. In other words, the ideological effort to overcome the reification produced by capitalism is precisely the means by which reification becomes more pernicious.

Thus, the extreme abstract inwardness of Kierkegaard's doctrine disables love's ability to reconcile both natural tendencies and social relations. Happiness and its historical conditions become impossible: secular injustice remains untouched in a classic pattern that calls for the ideology-critique that Adorno saw as one of the abiding strengths of Marxism. In the end, as I noted earlier, Adorno grants Kierkegaard a limited insight into the alienating effects of capitalism and bourgeois society, but his attempted solution provides only an ideology that pre-empted a more advanced form of capitalism.

Adorno's solution, however, is to construct an alternative theory of subjectivity that will lead into the argument of *The Jargon of Authenticity*. And for Adorno such a theory requires a properly mediated dialectic between subject and object, between human subjectivity and the historical context in which subjectivity is formed. This avoids the traps of positivist objectivism (subjectivity depends on the facts themselves) and idealist objectivism (innate principles of the mind) that characterises



Kierkegaard's system. But I am not sure that this is enough. Adorno refuses to take up the implications of his argument, and here again I want to squeeze them out, opening his lips to let the words that must be there emerge: if Kierkegaard's effort to hold onto the reconciliation at the heart of the doctrine of love fails precisely at the point where he attempts to save it—in the retreat to absolute inwardness—then what does a reconciling love look like? If inwardness is the end of love, then love must be radically collective: only here may reconciliation take place, in a collective love of which we as yet have only shards. But this is not all, for Kierkegaard's effort to salvage *agape* from *eros* through his retreat actually loses the very sense of love that is so dear to him. Implicit in Adorno's criticism, then, is a profound questioning of the separation of *agape* and *eros*, a bifurcation that runs through biblical exegesis and theology. The problem, of course, is that the Septuagint's tendency to translate all the Hebrew words for love (*chesed*, 'ahabah, *dod* and *ra'yah*) with the Greek *agape* dry out all of the moist, sensual, lusty and fleshly senses that we find in the Hebrew for some "higher" notion of love that was to find its way into the New Testament.

### Grace, Nature and Myth

But love is nothing, as I suggested in my discussion of Žižek, without grace. If we expect Adorno, like Žižek and Badiou, to seek a thoroughly materialist and political sense of grace, then we will be disappointed, for he has already foreclosed such a possibility with the criticism of secularised theology. Not that Adorno writes all that much about grace, except obliquely, but it bides its time, ready to break the door from its hinges like a cork from fizzed wine. Until that moment, we need to work our way through a cluster of closely related issues, particularly nature and myth in order to dig out the implications for grace. So, let us dip into Kierkegaard one more time, picking up, to begin with, on the relationship between grace and nature.

Adorno has, as we have already seen, much more to say about nature than grace. Let me reiterate the senses of nature that appear in the Kierkegaard book: nature is above all the state of human beings, the



result of the Fall, and then the whole realm of non-human nature which is also fallen, characterised by timelessness and abstractness. The image that Adorno's text conjures up for me is of the dank and damp swamp, the cloacal zone of the feminine (Eve was after all responsible for the whole mess), of wetness and fecundity, of carnal passions, of mossy corners hidden from the sun from which one desperately seeks some form of rescue. Out of the murky realm of such nature arises myth, particularly the bleak myths of the self-sacrifice of a treacherous and violent god, of submission to fate, of the vengeful god who demands the payment of death for sin, of the still largely unknown excesses of the Orphic mysteries, and above all of the gnostic rescue from evil nature. Such nature is a timeless moment of proto-history, for which myth then becomes the most appropriate expression (K: 54; GS2: 80). Or at least this is how Adorno characterises Kierkegaard's sense of nature: Kierkegaard perpetually tries to rescue Christianity from nature only to have it fall back into nature.

Nature is none other than hell. But how does hell appear in Kierkegaard's texts, given his aversion to such mythical notions? Adorno zeroes in on the spiral of despair, which lies at the heart of Kierkegaard's doctrine of existence and which was to become so crucial for existentialism later on. In an extraordinarily terse section (K: 120; GS2: 172), Adorno argues that despair emerges as the key term in Kierkegaard's notion of reconciliation, shedding on the way both passion and more remotely the theological category of sacrifice. But reconciliation has by this time left the scene in a hurry, hand in hand with sacrifice, and so all Kierkegaard can do is call on myths of rescue, which materialise out of the gloom in futile efforts to raise us from our absolute, individual despair.

I have still not quite answered the question concerning hell: for Adorno, not only does despair cry out for myths of rescue, but despair itself relies on the ontology of hell, which is itself inescapably a mythical notion. All we need to do here is recall the Greek Hades, the figures of Sisyphus and Tantalus (K: 83; GS 2: 119), and especially the absolute dualism of Zoroastrianism and gnosticism for which hell is not some separate realm of fire and ice into which we might slip from our everyday



world but rather this world itself, for which “nature” is the prime term. Despair then becomes the existential despair of hell, the despair of damnation, which is *produced by our entanglement in nature*.

Despair is hell, which is in turn the state of being jammed in nature: from here Adorno will finally get to grace. Now I want to pick up the briefest hint, a single phrase in fact, as a lead in to grace. This remarkable moment comes in the anti-Semitism section of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where grace as “undeserved salvation” shows its face. The sentence reads:

For Christian anti-Semites, truth is the stumbling-block, truth which resists evil without rationalising it, and clings to the idea of *undeserved salvation* against all the rules of life and salvation which are supposed to ensure that blessed state’ (DE: 179; GS3: 204; italics mine).<sup>30</sup>

In other words, only by denying the truth of Christianity can anti-Semitism exist, but what catches my eye in this sentence is the phrase “undeserved salvation.” In two words, Adorno and Horkheimer capture the essence of grace—something that took Žižek almost three books to identify. As I emphasised in the last chapter, grace concerns what is undeserved, unexpected and comes from completely outside the system—there is nothing that we can do to earn it or bring it about. And this, for Adorno and Horkheimer, runs against what Badiou would call the Order of Being—the effort to provide some kind of human assurance of salvation through commandments and statutes, earning salvation through good works (the Law and ethics), a denial of truth that is the sad story of the institutional claim that salvation comes through doctrinal adherence and correct ritual. What is stunning about this argument is not merely the positive space given to Karl Barth among others but also the equivocation regarding the Christian roots of anti-Semitism. Although Christianity can provide the logic of the personality cult, lead to totalitarian dictatorship and the valorisation of self-denial, it also has within it a truth that denies anti-Semitism.

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<sup>30</sup> Over against the apparatchiks of the institution who “rejected this knowledge and persuaded themselves with a heavy conscience that Christianity was their own sure possession” and thereby ended up affirming “their eternal salvation as against the worldly damnation of all those who did not make the dull sacrifice of reason” (DE: 179; GS3: 203).



And that truth is the notion of grace: the call from the non-human, beyond our knowledge and expectation, and our response is not to accept or reject such a call—the call is so overwhelming that we cannot reject it—but to live up to the burden of the call, to a heavy and often unwelcome task that is beyond ourselves.

Surely Kierkegaard, oozing Lutheranism, would make such grace central to his system. Not for Adorno, who traces a tension between what we might call the problem of “spirit” (the tension between supernatural and natural) and the problem of nature (the dialectic of salvation and damnation takes place within the realm of nature). Or, if I put it in terms of salvation itself, then the tension lies between a supernatural rescue and a rescue from within nature. The problem with all of this is the absolute devaluation of nature, the zone of both a mythical hell and an equally mythical rescue: thus, if redemption comes from outside, it must try, with the engines at full throttle and the tow rope straining to breaking point, to drag the individual from the clinging mass of nature and into the realm of freedom. But for Adorno, the only possibility for such a rescue in Kierkegaard’s thought is by means of “spirit,” a thoroughly gnostic redemption in which spirit releases the individual spark from the evil prison of nature. And the fact that such redemption is mythical means that it cannot escape the terrible pull of nature: myth is, after all, characteristic of nature itself.

So much for the problem of redemption from outside nature, but let us see what happens with the second problem, the dialectical tension between salvation and damnation within “the mythical fundament of nature itself” (K: 58; GS2: 86). For Kierkegaard, redemption also comes from the deepest point of objectless inwardness, where at last spirit and freedom may be found. Or, to put it in different terms, it is by taking hold of nature through clarity about the despair of damnation that enables the individual to reach beyond despair. Now, this is remarkably close to Adorno’s own dialectic (or should I say Adorno’s dialectic is strikingly close to Kierkegaard’s?), at least in form: does not Kierkegaard push the dialectical pole of human nature as far as it will go, deep into inwardness, only to find there the first glimpse of redemption? Adorno will have none of



it, for this is nothing other than trying to lift yourself off the ground by grasping your own belt; the only result is to drive your pants way up your crotch and leave you firmly on the ground (that is, nature). The reason of course is that if nature is as thoroughly hellish as Kierkegaard holds, then there is simply no possibility of redemption from within nature. His perpetual recourse to myth is the clearest signal of such a failure, and so the theological categories of damnation and salvation become the mythical ones of ruin and rescue.

Adorno never tires of whipping the camouflage off Kierkegaard's theological arguments and finding myth ready to spring out, net at the ready to snare Kierkegaard's every move. The assumption here is that myth is everywhere baleful, that it rises from the swamp of nature ready to suck the foot of the unwary into its suffocating realm. On a first count, I am not at all sure that one can separate theology and myth so readily; indeed, Adorno himself takes them at times as a pair that cannot live without the other, but then at other moments he suggests that theology can actually stride out on its own, freed from the traps of myth. In the end, I am not so interested in the intricacies of the relationship, so let me put it bluntly: theology is always and inescapably mythical, for does it not at its heart concern a mythical narrative all the way from creation to the eschaton, with the odd crucifixion and resurrection thrown in? Either this means that theology is doomed to falter and slip at its every step, or myth is not necessarily the irredeemably negative category that Adorno and Kierkegaard assume it to be. My preference should by now be clear.

What is good enough for myth is good enough for nature, and here again I want to look the Minotaur in the eye—rather than grasping its horns and wrestling it to the ground—and bring it with me, following the thread. It seems to me that Adorno assumes all too readily, at least in the Kierkegaard book, a position that consistently underlies his all too tight analysis of Kierkegaard, and that is the doctrine of original sin. Lurking in the shadows of Adorno's discussion, original sin vitiates and warps Kierkegaard's arguments in what I would like to describe as a leakage between anthropology and the doctrine of creation, or cosmology: original sin, should one accept such a doctrine as theologically viable, is





first and foremost an anthropological category. Human beings sin and so are fallen: human nature is therefore a fallen nature; we live in a state where our sin constantly forestalls the full realisation of our human life, especially in its communal and collective forms. In itself, something may in fact be retrieved from such a position, albeit not in its full-blooded Augustinian form. But the problem arises when in a moment of human hubris or anthropocentrism we assume that such a fallen state applies to non-human nature, that there is some leakage from our very human problems and concerns to all that is other-than-human. I think here not of the profound inter-relations between the various species and the natural environment of which we are a part—that is obvious—but of the transfer of a distinct human moral status to the natural world. This is Kierkegaard's problem, and although one may find many a Reformed thinker following the same line, it seems to me not to be a consistent Reformed position (I will come back to this in a moment). Hence nature as hell, as both fallen human nature and fallen nature as a whole, as the realm from which one seeks to escape.

In response to such Lutheran assumptions of both Kierkegaard and Adorno, I introduce a point that is implicit within Calvinism: rather than chaining nature to evil, hell and original sin, we should insist *that nature, that is creation*, is grace. I cannot emphasise enough that creation is not merely a manifestation of expression of grace, but that it is grace itself (in the same way that Calvinism argues in a dialectical *tour de force*, that the Law is itself grace). That this has profound implications for the discursive category of nature hardly needs to be said: if grace is the irruption of the non-human into our everyday world, into the Order of Being as Badiou would put it, then that non-human is not restricted to God, but includes nature itself. Nature is then less an inert or passive realm open for human appropriation and exploitation, nor indeed is it warped by the imputation of the anthropological notion of original sin: rather, it takes on a distinct and diverse agency, the realm from which a completely unexpected, undeserved and perhaps undecipherable—at least in terms of human language—breakthrough may come. Adorno



makes a beginning in this direction with his identification of natural beauty in *Aesthetic Theory* as the totally Other that cannot be subsumed in an anthropocentric agenda. But the sense I am pushing here is not some mystical, spiritual or New Age notion of agency, but one that is quite specifically political. I will leave my comments at this tantalising point, save to suggest that this is a dimension of a materialist grace that neither Badiou nor Žižek consider, for the very materiality of nature provides a whole new angle on what a materialist, political grace might be.

## Conclusion

I hardly need to repeat what I wish to draw from Adorno—theological suspicion and the criticism of secularised theology—and there is little more that I want to write about them here. I have tended to treat them separately, theological suspicion maintaining its vigilance in the arena of theology itself and the criticism of secularised theology ready to cut down any foray outside, any effort to draw theology out of its cosy, fire-lit lounge-room full of the memorabilia of millennia. But the two do not always observe the imaginary line that separates them, for theological suspicion may also be the suspicion of secularised theology. The swell of yet another wave of political theology today, now concerned with the legacy and possibilities of Paul's epistles in the New Testament, suggests to me that we dispense with both elements of Adorno's approach at our own peril. Indeed, this resurrection of political theology renders both items extremely relevant today. One response is to dive in to the debates, searching for a viable political direction when all other possibilities seem to have withered, absorbed yet again by capitalism. Badiou may want a militant Paul of materialist grace, Žižek may desire a Paul of political love, and then finally of grace as well, and Agamben may watch for the messianic moment first identified by Paul. Or we may take a stand against all of this and search for a thoroughly de-theologised



politics, a call that Moreiras makes in response to Badiou and,<sup>31</sup> or that Albrecht Wellmer makes in seeking to root out the last theological residue in Adorno's work.<sup>32</sup>

It seems to me, however, that another possibility emerges from Adorno's criticism, but before I comment on that, let me return for a moment to unrelenting negative side of what I have described as his vacillation, his thorough demolition job on Kierkegaard. Recall for a moment the double move, from demythologising to history and then alternatively paradox. At this point, Adorno felt that he had Kierkegaard's system disintegrating under its unbearable tensions, the result of a failed dialectic. Somewhat later, in the lectures on metaphysics, Adorno points out that such a strategy has its flaws: "in general, one does not understand philosophy by eliminating contradictions, or by chalking up contradictions against authors—there is no significant philosophical author who could not be convicted of this or that contradiction. One understands a philosophy by seeking its truth content precisely at the point where it becomes entangled in so-called contradictions" (M: 53).

What are the implications of this quotation for my reading of Adorno? To begin with, I have explored that other side of his own work, the perpetual fascination with theology that would lead to some extraordinary glimpses of another dimension he himself refused to explore. And so, drawing out the logic of his arguments, I dared to make a run with such items as faith and love (a collective reading that takes off from

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<sup>31</sup> Alberto Moreiras, "Children of Light: Neo-Paulinism and the Cathexis of Difference (Part I)," *The Bible and Critical Theory* 1, no. 1 (2004): 1–16. <http://bibleandcriticaltheory.org/index.php/bct/article/viewFile/15/3>; "Children of Light: Neo-Paulinism and the Cathexis of Difference (Part II)," *The Bible and Critical Theory* 1, no. 2 (2005): 1–13. <http://bibleandcriticaltheory.org/index.php/bct/article/viewFile/28/15>.

<sup>32</sup> Wellmer argues that Adorno's reliance in the notions of reconciliation and utopia are theological and metaphysical pieces in his work and need to be eradicated. He suggests taking up Adorno's notion of the sublime in order to locate the liberating force of linguistic meaning in the context of inter-subjective relations rather than the redemption of an alienated nature. See Albrecht Wellmer, "Adorno, Modernity, and the Sublime," in *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*, ed. Max Pensky (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1997), 112–34. See also Wellmer, "Metaphysics at the Moment of Its Fall," 41–42.



## Criticism of Heaven

the criticism of Kierkegaard's radical inwardness), and particularly with grace in relation to nature and myth. Yet I may appear to have transgressed, to have returned to theology and left myself wide open for Adorno's theological suspicion.

However, like Adorno I want neither to hold, however surreptitiously, onto an impossibly pristine theology, nor indeed to search for some new mode of secularised theology that will rescue us from our political predicaments. Rather, I want to ask what Adorno means by stating that theology, and indeed philosophy, must seek "its truth content precisely at the point where it becomes entangled in so-called contradictions" (M: 53). My suggestion, or indeed answer to this problem, is that theology must be allowed, or perhaps encouraged, to run its dialectical course. And this path is one that has been overwhelming in nearly all of the critics I have discussed in this book, namely from theology to politics. But what if we take this dialectical track to its logical end, moving all the way through the political to see what theology looks like at the other end?



## Conclusion

In winding my way through the variegated critics in this book I have, while criticising their positions in some detail, collected a range of items in a large pack slung on my shoulder. Patiently they have sat there, jumbled in with one another and awaiting the time for their own emergence. Now, in a peaceful corner, it is time to lay them out on the table, to sort and arrange them into a somewhat coherent position, or at least the beginnings of one.

There is, however, another question I must face before undertaking such a task, one that I have mentioned before: the move from theology to politics, or as it is sometimes called, the secularisation of theology that we apparently find everywhere around us. This question touches directly on the new wave of contemporary debate over neo-Paulinism or the political theology of Paul with which my chapter on Žižek and (as it turned out) Badiou is something of an engagement. Into the flurry of this debate, which has no signs of abating or being resolved, come, among others, Giorgio Agamben, Eagleton in his own way, Jacob Taubes's posthumously published seminar on Paul's political theology, Alberto Moreiras and even E.P. Thompson.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of this debate lies the famous assertion by Carl Schmitt that "all significant concepts

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<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (translated by Patricia Dailey, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Moreiras, "Children of Light: Neo-Paulinism and the Cathexis of Difference,"; Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. D. Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast*.



of the modern theory of the state are secularised theological concepts.”<sup>2</sup> That the conservative Schmitt would go on to elaborate the idea of the exception in jurisprudence as “analogous to the miracle in theology”<sup>3</sup> is also well known, but Schmitt has, well before the current wave, identified the problem which might be cast in the form of a question: is all political thought secularised theology, with the result that we should stop kidding ourselves and return to theology?

Adorno’s criticism of secularised theology will always hang very low over any position like this, so how do Schmitt *et al* avoid his criticism? What we need to do, they suggest, if we are to be honest with ourselves is reverse the flow, running not from theology to politics but in the other direction, from politics back to theology. Yet, apart from playing an apparent trump—behold, it is all theology in the end!—all we end up doing is engaging in a theoretical house search, identifying the whiff of theological corpses under the beds of these Marxists, seeking either to expunge the last vestiges of such theological thinking, attributing it to a certain immaturity of thought in the Marxist tradition, or calling for a return to theology, that old queen of the sciences.

I would suggest that most of the current debate is still within the first phase of Marx’s famous dictum in 1843, that the criticism of theology must become the criticism of politics. All of the writers with whom I deal in this book are very much within this first step, however much they may try to move past it. Except perhaps for Adorno, although he never really gets past suggesting what we should do without actually doing it himself. And my reading of Adorno’s statement, reiterated more than once, that we ought let the dialectic have its head and seek the truth content of theology by this means, is that the move from theology to politics should be allowed to run its full course, to push through to its dialectical extreme. Only from here can a full engagement by Marxism with theology take place. The burden of my conclusion is to explore the initial implications

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<sup>2</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*



of *this* challenge from Adorno.<sup>4</sup>

For what we will end up with is not merely a political theology, as a youthful Althusser and Eagleton have sought at various moment, or as the liberation theologians continue to do. Their agenda has been to bring together Christian theology and Marxism, whether the metaphor is one of dialogue, mutual insight, antagonism or the demarcation of spheres of competence (the one is better for analysing social and political systems, the other more adept with questions of transcendence and salvation). Instead, as Žižek has suggested but has not, to my mind, carried through in any consistent or thorough fashion, it is only through a thorough materialisation, through the full materialist move, that the possibility of theology begins to emerge. In fact, the form of my argument relies not merely on Adorno, but also on the long tradition of theological reflection concerning transcendence and immanence. For it is only through a radical immanence, through completely embracing immanence and all that it entails, especially the contingent, earthy and material nature of our existence, with its riot of birth and death, eating and shitting, that transcendence comes into view, that it becomes possible at all. So also, only when we take transcendence to its extreme, rendering the break between what is eternal and contingent, between omniscience and stupidity, when God becomes so distant as to be unknowable, unreachable, and inconceivable, does immanence enter into the picture.

## Theological Suspicion

I have gleaned three key categories from my earlier discussion, namely theological suspicion, revolutionary grace, and myth. Let me start with what I have called Adorno's theological suspicion, one of his strongest contributions to a materialist theology (although he may well not have thought of it in this way). Here I want to develop this theological

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<sup>4</sup> For a much fuller statement that develops the points below, see my *In the Vale of Tears: On Marxism and Theology*, Historical Materialism Book Series V (Leiden: Brill, 2012).



suspicion further, bringing together items from the others, particularly ideology (Althusser), everyday life (Lefebvre), idolatry (Adorno), redeemer figures (Adorno), and the interpretation of sacred texts (Bloch).

As I pointed out in my discussion of Adorno, theological suspicion cannot in the end be separated from his criticism of the various secularised theologies that he found rising up from the ground around him, particularly with Heidegger and existentialism. The path that such secularised theologies take—emptying theological categories one after the other of their theological content and reworking them as the basis for philosophical and political reflection—raises questions about the arguments of some of those I have discussed in this book. Eagleton and Žižek are chiefly guilty here, but the tendency also lies behind some of the work of Bloch, Benjamin, and Althusser. It is one of the reasons I have not been content to remain at the level of assessing the viability or otherwise of such moves. Hence the exploration of what a materialist theology might look like.

## Ideology

However, the preliminary question for theological suspicion is that of ideology itself, which is of course raised by the close connection between theological suspicion and ideological suspicion. At this point I need to return to my discussion of Althusser, particularly in relation to the various elements of a materialist philosophy of religion. In that section I argued that the critical reading of Althusser's most famous essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," comes to a close prematurely with the material on interpellation: it is in fact the final section, the so-called "religious example" that brings his argument to an end. I do not want to rehearse my whole argument here, except to pick up a few points that I will develop. There is little mileage in a couple of possibilities that arise from Althusser's work: first, given the theological basis of his theory of ideology we might return to theology in response; second, theology and religion more generally are nothing more than ideology, a particular form of ideology that Althusser would elsewhere characterise as a "practical ideology." Both tracks soon become overgrown and impassable. As I argued in





that chapter, Althusser's own reflections move well beyond either option, although at times despite himself.

It is not merely the case that religion—and remember that Althusser speaks in terms of the philosophy of religion—is a particular instance of the eternal and material definition of ideology, for the practical ideology of religion operates not in a vacuum but in the conflictual terrain of the ideological state apparatus of religion. The value of such an argument is precisely the question of conflict. Even if we leave aside the specific terminology of Althusser—although it is very useful—the point remains that religious institutions of whatever type are not sites of instrumental reason pure and simple, not the locations for the inculcation of a particular ideology: they are the sites of perpetual ideological conflict and tension.

Anyone who has spent even a little time in a particular ideological state apparatus such as one of the many Christian churches, or perhaps one of the myriad branches of Judaism, will be familiar with the terrain: one's greatest enemies are those in the local congregation, or perhaps another denomination (for evangelical Protestants, the pope is the AntiChrist, while for conservative Roman Catholics every other denomination is not the true Church); the battles will often be fought over crucial issues such as the way communion is celebrated or the cleaning roster. Petty struggles for power between a few individuals generate lifelong hatreds. Rather than put aside such squabbles when larger questions loom, these arguments turn out to be on a continuum with the schisms over practising gay and lesbian members, or more importantly of clergy themselves. Or if one dares introduce a Left magazine in the youth program, called perhaps "The Tribune" with the slogan "Better Red than Dead," then the ire of parents will manifest itself in a stern suppression by the chief religious professional in the congregation. As Lenin was fond of saying: God help us in dealing with our friends, for we can deal with our enemies.

I might go on, drawing ever closer to personal experiences, but my point is that a religious institution like the Church, which Althusser recognises



as a major ideological state apparatus in all its myriad forms—whether declining in established forms in the West or growing exponentially in Africa, South America and other locations outside the fading imperial locus of the Atlantic—is a site of profound and important ideological conflict. This is one of the main reasons Gramsci was interested in the workings of the Roman Catholic Church, as both a specific Italian institution and a global phenomenon. The issue then becomes not one of dispensing with an ideological apparatus like the Church—for the effort would have as much success as abolishing education or the family in all its forms—but of engaging in the ideological battles which are in fact crucial. But these battles do not take place in isolation: the ideological debates will be specific forms of those that appear in political forums, education, media and so on.

But let us go a step further than this and focus on what binds people of a particular religious tradition to that faith. For Christianity it is the figure of Jesus Christ, for Islam Mahommed, for Buddhism the Buddha, for Hinduism the specificity of the local deity in the myriad constellation of such deities, for indigenous religions such as those in Australia a complex of myth, land, ethnic identity and mythic narratives of the Dreaming. And if we follow Althusser's argument through, then it is precisely at these points that we come across the very function of ideology. According to Althusser's argument, religious ideology reveals the mechanism by which the subject is constituted: "hailed" by the Subject (deity, and then state, cause and so on), the subject realises that he or she is one of a number of subjects in relation to the Subject. The result is one that Foucault would take further in his thesis of the panopticon: through a radical process of internalisation the subject freely accepts his or her subjection and freely submits to the Subject in order to live a "normal" life.

Where does the path lead from here? Althusser arrives at his theory of the function of ideology through the distinctly "religious" argument in which the Subject, God, cannot be excised so easily. But who, or rather what is this "God"? God is at first appearances somewhat less real than the various other Subjects for whom God functions as the primary model, such as the state, or the army, or the educational system,



or the family. Althusser could not entertain, at least at this stage of his life, the notion that God is as real or unreal as these other “Subjects.” Yet that, it seems to me, is precisely the point. In this narrative of Althusser’s, God is an ideological construct, one who has been generated by the institution in question—the ideological state apparatus of the Church—as the necessary sign of its own power, but also in a more sophisticated fashion as the glue that holds together the ideology and its institutional location. And this figure is crucial to the very idea of ideology and the constitution of individuals as subjects. Now, on the one hand, the same must necessarily apply for the other “Subjects,” for like God they stand in as place-holders, as necessary fictions, if you like, in order to make the system work. These Subjects are as necessary to the function of the ideological and institutional makeup of the respective apparatuses and yet they are at this level as unreal as God. But we need to go one twist further, for such an argument does not render God or the other Subjects somewhat ethereal and other-worldly. Rather, in the same way that Christians can grasp the dilemma of the simultaneous artificiality and reality of God and say, “This is the God we worship, this particular ideological construct that is indispensable both to the Church and to my very existence as a subject,” so also people at other moments, in other ideological apparatuses, can say “this indispensable ideological construct, this Subject, is as real and concrete as God.” Only in this way, it seems to me, through such a necessary fable, is it possible to begin to make sense of the function of the non- or supra-human.

### Everyday Life

There are two directions in which this argument may run, particularly in terms of those I have discussed in this book. The first is Lefebvre’s notion of the quotidian resurrection of “religion” in our everyday words, actions and interaction, and the second lies with Adorno’s ban on images, or as I recast it, his critique of idolatry. As for Lefebvre, let me pick up my exegesis of a couple of paragraphs from his *Critique of Everyday Life*. The sentence on which I focus plays out the dilemma I traced in



Althusser between the ideological construct and reality of Christian belief and practice, that is, between its artificiality and concreteness. Lefebvre appears to come down heavily on the side of the first part of the contradiction, stressing the ideological construct of Christian belief and the Church. In his perpetual polemic against the Roman Catholic Church, and Christianity more generally, Lefebvre sets out explicitly to condemn the stifling, kill-joy nature of Christianity. Thus, he loads up the side of the ideological construct with unremitting venom. However, my point is that he unwittingly gives voice to the other side as well, particularly in terms of everyday life.

The sentence in question reads: “In this way the illusion by which religion deceives us (that vain and ever-broken promise of community, of the power to act) tends to be born again with every action in our everyday lives” (CEL: 226). While at first this looks like the classic Marxist ideological criticism—in which ideology is false consciousness and needs to be stripped away to show up the real social conditions of such an illusion—the last phrase opens out on the other side. Religion (as illusion of course) is “born again with every action of our everyday lives.” I shall not repeat the detail of my discussion in the chapter on Lefebvre, save to point out that although he insists that the religious observance of the Roman Catholic Church is an imposition from without, one that “penetrates everyday life” (CEL: 225), his arguments suggest another possibility, namely the persistence and influence of religion from within the very structure of everyday life. And by structure I refer to the ideological and cultural dimensions of particular forms of political economics.

Lefebvre provides a more down-to-earth analysis of Althusser’s discussion of theology as ideology—and this despite Althusser’s effort to resort to various narratives of interpellation in the street or being addressed by God on one’s knees in church. For the various religions are ideological constructs, “illusions” to use Lefebvre’s terms, and yet their very strength lies in the inescapable and all-pervasive realm of everyday life. Lefebvre’s examples are part of this myriad pattern: an insult, a wish, a greeting, thanks, a propitious phrase, an *Adieu* when we part; or in English, farewell,



goodbye, may God be with you, God bless, God willing and so on. It is precisely here that the concrete material reality of religion manifests itself.

## Idolatry

The second direction to be followed from my discussion of ideology is that of Adorno's criticism of idolatry, or as it is more well known, the ban on images. The second commandment, the prohibition of graven images, becomes in Adorno's hands a philosophical strategy that runs its way through his reflections on utopia, music, aesthetics, philosophy (especially the concept itself), and also theology, whether secularised or liberal. But the ban has at heart the question of idolatry, which came to rest, for my discussion at least, with the criticism of secularised theology and the recurring problem of redeemer figures, or the cult of personality to which both Left and right are prone.

In Adorno's hands, the problem of idolatry puts paid to any attempts at secularising theological concepts or arguments. The reasons I have outlined in some detail in my chapter on Adorno, but they boil down to the appropriation by philosophy and other disciplines of the authority structures of theology while chasing theology off the field. With its institutional structures and the theoretical dependence on divine transcendence, omnipotence, and omniscience, theology is bad enough, but at least you know where you stand. However, once the ostensible content is gone, the institutional structure shifts elsewhere and God's authority takes up its abode in the realm of theory. The same criticism applies to fully secularised theologies such as those of Heidegger, as well as to the efforts of liberal theologians like Paul Tillich, a close friend of Adorno. For liberal theology becomes a halfway house to secularisation, dispensing with most of the major doctrines of Christianity while still holding the faith, in some sense at least. The criticism is also pertinent for Žižek, Badiou, Benjamin, Eagleton, and even Althusser.

What are we to do then? Resist secularised theology in whatever form and insist on the integrity of theology itself? This would involve returning along the track that all of the writers in this book follow in one



sense or another—that from theology to politics—and would get us nowhere. And Adorno hardly found that Kierkegaard's theology, no matter how subtle and complex it might be, was an avenue that led anywhere. Two possibilities open out from Adorno's argument. First, theological suspicion actually belongs to theology itself, that theology must be subject to the most rigorous suspicion of all. Second, we should push secularisation to its dialectical conclusion, and the result of that move will turn out to be something like my discussion of Althusser on ideology a little earlier: a religion that is thoroughly secularised, or rather beyond secularisation, is one that is fully ideological, one in which the patterns of belief, institution, and practice are seen as a complex ideological structure. Only with the full realisation of both the purely ideological and the concrete nature of religion can we begin to make any sense of religious commitment.

### Redeemer Figures

Let me pick up one example where such a suspicion has an urgent task, namely the question of redeemer figures. Of course, this goes to the heart of Christianity, but also the religions in which a crucial prophet or founder plays a role, especially Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that despite Christianity's efforts to overcome the law with grace, to replace a religion of duty with one of love, the worship of a human figure, Jesus, sees the return of an idolatry that Judaism worked so hard to overcome. In Christian doctrine, already evident in the New Testament, Christ becomes the fleshly embodiment of the divine. The logic here is exactly that of idolatry: while the human figure is a representation of, or points towards, God, he all too soon becomes God and we worship that representation as God.

The criticism comes from Adorno and Horkheimer, and I have already used in order to question Eagleton's heavy reliance on Christology in his recovered political theology, as well as Žižek's amalgam of the supposed sayings of Jesus from the Gospels with those of Paul. But Christ is also important in Bloch's work on the Bible. For Bloch, Christ is an insurgent,



a revolutionary who has been tamed by the Church, one who undermines the grand theology of a God on high. We do not need an overt championing of Jesus Christ to stumble over the problem of redeemer figures: Benjamin's favouring of the messiah, especially in what is in many respects an apocalyptic theory of history, runs the danger of falling foul of the criticism of Adorno and Horkheimer, although the enigmatic and elusive messiah of Benjamin's writings may avoid the trap.

However, unless I were to take a theological stand against idolatry—it detracts from God in some form of false worship—there is nothing apparently wrong with resorting to messianism or indeed redeemer figures like Christ. The point of Adorno and Horkheimer, however, is that the logic of Christology is itself problematic. For the theological development of the Christ—the two natures, fully human and fully divine, one person in the Trinity—functions as a “pretense on the part of the finite” (DE: 177). It is not simply that the divinization of one human being enables a similar move for others. Rather, what we have is an inversion: the humanisation of the divine and eternal Christ enables the deification of other human beings. The most sophisticated and dialectical forms of Christological reflection manifest this process most clearly. According to this line of thought, we must stress how fully human Jesus in fact was against any gnosticising tendency to denigrate his humanity (he was merely clothed in human flesh which did not affect his true nature as God) in order to attain a sense of his divinity. Only by going to the full extent of his humanity, down to his physical functions (he did in fact have an anus), limited knowledge of the world (he believed the world was small and flat) and universe (it was swarming with spirits and had three layers—hell, earth and heaven), can we arrive at divine nature. This is, suggest Adorno and Horkheimer, the logic whereby other human beings may be deified, made idols and worshipped. If Christ's divinity can only emerge through his humanity, just as his true and full humanity can appear only through his complete divinity, then any other human being may be divinised in the same way.

I have already explored the implications of this argument for politics, especially in the chapter of Eagleton, since he is most dependent on Christology for his political theology—a political Jesus who suffered



immeasurably for his revolutionary message and ethics. Adorno and Horkheimer develop the argument in an effort to deal with the problem of the personality cult, which turns out to be a form of idolatry that is even more pernicious than the overt one of Christianity. They have in mind not only the problem on the Left, but also its manifestation in fascism. But my interest here is with the implications for theology itself: Adorno and Horkheimer grant Christology a paradigmatic role in the development of the personality cult, and in many respects I can agree with them. For the patterns of the personality cult cannot be thought without the elaborate arguments of Christology, particularly those that were beaten out in the early years of the Christian Church through a series of controversies, ecumenical councils, and vilification of the failed options as heresies. However, the problem then is not so much with the secularisation of Christology in the personality cult, but with Christology itself. We do not even need to extrapolate from Christology to see a profound problem with the personality cult, nor is the logic hidden behind some rejection of Christianity. For in Christological reflection we find the divinisation of a particular human being, along with an elaborate intellectual apparatus, a pure form, if you like, of the personality cult. This human being is revered, honoured, prayed to, followed, continues to live in heaven but speaks to us daily, is present to us in the Holy Spirit and in the Church, and is of course worshipped.

However, although many would argue that Christianity stands or falls with the deity of Christ and all that follows in its wake—death and resurrection, salvific function, and so on—there are enough Christologies that are far more concerned with the earthly Jesus. Eagleton's is but one example among a host of liberal Christologies in which Jesus the wisdom teacher and ethical example is the prime concern, let alone the religious and political guerrilla who was executed by the standard Roman means of dealing with rebels and criminals. The divinity of Christ takes a poor second beside his earthly credentials. In my discussion of Eagleton, I stressed the point that this is the surest way to make an idol of Jesus, to render him more divine than ever, particularly in light of the logic of Christology.





Thus far I have been concerned with the nature of the redeemer figure—the two natures, if I may put it in Christological terminology—but a similar pattern manifests itself if I shift focus to soteriology, or the redemptive role of the redeemer. If we stress the divine nature of Christ, then redemption becomes an otherworldly issue—eternal life on either an individual or collective scale. Obviously this has less appeal for urgent political issues of the here and now. Thus, the human and political Christ enacts a more worldly and political redemption: in short, he becomes the figure who will lead us to utopia. At this point, it is not so much a problem of deification, but that we rely on a redeemer figure, that particular leader who will personally take us through the present turmoil to a better life, or a model who has now died but to whom we can still look up to in our own struggles. Yet, the problem with redeemer figures, no matter how human they may be, is that commitment to the leader's cause inevitably leads to adoration, veneration, and worship, and it is but a short step to the imposition of the leader's will over all who follow him, and then eventually those who do not. The imposition of this will, which all too readily moves into domination and dictatorship, relies on the narrative of former oppression and the hardship of the movement as it struggled to survive. To put it bluntly, the problem of Stalin, or Pol Pot, or Mao Zedong, or indeed Adolf Hitler, is in fact the problem of Jesus Christ.

For these reasons the Left needs to avoid redeemer figures, or as it is more commonly known, the cult of the personality. I am saying nothing new here, for it is a commonplace in discussions on the Left, although there is perhaps less awareness of the theological roots of the pattern. More importantly, Christianity, and other religions as well, need to rid themselves of their addiction to redeemer figures. Although it seems to me that Christology provides the paradigm for the personality cult, my jussive applies well beyond Christianity. It is difficult to tell whether the emphasis on Moses, Mohammed, Sidharta Gautama (the Buddha) or indeed Zoroaster is the result of the internal workings of Christology that have entered into the very fabric of our thought, or whether these “religions” have their own patterns of redeemer figures distinct from



Christianity. Rather than dwell on this problem, I want to exploit the overlap: although we do not find the full-blooded christological speculation of Christianity, yet the logic is remarkably similar. Apart from the Buddha—and even there Hinayana Buddhism is technically atheistic—neither Moses nor Mohammed is a divine figure like Christ. In various forms of Buddhism, such as Mahayana or Vajrayana, the Buddha becomes the first Boddhisattva, the one who has attained enlightenment but deigns to forego its full realisation so that he can assist others on the way. And yet these figures are a means of revelation, prophets if you will, and also of the message of redemption itself. All too human, they are also much more than human: Moses does not die a normal death but finds himself whisked away by God; and Mohammed's words themselves are held to be infallible, the direct word of Allah to human beings.

Both Islam and Judaism are at pains to maintain a sharp distinction between God and his messengers, and so at first it seems as though they avoid the problem of idolatry. Yet at a deeper level that pattern is very much in evidence: the purported words of the redeemer figure should not be questioned, for these words come from God himself. In this way not only does the authority of this figure rise a notch or ten, but anyone with a vested interest in claiming some influence will latch onto some sort of succession from the long-dead figure (apostolic succession in Christianity, the priesthood in Judaism and Buddhism, the relatives of Mohammed). Further, the redeemer figure becomes very much an elevated human being: not quite deified, the pattern of idolatry—the veneration and worship of a human figure or creation—manifests itself quite clearly.

Thus, not only should political movements avoid redeemer figures like the plague, but religions also need to lock them in the garbage bin and wheel it out on Sunday night. As I pointed out in my discussion of Žižek, this is hardly a return to religion from politics, but rather a way of taking the political reading of theology to its dialectical conclusion. Of course, my imperative raises the curious image of Christianity without Christ, Islam without Mohammed, Buddhism without the Buddha, and



Judaism without Moses—or rather, each tradition without the personality cult surrounding such figures. An impossible agenda? Perhaps. But the beginnings of an answer may actually be found in the Gospel traditions of the ban Jesus himself placed on any claim to being being the messiah. Again and again he refuses to be adored and worshipped, warning the disciples against granting him any elevated status, let alone proclaiming it to others. Given the necessary caveats concerning Gospel traditions and the constructions of early Christianity, this internal application of the ban on images is a remarkable move.

### Sacred Texts

A fourth zone in which Adorno's theological suspicion comes into play is that of sacred texts. Bloch becomes Adorno's partner at this point as well, specifically on the questions of politics and class. Bloch wrote at the period of almost universal dominance by so-called historical-criticism of the Bible, in which the triple methods of source, form, and redaction closed out any other options. One might make use of archaeology, or textual criticism, but they remained tied to the big three, whose purpose was to produce both a history of the literature of ancient Israel and then a history of Israel itself. Bloch's innovation was to ask political questions of these methods: the reason why one source was written over by another has as much to do with politics as any other reason, religious or literary; the appropriation of oral stories from the people by a scribal elite also sought to deal with protest by casting it in larger narratives of punishment for sin; and priestly redactors constantly attempted to make these texts conform to a religio-political agenda that favoured the privileged and ruling classes. In short, Bloch is inherently suspicious of the use of sources and oral traditions by those responsible for putting the larger texts and then what became the canon as a whole together.

Since Bloch's time, the dominance of historical-criticism has waned—although it remains influential—and a range of methods with overt political questions have made their way in biblical studies. I think here in particular of feminism, Marxism, ideological criticism, postcolonial



criticism, gay and lesbian studies and ecocriticism. Each is, in their way, a method connected with political practice and theory. In this light, Bloch's question needs to be asked all the more: *cui bono*, for whose benefit? For Bloch this was a question concerning alterations, excisions, and additions to the biblical texts, but the question needs to be extended to those who practice biblical criticism, and perhaps more importantly those who use the Bible in various institutional settings. I noted in my discussion of Bloch his surprise that political questions have all too infrequently been asked of one of the most politically loaded of texts.

The edge of Bloch's analysis comes down to a question of class, for the Bible is a text both of those who work and those who live off the surplus of that work. What Bloch did not do was ask whether class, let alone other Marxist categories such as mode of production or ideology, in fact existed as a socio-economic category in the political and economic context(s) in which the Bible was produced. The work that has been done in this area has been forced to begin with the basic and somewhat abstract distinction between rulers and ruled, exploiters and exploited and then develop hypotheses from there heavily reliant on models developed in other contexts. In biblical criticism, however, the issue of class remains unresolved, for the scant textual and archaeological evidence requires a heavy dose of theoretical speculation on the precise mechanisms of economic relations.

However, Bloch's point is not limited to the context of the Bible's production, however long that may have been, but to its appropriation. Thus, its ability to feel at home in peasant and worker cottages, as well as in the castles and mansions of rulers and the wealthy, says as much about the issue of class and the Bible as its production. In other words, the issue of consumption, if I may use the term loosely, is as important as that of production. The fact that the Bible can be read as their own text by both the poor and wealthy, the weak and the powerful, means for Bloch that there is something two-faced, or rather two-voiced, about the Bible, one that is not always, as he puts it, folly for the rulers of this world. On this level, he has a distinct contribution to make to the reading, telling and hearing of any sacred text, for once we begin to work with a



hermeneutic of class that takes into account both reception and production, and put on one side the dominating religious questions, then different texts come forth. And these are the ones that speak of protest, liberation, the overcoming of adversity and oppression, often as masked or underground, speaking with two voices, one that seems to offer praise and obedience to the prince yet undermines him at the same time. In short, Bloch's approach to sacred texts draws near to his strategy of the discernment of myths (see below), since of course the myths with which he deals are in part drawn from those sacred texts.

At this point the distinction I made in my discussion of Bloch between theology and biblical studies comes to the fore: in this conclusion I am mostly concerned with theology, or rather trying to formulate what a materialist theology might look like, so what is the place of biblical studies if, as I argued earlier, it has been colonised by a theology that now faces continual rebellion and insurrection by its colonised subjects? The key motif here is, if I may gloss Bloch, that the Bible is theology's bad conscience. In other words, not only must we read the Bible with a perpetual theological suspicion, resisting the theological assumptions that so readily arise from the content of the material itself, but the Bible itself also becomes a source of theological suspicion, an angle from which theology must constantly be held to account. Rather than the quaint idea that theology must keep "true" to the Bible, that it must constantly seek biblical sources for its positions (the ubiquitous "proof-texts" in even the most exploratory forms of theology), Bloch indicates that the Bible will constantly undermine and question even the most cherished of theological positions, that every theological postulate will be under suspicion precisely from these supposedly sacred texts.

## Revolutionary Grace

Alain Badiou's militant rereading of the doctrine of grace signals that its revolutionary potential has yet to be realised. Against those who would seek a fine balance between grace and the law, who argue for the



importance of ethics, Badiou's unremitting Reformed emphasis on the absolutely external irruption of grace (the truth-event) is an emphasis on which we should be reluctant to compromise.

Yes, I want to claim Badiou, somewhat perversely, as a reformer, although in a way he would find distinctly uncomfortable, let alone the reformers themselves. All the same, a paradox lurks beneath such a doctrine of grace: while it seems to me that the revolutionary potential of Calvinism has not yet found its time, I also know too well its infamous legalism and moralising.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the slogan from Romans, "not under the law but under grace" has led paradoxically to a greater emphasis on the law than ever before. I recall from my youth the ban on any work on Sundays, or indeed causing others to work. Thus, we were not permitted to do school homework, buy anything from the shop, or even watch television, for then we would be complicit with the erosion of the fourth commandment to keep the sabbath day holy and do no work. The paradox of course is that although the law was relegated to secondary status below grace, the idea that obedience to the law was a sign of God's grace meant that any wilful and continued deviation from the law was a sign that you were not a recipient of that grace.

Although I want to insist on Badiou's forthrightness concerning grace, the value of Žižek's tortuous path to realise the implications of grace is that it provides an extraordinarily useful example as to what one should avoid. As I argued in my chapter on Žižek, the three books on Christianity, with their selective reading of certain New Testament texts in a manner so characteristic of the use of the Bible by theologians, function at one level as a response to the criticisms of Judith Butler—psychoanalysis cannot provide a political position—and Ernesto Laclau—Žižek's Marxist pronouncements are highly undeveloped. Stung by the criticisms, he moves by the tortuous path through Paul and the New Testament to Lenin. But it is only when he is able to realise the full import of grace is he able to see Lenin's point: only through grace, with its absolute suspension of the law and ethics, does Lenin's actual freedom make sense, the over-riding

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<sup>5</sup> See my *Political Grace: The Revolutionary Theology of John Calvin*.



of any and every ethical and political code that there might have been.

What Žižek does on the way, however, is analogous to the Calvinists' extraordinary propensity for legalism. Thus, after his initial exploration of Badiou's work in *The Ticklish Subject*, where he tries to answer Badiou's challenge to psychoanalysis and cannot find anywhere within psychoanalysis a basis for political thought, he pursues the line of love and ethics in *The Fragile Absolute*. The ground in this book is thick with Lacan and his ideas, so much so that Žižek argues that Lacan's position in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* is the same as *agape*, which he glosses as Christian love. It does not help matters when he collapses Paul's argument concerning grace into his statements on love. Only with *On Belief* and a key section of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* does he turn his back on the byzantine pattern of law and desire, ethics and ultimately Lacan to pursue the revolutionary implications of grace. As I noted in my earlier discussion, Lacan markedly exits the scene when grace comes to the fore.

Two aspects of the doctrine of grace press forward in Žižek's belated discovery, the first its sheer externality, coming entirely from outside any known system or pattern, and the second the fact that it is beyond any human agency. At this point I will insist on the absolute need for both elements. The externality of grace—in theological terms the utter reliance on God for salvation—is of course another way of saying that grace suspends and does away with the law, ethics, and any notion of love that is tied to the law. What we may call “law,” “ethics” and “love” after grace will be (and the future tense is quite deliberate) different from anything that has gone before. But human agency is perhaps the most difficult to relinquish, and Žižek does it only in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*. Yet it cannot be separated from the externality of grace, for if grace is beyond the system, then it is beyond human influence (otherwise we are back with salvation through good works).

Badiou leaves the question of the founding moment of grace, of the act of grace itself, in the realm of fable (Christ's resurrection). I would stress far more than Badiou that it is a *necessary* fable. Of course I am intrigued by this, partly because the ground begins to shift on the



questions of the truth of and belief in such a fable (what does it mean to believe in a fable that we know is not “true” according to any of the usual canons?), but more so because the necessary fable relates to my argument concerning Walter Benjamin and the relationship between allegory and the future. Let me extend Badiou somewhat if grace is purely external (as he emphasises with the truth-event) and outside human agency (which he leaves untouched except for the presence of fable), then the only possible means for speaking about it, for representing it in some way is by means of fable, or, as I would prefer, myth. And such a fable or myth must be unverifiable, beyond any means of grasping and controlling it, in order to be both purely external and beyond the system.

We are back in the realm of myth, although not unexpectedly. The difference is that I do not want to revert to any conventional myth. Nor, as I have pointed out already, do I want to argue that Badiou and Žižek have simply not realised the full import of grace (all they need do is turn to theology more fully and their eyes will be opened!). Rather, if we take Badiou and Žižek’s materialist grace to its dialectical conclusion, then only by means of such a materialist move can the doctrine of grace realise its potential. Thus, it is a revolutionary doctrine, full of the gunpowder of political change and overthrow, but *only through its materialisation*. In other words, fully and utterly secularised, it provides a completely theological doctrine that cannot be anything other than revolutionary.

### Political Forgiveness

I have until now taken my stand with the utter externality of revolutionary grace, along with the cancellation of any human agency. And it would seem that I have thrown my lot in with Badiou’s apparent refusal of dialectics (hence his avoidance of those passages of Paul that praise the law).<sup>6</sup> However, I do not want to leave the scene at that point, pronouncing prophetically an end that none of us can foresee or bring

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<sup>6</sup> But see Bruno Bosteels’s landmark work on Badiou, in which he argues for Badiou’s faithfulness to and thorough reworking of the dialectic: *Badiou and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).





about. And rather than content myself with some imperative to watch for the moment, since it may arrive unexpectedly like a thief in the night, a better path leads to a smaller goal that may be conceivable. To use Henri Lefebvre's terminology, I seek an item from everyday life, and that is the curious notion of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a strange term, and an even stranger practice. It lands, as it were, quite unreconstructed from some future space, so much so that we hardly know what to do with it despite its familiarity in those cultures influenced by Christianity. An alien artefact from an alien space, we seem to use it in ways that hardly fit, a little like the items from the 'zone' in the Strugatsky Brothers' *Roadside Picnic*. At once impossibly utopian, for those off with the pixies, and full of the hard-nosed reality of daily life, it quite simply makes any current social form unworkable. Yet it is something we can imagine doing on a daily basis in our personal lives, and that is where I would like to begin.

The way we might think about forgiveness owes more, at least in its basic motivation, to Fredric Jameson's suggestion that what we might want to plan and work towards a particular item—his suggestion is full employment—that will in the long run have unforeseen results.<sup>7</sup> That is, once full employment is properly on the agenda, once the committees and discussions and various papers have been written, circulated, and discussed, and once the policy begins to be implemented, then eventually the fact that capitalism relies on a body of unemployed people in order to function will lead to a fundamental questioning of capitalism itself. The ranks of unemployed, under-employed and unrecognised employment (particularly women) keep wages cranked down and conditions less than they should be with the threat of dismissal. So, the demand for full employment leads to one change after another, its ramifications fanning out in ever-new directions until the system itself has altered beyond recognition.

Thus, Eagleton's emphasis on forgiveness may have similar ramifications. But I need to be very clear at this point, for the notion of forgiveness threatens

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<sup>7</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005).



to run off into a number of dangerous alleyways. Most obviously it has been and continues to be used for the perpetration of wrong done to others: the knowledge that one is forgiven, whether by others or by God (the latter is probably worse), merely allows one to continue wreaking havoc in the lives of others. Further, forgiveness has been used all too easily by the various ruling classes of Christendom to maintain power: calling on those oppressed to forgive their oppressors does nothing to overthrow the system of oppression itself. And then in the radical privatisation of religious observance under capitalism, forgiveness becomes a private affair, a matter between one's God, or one of his professionals, and oneself (Eagleton tends to slip into this mode too easily). At times I am unsure that forgiveness is the correct term, fearing that under the weight of these associations it may buckle at the knees and sprawl on the ground exhausted. Yet, I am not sure that we have any better term for the fully political sense of refraining from retaliation (pacifism is one, but it remains restricted to arena of violence and warfare).

So I will take forgiveness as that act which breaks the cycle of revenge, violence and the juridical system itself. The idea and practice of a just and fair reward for one's actions—whether for good or ill—is so much a part of the cultural and juridical ideology with which we operate that the only possible world we can conceive without such a pattern of rewards and punishments is one of total chaos. This applies as much to the notion of proper redress for exploitation as it does to the transnational giants who would seek to punish anyone who dares 'liberate' for themselves the smallest item.

Rather than pursue the question of forgiveness in generalities, let me use a particular hypothetical example. What if, after the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001, the United States government had refrained from retaliating and announced a period of introspection. After some days, the president of the United States announces forgiveness to those who carried out the daring attack and then begins to spell out the ramifications of such a decision—that the USA will completely recast its foreign policy, that the



juridical system will begin a long process of reshaping, that the need to control dwindling oil resources is no longer a concern, and so on. Of course, I am dreaming; the scenario would hardly turn out that way. But the question remains, what if?

A more workable possibility may be to put on the table that there should be a change in the cultural and juridical framework so that forgiveness, rather than reward, retaliation and punishment, gradually become the norm. At first the implications for daily life would need to be explored—how individuals in interaction with others might function at this level. This would then lead to a reconsideration of education, the process of ranking and rewarding students according to performance, and then to sport and whole idea of competition itself, then to the juridical system, economic exchange and so on. In a similar line to the one I borrowed from Fredric Jameson a little earlier—full employment—once the myriad ways in which the underlying motif of forgiveness begins to work itself out in practice, the very system itself would have undergone irreversible change.

Once again what I have done is pursue the full secularisation and materialisation of grace in order to say something about a distinctly theological idea. But the same comment applies to forgiveness as it does to grace: the full political implications could in no way be realised without such a materialist move. By this stage I hardly need to point out that although forgiveness began its journey at the other pole from grace, we are now in the same territory, for forgiveness becomes a particular manifestation of revolutionary grace, one whose outcome can scarcely be expected or foreseen.

### Materialist Ecclesiology

Yet, as I write about grace and the instance of forgiveness, Weber's problem of charisma and structure will not leave me alone: the initial charismatic moment can survive only through organisation and institutionalisation. Or, in the terms I have been using, the tension is between revolutionary grace and ecclesiology. Inevitably, the charismatic passion and fervour



abates and settles down for the long haul. In fact, if a movement cannot make this crucial transition then it falls by the wayside, a curiosity of history rather than a viable force within it. The formulation of the problem takes many forms, as in Lenin's point that the hard work begins after the revolution, when everything must be built anew.

But it seems to me that both Žižek and Badiou show us way through the dilemma of charisma and institution. Badiou's point with Paul and Žižek's with Lenin is not that Paul and Lenin mark the necessary but lamentable moment when the charisma began to fade and the structures of longevity were established: rather, the movement itself is the moment of charisma, of the truth-event as Badiou would put it. Badiou's position is more than mere reaction against Weberian dichotomy, for in both Paul's letters and the largely fictional tales of the Acts of the Apostles, the early communities of Christians come through as highly charismatic. And by charismatic I refer to the various manifestations or gifts of the "Holy Spirit"—glossolalia, healing, prophecy and its interpretation, and so on. Paul often seeks to contain the expression of such gifts in the various churches to which he writes, but the gifts perpetually run through his letters. Rather than separate, charisma is inseparable from organisation and institutional structure.

And so I turn to the question of structure. I must confess that I have never been enamoured with the institutions of religion, of whatever form. Yet, nearly all of the critics I have considered in this book deal with religious institutions, or really the various forms of the Christian Church. Apart from the non-institutional and very private Walter Benjamin and the eternally suspicious Adorno, I can make a division between those who seek reform within the Church (the early Eagleton and equally early Althusser and Lefebvre) and those who see within the Church a possible model for revolution (Bloch, Gramsci, the later Eagleton, Badiou, and Žižek). In this last group we can make one further differentiation, namely between the Church providing the source of social and cultural revolution from within its own patterns of belief and practice (Bloch, Badiou, and Žižek), and the Church as a possible model for an entirely secular revolution (Gramsci and Eagleton).



I will say a little more about each in a moment, but I should make it clear from the outset that I am less interested in the specific content of each position than in the fact that in each case the issue of reform and/or revolution comes out of ecclesiology. What is it about a religious institution such as the Church that should generate such patterns and such interest? For those who were youthful participants in the Church, the early desires and writings of Althusser, Lefebvre, and Eagleton show a classic desire for reform. It is no accident that their involvement in such processes took place in the Roman Catholic Church. Their efforts at reform had a distinctly Marxist bent, and Eagleton especially was at the centre of the movement around *Slant* that had quite an impact in England and other English-speaking countries. Their personal and political moves out of the Church and into Marxism is a pattern that manifests itself theoretically in the work of Eagleton, but also with Bloch, Gramsci, Badiou, and Žižek.

The difference between these five is the one I noted a moment ago. For Bloch, Badiou, and Žižek, there is something within the Christian Church—whether that is a particular form of belief and practice, its sacred texts, or even the ever-important model of the early Church—that can be realised only on a trajectory outside the Church. Thus, for Bloch, it is the constant strain of rebellion that comes into its own with a protest atheism in which human beings are no longer downtrodden (that is, Marxism and the communist society). Žižek has his Blochian moment late in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, where Christianity must follow its own deepest logic and divest itself of its institutional forms and beliefs in order to realise its revolutionary potential. But he also argues that both love/ethics (mistakenly) and the doctrine of grace, albeit in a materialist register, provide the perverse revolutionary core that puts Christianity on the same political side as Marxism. As for Badiou, the truth-event manifests itself in the militant cells (congregations) of the early church—a handful of people in Corinth, Thessalonika, Ephesus, Rome, and so on—where Paul is the revolutionary leader and ideologue.

Badiou also follows the other line in which the Christian Church in some way provides the model for revolutionary activity. He is after a



model for revolutionary activity and the early cells of Christians provide that for him—a revolutionary vanguard of Christianity if you like. Although Eagleton has shed his explicit ecclesial concerns with reform, his later return to theology is motivated by the desire to locate elements of the Christian tradition that provide models and theoretical possibilities for the Left. But Gramsci is by far the best exemplar of this reading of the Church. Rarely polemical, Gramsci's notes on the Roman Catholic Church are a model for detailed and nuanced analyses of religious institutions such as the Church. What interests Gramsci is ecumenism, its internal politics, the role of intellectuals and the process of reformation. The first and last points are pertinent to my discussion here. Gramsci is fascinated by, and explores the possible uses for the communist party of, the Protestant ecumenical movement, with its effort to overcome through an inclusive universalism the singular and exclusive universalism of the Roman Catholic Church. Yet, the deepest marks in his thought are left by the Protestant Reformation as a model for the communist revolution. He sought for the reasons why the Reformation was able to reach right through medieval society in all its nooks and crannies. It is not that he saw such a revolutionary movement coming from within the Church—that was the prerogative of the party—but that it provides the best and perhaps the only example he could study of both a global movement and of a comprehensive transformation.<sup>8</sup>

Badiou and Gramsci provide by far the best instances of the way the study of the Church can provide insights into revolutionary questions, glimpses at different moments of what is in effect the same institution. However, that is not my focus here, which is what these various positions might enable me to say concerning the Church itself. And that is, as I mentioned briefly above, the fact that reflection on the institution itself—what would normally be called ecclesiology—cannot avoid the question of

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<sup>8</sup> It is perhaps Gramsci's model that inspired Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri to go back to the moment when Christianity overwhelmed the Roman Empire as one model for revolution against "Empire." Diametrically opposed to the agenda of the Roman Empire, Christianity came out on top in the struggle. See Hardt and Negri, *Empire*.



reform or revolution itself. And in order to begin to make some sense of this inevitable tendency to reform (usually within) and revolution (usually on society “outside” the Church), we may begin with Althusser’s ideological state apparatus.

I have already made use of the term earlier in this conclusion, but I would like to stress again how institutions such as the Church are highly conflictual zones. Although there is certainly the repressive arm, the ecclesial police who seek to control belief and practice, in the perpetual debates, tensions, schisms, reforms, heresies and compromises the Church is perhaps *the* model of the highly contested ideological terrain that Althusser formulated with the term “ideological state apparatus.” My hunch that the Church is, or at least was, the prime instance of the ISA is strengthened by the way Althusser’s ecclesial “example” in the last section of his famous ideology essay brings the whole argument itself to a close.

But what does this mean for a materialist ecclesiology? It means that there are significant ideological debates and battles to be fought and won on this institutional ground, and that the results of those battles will have profound ramifications for ideological tensions elsewhere. It is not that such conflicts need to be generated in a harmonious and unified institution: as I argued above conflict is endemic to the institution itself. I am not interested in developing a covert plea for the viability of religious institutions, but rather to point out that this is valuable ideological terrain. My argument does of course have a personal agenda, for I know many on the Left within various religious institutions who fight these ideological battles daily. Some leave in the face of massive frustration, others move into alternative religious beliefs and practices, whereas as others stay, committed to the “fables,” as Badiou puts it, of the different religious traditions. The conflicts are over areas that are not new: environmental destruction, feminism, gay and lesbian rights, indigenous peoples, refugees, poverty, hunger and injustice, economic exploitation, the depredations of capitalism, the anti-capitalist movement and the need for a public political voice on these questions. It seems to me that the Left has more than a passing interest in the nature of such battles and how they work



themselves out, indeed that a politics of alliance between the secular and the religious Left is well overdue.<sup>9</sup>

## Political Myth

The third major category is that of myth, political myth. I take this as the realm of Badiou's fable, the necessarily unverifiable element that underlies the truth-event. But Badiou says little about this fable, and so I will draw on the others in this book to say something more, especially Adorno, Bloch, Althusser, Benjamin and Lefebvre. In particular, I am interested in the inescapable mythic background of theology (Adorno), myth and the future (Althusser and Benjamin), and the discernment of myth (Bloch). These three will, I hope, enable me to make a beginning on a properly Marxist notion of myth.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, before I dive into what is in many respects one of the most delectable questions for a materialist theology, let me approach the question of the future by means of what always seems to be the greatest barrier to the future, namely death. Is not death the point where any materialist position faces its hardest task? The usual positions are exceedingly well worn and smoothed down after years of use: against the "positive dogmatism" of Christianity we have the "dogmatic negativity" (the terms are Bloch's) of a materialist approach that has no time for any notion of an existence after, or indeed before, this spatial and temporal body. Mostly such a position is tied up with more or less dogmatic atheisms.

In the face of both dead-ends, let alone the simplistic dismissal of a topic concerning which we have no verifiable "evidence," Adorno and Bloch bring the fresh breeze of an honest agnosticism. While I am not so sure about Bloch's notion of a "life-force" that seeks a fulfilment beyond death, perhaps in some unimagined socialist community, what

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<sup>9</sup> See the much fuller development of this argument in my *Rescuing the Bible* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> For a fuller statement, see my *Political Myth*.





intrigues me is Bloch's argument that atheism by no means entails the finality of death, and that religion does not hold all the cards of death's hand. As I pointed out in my discussion of Bloch, he distinguishes between the normal act of dying as a part of life and the state of death itself, which can be the great anti-utopia, its horror the end of any drive for change and revolution. Rather than the traditional image of the resurrection to a new life or indeed the retrospection that immanent death produces, he stresses that death should be regarded as an open question for which we have no answers, a departure on a journey whose destination cannot be foreseen, whose outcome is simply an unknown. What we should never relinquish is the look forward to the *Novum*.

Adorno agrees in his own way: in his fascinating discussion with Bloch, "Something's Missing," Adorno argues that one of the key questions for a utopian consciousness is the possibility that people no longer have to die. Adorno's adherence to the *Bilderverbot* holds even on the question of death. Here I will let Adorno speak:

I believe that without the notion of an unfettered life, freed from death, the idea of utopia, the idea of *the* utopia, *cannot* even be thought at all. . . . There is something profoundly contradictory in every utopia, namely, that it cannot be conceived at all without the elimination of death; this is inherent in the very thought. What I mean is the heaviness of death and everything that is connected to it. Wherever this is not included, where the threshold of death is not at the same time considered, there can actually be no utopia. And it seems to me that this has very heavy consequences for the theory of knowledge about utopia—if I may put it crassly: One may not cast a picture of utopia in a positive manner. Every attempt to describe or portray utopia in a simple way, i.e., it will be like this, would be an attempt to avoid the antinomy of death and to speak about the elimination of death as if it did not exist. That is perhaps the most profound reason, the metaphysical reason, why one can actually talk about utopia only in a negative way, as is demonstrated in great philosophical works by Hegel and, even more emphatically, Marx (UFAL: 10; GEB: 68–69).



It seems to me that a materialist position that is oriented to the future must remain open on the question of death, that the only honest position is a utopian agnosticism that refuses to predict where the journey leads.

### Myth and Theology

We will come back to the future more generally at the close of my discussion (partly the result of the temporal nature of writing and reading), but for now the issue is the relation between myth and theology. Again it is Adorno who is my interlocutor: one of the fundamental elements of Adorno's discussion of Kierkegaard is that despite all his attempts to excise myth from theology, myth everywhere underlays that theology. Time and again, Adorno shows how fundamental categories of Christian theology unavoidably fall back into myth. For instance, the central themes of damnation and salvation, faith and prayer turn out to be, in Kierkegaard's hands, the mythical notions of ruin and rescue, superstition and conjuration. Even Kierkegaard's own distinct categories, such as objectless inwardness, existence, the spheres and sacrifice resist the step to a full philosophical theology, preferring to slide back into myth. Rather than a problem peculiar to Kierkegaard, particularly in the half-light of his Nordic heritage, I take this is a problem inherent to theology itself.

For instance (with a slight debt to Žižek who makes but a passing remark), in the vast fantasy of J.R.R. Tolkien we find a similar interweaving of theology and myth. In this work of a conservative Roman Catholic, religion is absent as an object in itself—no-one engages in any ritual or worship, professes or debates religious commitment, and the wars have no religious dimensions to them—and yet it is everywhere present. This takes place by means of a comprehensive mythical structure, from the development of a language or two, through the mythical past of Middle Earth and the presence of elves, dwarves, wizards, hobbits and men, to the melancholic narrative of the passing a greater age (that of elves, the ring and absolute evil) for a lesser one of men. But—and this is the crucial point—it is thoroughly pagan. There is not a shred of Christian



theology in the whole corpus, and Tolkien resolutely refused the notion that it was an allegory of any sort, Christian or otherwise. In other words, the conservative Christianity of Tolkien could find expression only in the details of pagan mythology. In fact, the example of Tolkien puts in relief Adorno's argument concerning Kierkegaard, namely that Christian theology cannot separate itself from the very thing that it purports to drive from the field—pagan mythology.<sup>11</sup> Of course, following Benjamin, we need to understand “paganism” itself as dialectically constituted by Christianity: only with Christianity does paganism itself become a category (which makes Žižek's effort to recover Christianity over against the contemporary paganisms highly problematic).

By now it should have become clear that I both agree and disagree with Adorno on myth in relation to theology. Initially, Adorno differentiates between Christianity and myth: the latter belongs to the realm of the various pagan materials, such as those of northern Europe (Odhin-Wódhan's self-sacrifice), fate, gnosticism, the Orphic myths of Greece and a whole range of chthonic myths, whereas Christianity tries, however vainly, to set itself over against such mythology. But this argument belongs more to Kierkegaard than Adorno, and eventually Adorno argues that Christianity itself is inherently and inescapably mythological, that its deepest doctrines are fundamentally mythical. For Adorno, such an argument is a step on the way to showing how Kierkegaard's theological system breaks in pieces on the rocky shore of the paradoxes of myth. However, Adorno assumes that myth itself is baleful, of the realm of unredeemed nature, something that must be met and negated, if that is indeed possible, or at least demythologised so that myth itself may survive. This is where I must part company with Adorno, but I do so with some other companions, namely Althusser, Bloch, and Benjamin. And what they enable me to argue is that of course Christianity is inescapably

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<sup>11</sup> The same point could be made psychoanalytically: in the fantasy of Tolkien the fantasmatic kernel of Christianity overflows. The very effort to keep his conservative Christian beliefs separate from his fantasy writing shows their intimate connection, for the symbolic universe of Christianity seeks both to deny the Real of its mythical basis and that basis perpetually threatens to break through into the Christian theological structure.



mythological, but that is precisely where its value lies for a materialist theology.

### Myth and Utopia

As I argued in my exegesis of Althusser's long footnote on the alienation of labour and his heavily theological reading of the creation narrative of Genesis, this early Althusser is refreshingly ambivalent concerning the role of myth. Initially, he suggests that myth is part of the mystification of ideology—understood as false consciousness. Myth is both the sign and outcome of alienation, and it will disappear with the end of alienation. But then he moves on to argue that myth is a temporary filler, a necessary crutch, until a fully socialist society can be achieved. Here myth becomes the necessary link between work and nature, at least until the gap between them disappears. However, the most intriguing part of his discussion comes with the final comments concerning myth as the *reprise* of alienation. I will not go over the details of that discussion again here, but the dialectical point that arises from Althusser's use of *reprise*—it is both return and repair, resumption and mending—is that the possibility of overcoming alienation, of mending the situation that gives rise to alienation, can take place only through its return. That is to say, the malevolent presence of alienation is the very condition for its passing. And myth provides us with the means of dealing with this dialectic, for in myth the dialectic of alienation plays out its various permutations.

I am drawing close to Bloch's understanding of myth, and that link becomes even more marked with Althusser's utopian notion of myth, at least in the way I have unpacked it. The key idea here is that myth conceives "a totality which has not yet attained its concept" (SH: 168, n. 252; EP1: 238, n. 252). Of course this notion also permeates Bloch's thought in its many different terms—anticipatory illumination (*Vor-Schein*), not-yet consciousness, the life-force, the dissatisfaction with imperfection and incompleteness—but with Althusser it is but a glimpse. Yet it took Adorno to point out to Bloch that he was using the ontological argument for the proof of utopia rather than of God. So also in Althusser's case,



but now with myth, which provides the possibility of thinking that than which nothing greater can be thought, to borrow Anselm's famous phrase. Of course, the missing term here is communism, which then becomes the absolute term in the equation beyond which nothing can be thought.

If at this point Althusser draws close to Bloch, at the other point of his comments on the utopian function of myth he sidles up to Benjamin. I think here of the moments when myth pushes at the limits of language, when it tries to express the inexpressible. For Althusser, this is the possibility of imagining a world without natural alienation. Not so much the alienation between transformed nature and the work that transforms such nature, but between untransformed nature and work. In my discussion of Benjamin, I argued that the very failure of his attempt to break out of capitalism, which relied in part on using biblical categories to break of the mythic hell of capitalism, actually suggests a more profound role for myth. And that role is that myth attempts to speak about a world as yet unknown and inexpressible. It does so not merely through the use of fanciful or fantastic narratives, through the creation of purely imaginary characters and stories, but through what may be characterised as an effort to draw its terms from the future concerning which it speaks. Myth is then a genre doomed to fail, as happens most spectacularly in Benjamin's disparate project, for the foothold in the future that it desperately seeks turns out to be far too slippery.

If I have made use of the ontological argument with both Althusser and Bloch, then with Benjamin I appropriate the analogical argument from theology. One of the more subtle arguments from the history of theology, it comes from the much-maligned Thomist tradition, refined as it was by Austin Farrer. In its theological form, the analogical argument begins with the usual position that in order to understand God we project certain human traits, somewhat imperfectly, onto God. Thus, if we say that God is eternal, or that he is a loving, all-powerful and all-knowing being, we use these terms by analogy with human experience. As a qualitatively different being, God's love is not



human love, God's knowledge is not human knowledge, and so on. Yet these terms assist us in understanding God, albeit partially. But the analogical argument points out that this position has the whole relationship inverted. In fact, the true situation is that we can know what love, justice, power, and knowledge might be only because they originate with God. As incomplete, contingent creatures we can know and experience these things only imperfectly, but their source is with God and only through him are they possible in the first place.

I wrote "unashamedly" above, since this is clearly an idealist argument, and yet it is to my mind a highly intelligent form of idealism, which is always better than a stupid materialism, to gloss Lenin. If I shift the argument from analogy into a temporal register, then we arrive at an argument for the nature of myth itself: the imperfect effort to imagine the possibilities of another world may in fact turn out to be the piecemeal elements from that world itself. The various items that we might begin to list, such as the end of work itself, the full recognition of sexual difference, actual (over against formal) democracy with all its debates and differences of opinion, the flowering of individual foibles and idiosyncrasies, the end of antagonism between human beings and the nature of which they are a part (Althusser's end of alienation between work and untransformed nature)—all of these may best be understood as the dimly understood and perceived elements of a utopia from which they are drawn. The example I used earlier of forgiveness, which we both know well and yet do not quite know what it means or what its implications are, is precisely such an alien category.

### Discernment of Myth

Although I have concerned myself with Adorno, Benjamin, and Althusser, at times developing a theory of myth that runs against their own explicit arguments, as well as making use of some retooled theological arguments (ontological and analogical arguments), we have Ernst Bloch to thank for the most sustained and fully-fledged theory of the utopian function of myth. However, the most valuable stone from Bloch's vast



edifice is the strategy of the discernment of myth, a dialectical reading of myth that does not throw myth out wholesale nor takes myth as a uniformly positive dimension of human culture.

For Bloch, myth is neither pure false consciousness that needs to be unmasked, nor a positive force without qualification. All myths, like ideologies, no matter how repressive, have an emancipatory-utopian dimension about them that cannot be separated so easily from deception and illusion. Thus, in the very process of manipulation and domination, myth also has a moment of utopian residue, an element that opens up other possibilities at the very point of failure. Bloch is particularly interested in biblical myth, for the subversive elements in the myths that interest him are enabled by the repressive ideologies that show through again and again.

Such a reading pertains at one level to the survival of the emancipatory dimension of myth, for without the repressive myths of power and privilege those of subversion and kicking against the goad would not be there. But at another level it points to the actual strategy of discernment itself. Where do we draw the line? For Bloch the fundamental demarcation is between myths of domination and those of subversion, between conformist and non-conformist elements within and between myths. If the former show the need for submission to greater powers, whether human or super-human, if they give voice to superstition and ignorance, then the latter concern acts of rebellion and support of the underdog. Bloch adds that joyful myths are also utopian, as are those that leave one with a sense of the wonder of nature. But rarely does one or the other turn up in a pristine state, whether of pure exploitation with no relief whatsoever, or of unrestrained liberation. Most often a myth of rebellion will end with the punishment of the insurgent; indeed, punishment becomes a marker of such myths, alerting one to look more deeply at the myth in question. Among a whole range, the most important ones for Bloch are those of Prometheus, of the serpent in paradise, of the rebellion of the sons of Korah or of the curse of Cain, as well as the grand theme of the murmuring and dissent of the children of Israel in the desert, if not their continued “apostasy” in Canaan itself. The perpetrators are punished,



but often their deed cannot be undone—fire is given to human beings, the knowledge of good and evil is gained.

However, Bloch writes almost exclusively of already existing myths, drawing from an encyclopaedic range in order to identify the utopian urge from biblical stories to detective novels. The glimpses of hope that he locates are moments of rebellion and mutiny, or a sense that this world is not as it should be. So he wishes to retrieve those fragments not merely for his theory of the grand human quest for utopia, but also as myths that continue to provide resources for hope.





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