



# The Myth of Christian Eschatology as Counter-Myth to Neoliberal Capitalist Vulgate<sup>1</sup>

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Fashionable among postmodern writers today is the deconstruction of modernist project of de-mythologizing the pre-Enlightenment religious worldview. Following Adorno and Horkheimer, postmodernists unmask the myths undergirding scientism and secularism in the post-secular world. This article, while agreeing with the postmodern trope, contends that what is missed in this critique is the pseudo-universal pretension of neoliberal capitalism as the unrivalled myth of the vulgate of globalization. Using Christian eschatology as a counter-myth, this article contends that today more than ever we need apocalyptic messianism inherent in both socialism and Christianity to practically challenge the triumphant post-Cold War myth of neoliberalism.

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In the 1960s, the German theologian and student of Martin Heidegger, Rudolf Bultmann, consistent with the modernist tendencies in liberal Protestantism, proposed that once the scientific worldview of secularization is accepted, then, Christians must de-mythologize religious language.<sup>2</sup> The argument avers that the narrative of the Bible is purely ahistorical and is unintelligible to modern readers. Postmodern writers (who recycle Horkheimer and Adorno's

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Pierre Bourdieu (1999), a fierce critic of neoliberalism, for the word "vulgate" to describe the official mantra and accepted wisdom among academics, business leaders, and policy makers about the inevitability of neoliberalism.

<sup>2</sup> Bultmann's existentialist interpretation of the New Testament, however, ended up reducing Christian message (*kerygma*) to bourgeois interiority. It is interpreted purely as a personal decision on the part of the believer.

*Dialectic of Enlightenment*) on the other hand, belatedly, now realize that such is not the case. Rather than religious language being de-mythologized, scientific language is now considered as an expression of another myth, the “myth of mythlessness.” Postmodernism makes it impossible to separate the mythical from the non-mythical. Yet consistent with its ironic logic, it “does not seem receptive to messiahs and messianism. It no longer has a place for the utopias of the poor” (Sobrinho, 2003, p. 143). This exemplifies once more the *coincidencia oppositorum* (the perverse Hegelian notion of coincidence of opposites) in late capitalism. Despite its demythologization of messianism, it simultaneously promotes new myths of postcapitalist messianism.<sup>3</sup>

Pushing this logic to the extreme, I want to explore the possibility of “re-messianization” (Sobrinho) of Christian myths in order to extract its revolutionary kernel and use it to defeat the formidable dystopian myth of neoliberal capitalism.<sup>4</sup> My argument runs as follows: capitalism has destroyed ruthlessly the myth of socialism, while postmodernism gives a death blow to utopian aspirations of Enlightenment. In the face of this “end of ideology” in our history, what intellectuals –both Marxists and Christians— should do, following Žižek’s (2000) suggestion, is to close rank with each other and reassert the revolutionary meaning of their respective myths. This is not a simple paganistic notion of recollection (recovery of eternal truth via origin) but a repetition (reconstruction of the truth in a new historical horizon). The main bulk of my argument therefore will center on why Christian messianic myth acts as a supplement to Marxist revolutionary myth and vice versa.

### **Theological Melancholia and the Fetish of “Humane” Capitalism**

With the demise of “real existing socialism,” theologians-cum-intellectuals are now mourning the death of emancipatory utopias in the twentieth century. Many of them, who are unable to come to terms with the historic triumph of capitalism yet cannot imagine an alternative system, are thrown into deep theological melancholia. Pope Benedict in his encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, joining the chorus of post-ideology intellectuals, declares apropos Marxism,

Marxism had seen world revolution and its preliminaries as the panacea

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<sup>3</sup> One such secular utopia is the “ungrounded hope” of Richard Rorty. By rejecting the longing for total revolution,” Rorty thinks that “the best we can hope for” is something that the lucky few in the rich corners of the world already have, namely “bourgeois democratic welfare states” (Rorty, 1998, p. 231). The obverse of this postcapitalist messianism is the liberal fascination of Western intellectuals about the “remarkable phenomenon” of Maoist resurgence in third world countries like Nepal. Such revolutionary utopia seems “archaic, especially in the West, where ascendancy of global capitalism has been secure for over a decade” (see Santina, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> This is also the position of Jon Sobrinho (2003), in discussing the titles of Jesus in the Gospels: “the need the crucified peoples have for utopias, messiahs and messianic hopes, or whatever, and the inaction, lack of interest, or contempt shown toward this need by the ruling system – I propose to reflect on messiahs and messianism as seen today, since messianism has always been and will be the best shock tactic for tackling the problems of the present, opening oneself to a future filled with hope... messianism is good for awakening sleeping and soporific free-market democracies” (p. 144).

for the social problem: revolution and subsequent collectivization of the means of production, so it was claimed, would immediately change things for the better. This illusion has vanished (No. 27).

The Pope's observation, that sounds much like Bush's "Preface" to *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* quoted above, is not an exception in the prevailing climate of ideology among Christian intellectuals.<sup>5</sup> No less than Leonardo Boff (1995), a leading figure in the radical reinterpretation of Christianity in Latin America and sympathetic to Marxist analysis of imperialism and colonialism, concedes, "Socialism has indeed collapsed. I am not saddened by this" (p. 93). Hugo Assmann, a prominent proponent of Christians for socialism movement in the seventies, is now pessimistic about apocalyptic end of capitalism. He considers that once the concept of a "final victory" is gone, "the challenge is to know how to live together with that ambiguity [no more revolution] and not to fall into the temptation of apocalyptic deceit. To cope with the absence of definitive solutions," (quoted in Kater, 2001) Jon Sobrino's (2003) polemical Christology from the "viewpoint of the victims" also grants that "socialism has fallen, that the revolutions in Latin America have not succeeded" (p. 6).

Unable to proffer any radical alternative and gagged by the *denkverbot* (prohibition against radical thinking) prevailing the intellectual climate, radical theologians today take refuge into the limbo of messianism (Sobrino), eschatological hope (Moltmann), and ecological consciousness (Boff) to avoid capitulating to apocalyptic triumph of global capitalism. Yet in spite of their seemingly Christian-inspired utopian rhetoric, these theologians and the Pope himself seem to resign themselves to Bush's euphoric eulogy to capitalism in his *Preface to The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*: the final triumph of liberty, democracy, and free enterprise (the so-called values of "blessed capitalist order").<sup>6</sup> The only option left is the mantra of the Third Way prophets (Giddens and Tony Blair): how to make global capitalism more humane (cf. Kiely, 2005, Chap. 5). As Zizik succinctly states,

The rise of global capitalism is presented to us such as Fate, against which

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<sup>5</sup> The Pope, in his most recent encyclical, *Spe Salvi*, further specifies the error of Marxism: "He [Marx] forgot man and he forgot man's freedom. He forgot that freedom always remains also freedom for evil. He thought that once the economy had been put right, everything would automatically be put right. His real error is materialism: man, in fact, is not merely the product of economic conditions, and it is not possible to redeem him purely from the outside by creating a favorable economic environment" (No. 21). This is a standard reproach of humanist Christians against historical Marxism. I cannot deal here with this vulgarized reading of the Marxist concept of individual. But if there is a lesson we can learn from Lee Strobel's (2003) recent best-selling defense of Christianity against secular humanism, it is that we should not conflate those things done in the name of the movement (say, Christianity and communism) and those things that really represent the real teachings of the founder. Interestingly, both Christianity and socialism share the same horrible records in their respective history.

<sup>6</sup> Moltmann (2004) still believes there is an alternative. But he cannot embrace the prospect for socialism.

we cannot fight – either we adapt to it or we fall out of step with history, and are crushed. The only thing we can do is to make global capitalism as human as possible... (Zizek, 2004, p. 73).

### **Historical Materialism as the Antidote to Angelistic Pseudolove**

The current Pope and radical theologians of course do not unambiguously endorse capitalism.<sup>7</sup> If early Marxists criticized Christianity for “not having loved enough,” today *angelism* remains a valid critique of Christian attitude to postcapitalist social order:

Angelism is thus impure, even if it doesn't realize the fact. It does not dare take sides with the executioners, but neither does it venture to fight alongside with the victims. Two cowardices do not add up to purity! On the other hand, angelism cannot assure the salvation even of the individual. Even if we assume that it purifies him, it still leaves the collective stain untouched. But what use is the restless chastity of this or that individual when compared with the enormous collective prostitution? Or the scrupulous refusal to eat meat on Friday when confronted with colonial war? In the face of evils so vast, even the greatest angels are dwarfs. Religious love is just not big enough! (Michel Verret, quoted in Gonzales-Ruiz, 1976, p. 23).

Against such “beautiful souls” (in Hegelian sense, they are critics who lament the evils of the world but they exempt themselves) posture of the Christians, liberation theologians adopt certain arguments from Marxist analysis to be effective in their struggle in behalf of the oppressed (Boff, 1995, p. 98). Recently, Leonardo Boff still maintains, “These arguments [Marxist analysis] helped –and still help– to overturn the perverse logic of gain paid for by misery and dehumanization of the masses” (ibid.). It helps to delineate who and what the real enemies of human rights and dignity are. Knowing our enemies, we can take responsibility for our enemies. We should not even summon here the injunction “Love your enemies” as a categorical imperative that enjoins us to embrace evil and avoid conflicts. As Moltmann (1989) rightly argues, loving our enemies means “the creative and intelligent overcoming of enmity.” This further entails that we can only fulfill this injunction “by dismantling our enmities and taking responsibility for common security and lasting development” (p. 44).

With the demise of “really existing socialisms” and the maddening celebration of the collapse of revolutionary hope, radical Christians should look for analysis that can help them make Christian messianic utopia bear on the “victims” of capitalist Moloch. Christians and Marxists alike should suspend all prohibitions against any

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<sup>7</sup> Boff (2003) still talks about the necessity of revolution to overturn the wretched condition of the world's poor. He says, “Socialism has not gone into exile: it is the dream of liberated humankind” (p. 110). Sobrino (2003) meanwhile still heaps praises to the successes of the past failed revolutions.

form of radical political act. Today this prohibition is invoked in the name of openness to radical future and the so-called omnipresent threat of totalitarianism. Any revolution will simply lead to Stalinism. The following comments by Russell Bardner Norris (1974), a Christian theologian, in his dialogue with the French Marxist Roger Garaudy, represent this anathema of Christianity to concrete historical options:

This struggle [for freedom] cannot be identified with any political or ideological system, for no such system can contain the fullness of the future for which we hope... Christians must remain troublemakers and revolutionary in every society which remains closed and self-contented (p. 127).

While Norris is at pains to argue that this position does not lead to passivity in the face of the future, it remains caught in the dystopian thinking that characterizes current attitude of Christians towards global capitalism: we may restlessly disturb the existing order and be not conformed to it, but definitely, we do not have any radical alternative.<sup>8</sup> Against postmodern nihilism, Christians should insist that to accept that truth is always historical and contingent does not leave us with no good grounds for choosing Marxist analysis over and against other competing paradigms. But for theologians to claim that by using Marxist analysis, they are already compromising the absolute character and autonomy of theological discourse, that is simply an indefensible way of elevating theological discourse beyond historical determinations. That is the perverse reading of theology's autonomy.

### **God-Walk versus God-Talk: Theological *Partiinost***

If there is an absolute truth that has been learned from the debates fomented by liberation theology against bourgeois liberal theology, it is that Christian faith cannot be evacuated from history. As the late Juan Luis Segundo (1982) rightly

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<sup>8</sup> The same reservation is found in Gustavo Gutierrez's (1996), the father of liberation theology, attempt to safeguard the absolute character of the theological discourse. While acknowledging that [social] sciences do help us understand better the social realities of our present situation," Gutierrez comes closest to end of ideology thesis and the Foucauldian thesis of freedom-is-not-secured-by-any-political-system, by insisting that "people will have to be faithful to a quest for freedom that no political system guarantees." Innocent as this remark may appear, yet in the context of the demise of "really existing socialisms," this remark echoes the neo-Weberian thesis of Adorno and Horkheimer in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* in which socialism and capitalism are paired as metaphysically equivalent. They both end up either in Nazi camps or in Gulags. So the rallying cry for third world poor will have to be freedom and individual human rights, and not ideology and political programs. This is humanism disguised as a revolutionary Christianity. It is not surprising therefore if Louis Althusser vehemently repudiated Sartre's post-war humanism as pure bourgeois ideology. In fairness to Gutierrez, however it must pointed out that he believes that social analysis is fundamental for theological reading of the signs of the times. And I am in complete agreement with him that "it is not the function of liberation theology to offer strategic solutions or its own political alternatives." This is the proper understanding of the autonomy of the theology. That is why I will insist, theology should not be afraid of embracing Marxist analysis of society. Its task is not to offer social analysis, but to discern the movement of God in concrete historical projects.

concludes, “Every single effort to separate faith from ideologies in order to preserve the former is bound to stifle and kill faith — the very thing one is seeking to preserve” (p. 130). Or, putting the issue in the dialectic of universality and particularity,

If love does not risk partisan choices and involvement, it is not universal; or rather, it is lost in a welter of universal idealism limited to dealing with what is without meaning or force... We love persons only by taking sides with victims against their aggressors – quite precisely, by choosing and assuming effective solidarity with a class (Cassalis, 1984, pp. 158-159).

It is in the process of engaging in the political conflict and taking sides in a revolutionary situation that Christians are said to follow Christ. In this vein, Frederick Herzog, a North American liberation theologian, follows the Kierkegaardian injunction of the suspension of the theoretical in favour of struggle. As Herzog (1999) intimates, “it is not those who theorize, “Lord, Lord,” who enter the kingdom of God, but those who do the will of God. Christian theory is not primary; the struggle is, life is. This may be the most crucial epistemological contribution of Christianity” (p. 219). Jurgen Moltmann (1974) is in the same opinion when he states, “Only when he leaves behind the circle of those who share and reinforce his opinions in the church to go out into the anonymity of slums and peace movements, in a society ‘absence of peace is organized,’ is he tempted and tested, inwardly and outwardly” (p. 18). Unfortunately, Christian intellectuals are more prone to theological triumphalism. Ahistorical theologians absolutize the Kingdom of God beyond any historico-political projects. They fear to be tested. They simply refuse to acknowledge the political consequences of the cross. It is this fear more than the fear of materialist atheism (which is supposedly intrinsic to Marxism<sup>9</sup>) that leads Christians to believe that if the church officially endorses a given definite historico-political project, and it fails, then it will compromise the absolute character of the Kingdom of God and the gratuitous nature of divine intervention.<sup>10</sup> This ideology easily lends itself to the liberal democratic blackmail. Žižek argues that to accept this forced choice between acquiescence to the present and the risk of a totalitarian future is to accept liberal democratic hegemony in advance.

Against such dystopian melancholia, what we must insist is that today, more than ever, Marxist class analysis provides the best weapon and counter-myth to global capitalism. Lenin’s notion of *partiinost* must be invoked to show the partisan character of any form of social analysis or theology. This is not to absolutize revolutionary truth but merely to assert that any theology or social analysis is always

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Collier (2110) is right so say that atheism is not intrinsic to Marxist social theory. But Christians must also acknowledge, “Too often today it is atheism which has become a true commitment of one’s whole self, while theism is a respectable position, vague and without efficacy. Through centuries of bourgeois thought and behavior, God has been ‘compromised.’ And a lived atheism is that which eliminates, in an ambiguous manner, these compromises” (Lacroix, 1989, p. 107).

<sup>10</sup> Sobrino thinks that this reactionary theological attitude has to do with banishment of the centrality of the kingdom of God in Christology.

based on class position. If class struggle is the field that overdetermines any form of theology, then, to insist on objectivity is the highest expression of partisanship (Žižek, 1997: 21).

### **The Prophet and the Lacanian “Act”**

In 1971 Juan Luis Segundo in his essay, “Capitalism Versus Socialism: The Theological Crux,” provocatively suggests that Christianity must risk being wrong when faced with an historic choice between socialism and capitalism. Christians must learn from the prophets, who are unsure about the validity of their prognosis of the future, nevertheless they trust God, even if the judgments they made did not materialize. Or to put it in Žižekian-Lacanian language, the prophets are the true executioners of Authentic Act. The truth and alternative they propounded were not possible within the existing co-ordinates of the social universe where they were in: “in an act, I precisely redefine the very co-ordinates of what I cannot and must do” (Žižek, 2004, p. 121). Neither was their authority derived from a validated discourse. Like “political agents” prophets engaged in “acts which can be authorized only by themselves, for which there is no external guarantee [not even God because He only communicates through the prophet and not to anyone else]” (p. 87). They simply have faith. If there is something we can learn from the death-of-God theologians (from Thomas Altizer to Gianni Vattimo), it is that we must break this blackmail of the Absolute against historical project in the name of the Act. Žižek explains,

Act in Lacanian sense precisely suspends this gap between the impossible injunction and the positive intervention – they are impossible not in the sense of it is impossible that did happen...rather, it tends to enact the impossible absolutely...it is only through the act that I effectively assume the Big Other’s nonexistence, that is, I enact the impossible: namely, what appears as impossible within the co-ordinates of the existing socio-symbolic order (2004, p. 80).

Isn’t this what happened to Jesus Christ on the cross? That the frightening silence of God the Father showed the non-existence of the “Big Other” that gives guarantees to our historical and individual projects? Yet it was in his moment of utter helplessness and abandonment that Jesus Christ was nearest to God. So, too, for failed historical projects of emancipation. It is at the moment of their defeat that their future repetition is assured. It is in those momentary victories –in dispersed pockets of revolutions and insurrections—that historic utopias and the vanquished had a proper place of their own. This is true for the twelfth century Anabaptist rebellions led by Thomas Munzer (as Engels showed) and the socialist tendencies within the early Christian communities (as Karl Kautsky documented).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For messianic and prophetic elements in Marx’s thought, see Conklin (1954), Lobkowicz (1964), and Parsons (1964).

## Christianity against the Liberal Trap of Humanitarian Aid

Pope Benedict in his first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, castigates the Marxist for failing to see beyond the ameliorative nature of Christian charity. Against such perverse defense of Christian charity, we must not only insist on the old cliché that charitable acts lead to further oppression, but we must be brutal in our rejection of its insidious liberal trap. We must invert the encyclical's definition of charity and endorse fully this irreverent parody of the *Letter of James* by Juan Luis Segundo (1982):

My brothers, what use is it for man to say he has faith or the social encyclicals of the church when he does nothing to show it? Can this faith of his social encyclicals save him? Suppose a brother or a sister is in rags with not enough food for the day, and one of you say to them, "Good luck to you, keep yourselves warm and have plenty to eat, thanks to the social encyclicals," but does nothing to supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that (p. 127)?

Of course Segundo's parody is a bit misleading. For the Church, inspired by the social encyclicals, has programs to help the poor. But even if we correct Segundo's parody, it becomes even more damaging to the credibility of the church. Because such programs end up reproducing the logic of capitalist exploitation –the liberal trap of humanitarianism. Slavoj Žižek provides a shocking, but thoroughly logical analysis of the way out of this trap:

There is a will to accomplish the 'leap of faith' and a step outside the global circuit ... a will which was expressed in an extreme and terrifying manner in a well-known incident from the Vietnam War: after the US Army occupied a local village, their doctors vaccinated the children on the left arm in order to demonstrate their humanitarian care; when, the day after, the village was retaken by the Vietcong, they cut off their left arms of all the vaccinated children... Although it is difficult to sustain as a literal model to follow, this complete rejection of the enemy precisely in its caring 'humanitarian' aspect, no matter what the cost, has to be endorsed in its basic intention ... It is only such blow against the enemy at his best, at the point where the enemy 'indeed help us,' that displays true revolutionary autonomy and sovereignty... If one adopts the attitude of 'let us take from the enemy what is good, and reject or even fight against what is bad,' one is already caught in the liberal trap of humanitarian aid (2004, p. 84).

The lesson we can learn from this familiar hyperbolic suggestion of Žižek, is not of course to follow it to the letter, but to alert us to the danger of simply dismissing the terrain of ideological and political struggle and claim that our works of charity are beyond ideology.

The usual charge against principled Leftist politics today –especially among Christians — is to ask: "Okay, so you think by compromising with the policies of the ruling coalition, we end up supporting the system. But give us your alternative?"



Against such “principled opportunism,” Slavoj Žižek (2004), following Adorno’s negative dialectic, argues,

one should have the courage to affirm that, in a situation like today’s, the only way really to remain open to a revolutionary opportunity is to renounce facile calls to direct action, which necessarily involve us in an activity where things change so that the totality remains the same. Today’s predicament is that, if we succumb to the urge of directly ‘doing something’ (engaging in the anti-globalist struggle, helping the poor...), we will certainly and undoubtedly contribute to the reproduction of existing order. The only way to lay the foundations for a true, radical change is to withdraw from the compulsion to act, to ‘do something’ – thus opening up the space for a different kind of activity (p. 72).

Žižek of course is not calling for resignation and wait-and-see attitude. As a Leftist intellectual, what Žižek is arguing for is to avoid the temptation to jump immediately into the chorus of capitalist-inspired pro-active propagandas and programs that end up consolidating the unyielding grip of capitalism on the situation.<sup>12</sup>

### **Fidelity to the Victims against the Crucifiers**

Today, revolutionary Christians must also risk their lives in performing the same gesture of negation to repeat the event of resurrection. If Žižek calls for the repetition of Lenin, Christians must also clamor for repetition of Christ-Event. Amidst the paganistic recollection of Jesus Christ in popular self-help spirituality manuals such as *Celestine Prophecy* and the hit movie, *Stigmata*, radical Christians today are enjoined to repeat the Historical Jesus. Fidelity to the subversive message of Jesus Christ means wrestling away the definition of what Christianity from the so-called Gospel of Prosperity and fundamentalist Christians. As Michael Buddle scandalously argues, “God is not nice!” The cross is a scandalous crime and not a justification for *theologia gloriae* –a theology that glorifies God’s omnipotence and intelligence (Moltmann, 1974, 219). To be a revolutionary Christian is to reject “cheap grace” (Bonhoeffer): “Accept Jesus Christ as your Savior and you will be saved!” Against such “cheap grace,” we should follow Boff’s (1987) revolutionary interpretation of the cross: “the cross of love is a consequence of the cross of hate. The cross in itself is not a symbol of love encounter. It is a form of torture. It is the means by which human beings vent the power of their vengeance” (p. 112).

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<sup>12</sup> Žižek here might be interpreted as following Derrida’s ethics of undecidability. John Caputo (1998) explains, “I think it is important to remember that the idea behind undecidability has never been to leave us adrift in indecision but to raise the intensity of the decision, the “responsibility” for the decision. The more decidable things are, the more rule-governed they are and the more easily we can excuse ourselves for what we have done by saying, “this is really not my doing, it’s the rule.” And definitely, Žižek refuses to be ensnared by the rules of liberal rhetoric.

## The Cross against American Messianic Jingoism

Also, to repeat the myth of Christian eschatology is to oppose the idolatrous equation of God with American messianic jingoism. The current invocation of “clash of civilizations” – that replaces the great battle between Capitalism and Socialism—by American Empire reverses the true universality of Christianity by equating American war on terror with God’s infinite justice. American Imperial exegesis leads to seeing *Pax Americana* as “redeemer of the world” (Chapmann, 2002, p. 96; McCarraher, 2002, p. 107) that “requires killing other Christians in the interest of the state” (Buddle, 2004, p. 89). Today, Christianity must oppose this false universalism/globalism by counterpoising its own radical version of universality. True universality comes from the Void, those sectors outside the circulation of capital flow. True universality can only occur when those who are excluded from the consensus of “postdemocratic” polis, those who are not counted-as-one begin to question the “consensus.”<sup>13</sup>

The second meaning of repetition involves violent releasing of the historical Jesus from being hostage to the privatizing tendencies within bourgeois theologies and their religious expressions – from Bultmann to Richard Rorty. The cross is neither a product of the bogus existential rebellion of Jesus Christ nor the masochistic glorification of suffering. It was a consequence of the way Jesus lived his life that threatened the legitimacy of the powers and principalities of the world (Croatto, 1984, p. 120; Ellacuria, 1984; Galilea, 1984). Against such cynical individualism, Christians and Marxists, who interestingly, share the same communal ethic, must dutifully heed Lenin’s advise: they must forge an alternative *polis* with “a strong organization of revolutionaries... [prepared for] prolonged and stubborn struggle” (quoted in McCarraher, 2002, p. 112).

## Christian Eschatology and the Terror of History

What does it mean to repeat and be faithful to the subversive message of the historical Jesus? Mircea Eliade is best remembered for proposing the myth of eternal return. For Eliade the myth of eternal return provides a solution for early societies to come to terms with the “terror of history.” The Christian myth of Resurrection, the central Event in Christianity, remains today as a powerful narrative that can defeat Left’s cynicism, on the one hand, and the neoliberal capitalist unbridled hope in postdemocratic utopia, on the other. James Cone, a black liberation theologian states clearly:

[Jesus’] resurrection is the disclosure that God is not defeated by oppression

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<sup>13</sup> Postdemocracy, for Jacques Rancier, denotes the paradox that, in the name of democracy, emphasizes the consensual practice and conceptual legitimization of a democracy after the demos, a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount and dispute of the people and is thereby reducible to the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combinations of social energies and interests.” In short, postdemocracy effectively eliminates politics and universality by reducing everything to managed consensus.

but transforms it into the possibility of freedom. For men and women who live in an oppressive society this means that they do not have to behave as if death is the ultimate. God in Christ has set us free from death, and we can now live without worrying about social ostracism, economic insecurity, or political death. "In Christ, the immortal God has tasted death and in so doing ... destroyed death (quoted in Boff, 1987, p. 67).

By repeating the Resurrection as an Event and being faithful to its revolutionary message, Christianity does not only disarm the sting of death, but it opens up infinite possibilities that stretch to eternity. As Deleuze puts it,

[repetitions] do not add a second or a third time to the first, but carry the first time to the 'nth' power. ... it is not Federation Day which commemorates or repeats the fall of the Bastille, but the fall of the Bastille [Resurrection] which celebrates and repeats in advance all the Federation Days; or Monet's water lily which repeats all the others. (p. 1).

In relation to socialism, the collapse of "really existing socialism" does not mean the impossibility of repeating the Great Russian revolution, much less the Paris Commune, or the glorious 1896 Katipunan-led Revolution. As Kierkegaard, the great Hegelian philosopher realized, in the character of Constantius, the only repetition possible "was the impossibility of repetition" (Kierkegaard, 1983, p. 170). That is, while one cannot go back or forward in time and re-live an experience verbatim, one can repeat the impossibility of repetition. That is to say, the only thing that can be repeated is to repeat the impossible. Today more than ever, "repeating" the Revolution is the only logical gesture available to the "wretched of the earth" to face the "terror of history:" the terror of history arising from the failed attempt of really existing socialism.

The forced choice here is between recollection and repetition, paganism or Christianity. Kierkegaard rightly rejects pagan recollection in favor of Christian notion of repetition. Clare Carlisle's recent re-interpretation of Kierkegaard's *Repetition* puts the issue in a very clear frame:

Recollection means the articulate retrieval of an impression of a past actuality: someone who recollects is thinking about the past. Repetition means that a past actuality becomes actual once again: someone who repeats is renewing actuality. Recollection and repetition deal with the past in different ways: that which is recollected is complete within itself; it is contemplated as a finished totality, apprehended as an idea. On the other hand, if something is repeated it is re-enacted, actualized; it is not merely represented as an idea but recreated as a reality. Philosophically, the Greek recollection and the 'modern' repetition each denote processes towards the truth which express entirely different forms of self-consciousness, different interpretations of time, different ontologies – in effect, different truths.

Recollection, the horizon of New Age religion, locates timeless truth within the soul of everyone (the message of *Celestine Prophecy*). It freezes time. As

a result, it does not allow for change. Repetition, in contrast, allows for qualitative transformation or each repetition. Recollection produces truth as a form of knowledge, while repetition produces truth as a lived experience, of striving towards perfection. Repeating the gesture of revolution therefore is repeating its past failed attempts to usher the kingdom of God (see Moltmann, 1969, p. 20).

Repetition however does not mean a false forced choice for the Left: either a principled fidelity to its old programme or be marginalized. As Žižek (2004) points out in true Kierkegaardian way, the Left can repeat its failed project neither by accommodating to new circumstances nor sticking to its old program, but through a radical rectification of its own project (p. 73). Repetition therefore is not a simply nostalgia for the lost origin that parodies the past. Derrida alerts us against the tendency in Benjamin's "weak" messianism to remember the suffering of the past and foreclosing any rupture in the *avenir* (future) (Ware, 2006).<sup>14</sup>

Walter Benjamin is therefore right in arguing that one may never be sure whether one is acting to hasten the coming of the messianic Era, but it is essential to act. One must act radically and ruthlessly (Wolin, 2001, p. 91). This "ruthless" and "radical" action to usher in the messianic Era is summed up in Che Guevara's kenotic identification of Christian revolutionaries with the revolutionary project:

Christians should opt definitively for the revolution...But in the revolutionary struggle Christians cannot presume to impose their own dogmas or to proselytize for their churches. They must come without any intentions of evangelizing Marxists and without cowardly concealing their faith to assimilate themselves to the latter.

When Christians dare to give full-fledged revolutionary witness, then the...revolution will be invincible; because up to now Christians have allowed their doctrine to be used as a tool by reactionaries (quoted in Cassalis, 1984, p. 181).

Theologians today, from the most conservative to the most radical persuasions, who have acquiesced to the dystopian thinking that pervades the present intellectual climate, should be reminded of Marx's letter to Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, dated February 22, 1881, in which Marx pointed out the revolutionary value of Christian messianism:

...The doctrinal and necessarily illusory anticipation of the action program of a revolution of the future emerges only from contemporary struggle. The dream of the imminent destruction of the world inspired the early Christians in their struggle with the Roman world empire and gave them a

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<sup>14</sup> As Ware (2006), using Derrida's correction to Benjamin and Ricoeur's notion of messianism, maintains: "Thinking *with* historical messianisms does not mean retrieving the past indiscriminately. We need to choose what legacies will continue into the future. This is the position Derrida adopts in *Specters of Marx*. "Inheritance is never a *given*," he writes, "it is always a task" (SM, 54). And the process of critically selecting our inheritance, of sifting through the various spirits and specters of our particular social histories, is the very process of mourning" (p. 23).

certainty of victory. Scientific insight into the unavoidable and continuing disintegration of the dominant order of society . . . serves as a guarantee that at the moment of outbreak of a real proletarian revolution its very conditions . . . will directly bring forth the next *modus operandi* (in Raines, 2002: 239).

In the same vein, Engels in *On the History of Early Christianity* juxtaposes Christian struggle with socialism:

The history of early Christianity has notable points of resemblance with the modern working-class movement. Like the latter, Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome. Both Christianity and the workers' socialism preach forthcoming salvation from bondage and misery; Christianity places this salvation in a life beyond, after death, in heaven; socialism places it in this world, in a transformation of society. Both are persecuted and baited, their adherents are despised and made the objects of exclusive laws, the former as enemies of the human race, the latter as enemies of the state, enemies of religion, the family, social order. And in spite of all persecution, nay, even spurred on by it, they forge victoriously, irresistibly ahead (In Raines, 2002: 217).

Summarizing Marx and Engels, it can be argued that what is common to Christianity and Marxism is the tenacious and unconditional longing for a radically different future –Messianic rupture as elaborated by Walter Benjamin. Walter Benjamin (1996) provides a messianic concept of politics that runs counter to postdemocracy: “my definition of politics: the fulfilment of an unimproved humanity” (p. 226). This binds Christians to socialists.

### **Dangerous Memory: To Suffer for the Sake of Those Who Suffered**

Repetition however does not only connote a progression towards eternity. As Walter Benjamin points out, the power of messianism does not reside in the future or the promised salvation but in the past suffering. It also requires keeping alive the dangerous memory of those who had been vanquished by the evils of history – both those who had been vanquished in the revolution and those who perished in its reconstruction. As Paul Ricoeur points out, it is only by mourning the history of the oppressed that we can keep the promise of the future alive.<sup>15</sup> It is in remembering the *memoria passionis* –“the dangerous, subversive memory of the humiliated and the wronged, of those who were vanquished” (Boff, 1987, p. 108) — that can awaken dangerous visions and utopias, and launch new liberation movements (*ibid.*). Today, following J. B. Metz, we must sublate Nietzsche’s aphorism: “blessed are the forgetful” into “blessed are those who mourn” (Ashley, p. 947).

<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur states apropos Benjamin: “We need, therefore, a kind of parallel history of, let us say, victimization, which would counter the history of success and victory. To memorize the victims of history— the sufferers, the humiliated, the forgotten—should be the task of all of us at the end of this century.”

If there is a lesson that communists can learn from reading Pope Benedict XVI's most recent encyclical, *Spe Salvi*, it is found in the following radical statement,

The true measure of humanity is essentially determined in relationship to suffering and to the sufferer. This holds true both for the individual and for society. A society unable to accept its suffering members and incapable of helping to share their suffering and to bear it inwardly through 'compassion' is a cruel and inhuman society (No. 38).

He further adds, "the capacity to accept suffering for the sake of goodness, truth and justice is an essential criterion of humanity, because if my own well-being and safety are ultimately more important than truth and justice, then the power of the stronger prevails, then violence and untruth reign supreme" (no. 38). In the same vein Moltmann (1974) writes,

Where we suffer because we love, God suffers in us. Where he has suffered the death of Jesus and in so doing has shown the force of his love, men also find the power to continue to love, to sustain that which annihilates them and to 'endure what is dead' (p. 253).

### **The Kingdom of God as the Ultimate Horizon of Revolutionary Christianity**

If there is a certain datum about Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom, it is that it is reserved for the poor (Sobrino, 2003: 355). This basic datum has been lost in the conflict-ridden development of Christological dogma within Christian tradition. Jon Sobrino's critical re-interpretation of Christology from the "point of view of the victims" is a classic example of what Alain Badiou calls as fidelity to the Event via the politics of subtraction. Through series of hermeneutical clarifications and subtraction, Sobrino arrives at the pure interpretation of the Event. Jesus' solidarity with the suffering of the poor expresses Christian notion of love, a love that is radically different from the pagan love which only seeks beautiful objects. Moltmann (2004) comes closest to Žižek's Lacanian re-reading of Christian love when he declares,

This is solidarity Christology: Christ with us, the God-forsaken. The Gospels describe Jesus' passion as the story of this path into an ever-deeper self-emptying. This path ends with his execution on the roman cross. In the life of Jesus we can see a clear pull downwards. It is the pull of self-giving love. The Eros of the ancient world was love for the beautiful and radiant. But Jesus' love turned to the sick, the victims of violence and little unnoticeable people (p. 69).

In his earlier work, Moltmann (1974) emphasizes the coincidence of Hegelian love of "otherness" with Christian notion of agape:

But for the crucified Christ, the principle of fellowship is fellowship with those who are different. Its power is not friendship, the love for what is

similar and beautiful (*philia*), but creative love for what is different, alien and ugly (*agape*). Its principle of justification is not similarity, but the justification of the other (Hegel), the creative making righteous of the unrighteous and the attribution of rights to those without rights (p. 28).

For both Zizek and Moltmann, the crucifixion represents the love of God for what is “other.” It represents God’s *con-solatio* (being with others in their solitude and suffering) in every form of suffering. So that those who are persecuted and are suffering from social injustice “are joined by one who experiences and carries that suffering with us” (*Spe Salvi*, No. 39) – the crucified Christ.<sup>16</sup> This form of love is not mere sentimental feeling or feel-good love that one can learn by purchasing self-help books on love. It is a kind of love that “consists in opting for solidarity with the downtrodden.” Such love “radicalizes conflicts and accepts confrontations within the community itself... refusing to cover historical specters with a religious fog, never abandoning hope for anybody, even during the worst battles, and leaving killers as well as victims to God’s reckoning” (Cassalis, 1984, p. 156). Or, in the words of Boff (1987),

God assumes the cross in order to be in solidarity with those who suffer –not to sublimate and eternalize the cross, but to enter into solidarity with those who suffer on the cross and thus transform the cross into a sign of blessing, a sign of suffering love... only in solidarity with the crucified can we struggle against the cross, only in identification with the victims of tribulation can there be real liberation from tribulation” (p. 115).

What happens in capitalism today is the denial of suffering by reducing its massive scale into “risk management.” While mass media offers a proliferation of various representations of suffering, it also promotes its banalization by reducing it to mere scheduled spectacle of the system. Its ultimate goal is to remove all forms of suffering and anxieties generated by such consciousness (Geuss, 2005). Consequently, with the loss of fear of suffering, people lose their hope. Hence, Anson Rabinbach (2003) can argue that the messianism of Bloch and Benjamin has become outdated in our postmodern world. For people today have come to live well with the apocalypse. The apocalypse has become a boring stuff in the current culture industry (*Independence Day* and *Armageddon*, for instance). There is no further point in dreaming what comes afterward. Today, “The ‘developed’ nations had given to the ‘free market’ the status of a god,” and had accepted sacrifices for this new Moloch “as normal costs of doing business” (Berry, 2003, p. 4). Interestingly, Zizek acutely

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<sup>16</sup> This kind of love is the love that motivates Marxist revolutionaries as stated by Fidel Castro: “Who says that Marxism means renouncing human sentiments, love, respect, concern for comrades? Who says that Marxism means having no soul, no emotions? Indeed it is precisely love for humanity that engendered Marxism, which means love for humanity, for humankind, the desire to work to overcome the wretchedness and injustice suffered by the proletariat, to put an end to their crucifixion, to free them of the whole burden of exploitation weighing them down. Love has brought the possibility and, more than that, the historical necessity for the social revolution interpreted by Karl Marx” (quoted in Cassalis, 1984, pp. 157-158).

observes, people today are capable of imagining the demise of the planet through a meteor or comet or superstorm but not the end of capitalism. To imagine what comes after capitalism is dismissed as pure utopia.

### **The Death of Socialism and the Myth of Resurrection**

Max Horkheimer, the father of Critical Theory, towards the end of his life was led to theology in his hope that the social evils of the world will not be the final word. He defines theology as “the hope that this injustice by which the world is characterized is not permanent, that injustice may not be the last word. It is the expression of a longing that the murderer may not triumph over his innocent victim” (quoted in Moltmann, 1989, p. 90). Horkheimer further adds that today the “crucified” are already desensitized to their suffering that they are now reconciled with their crosses: “today people no longer permit themselves to experience the suffering caused by social conditions, but rather accommodate themselves to what is inflicted on them, if not actually approve it” (quoted in Lohmann, 1996, p. 399). These masochistic rituals give rise to the greatest sin today, hopelessness. As the church father Chrysostom states, “It is not so much sin which plunges us into disaster; it is rather our despair” (quoted in Moltmann, 2004, p. 93).

Hence, paraphrasing Pope Benedict’s words in *Spe Salvi*, the death of socialism like any other death is no cause for mourning, for it is the cause of mankind’s salvation (No. 10). The death of socialism is not the end. It is the source of salvation and hope for a better future beyond capitalism. The *memoria passionis* is transformed into *memoria resurrectionis* – “the future of those whose lot it has been to be the *massa damnata*, those forgotten by history, the excluded” (Boff, 1987, p. 108).

When faith in the messianic Era and revolution develops into hope, it “causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience. It does not calm the unquiet heart, but is itself this unquiet heart in man. Those who hope in Christ can no longer cope with reality as it is, but to begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world” (Moltmann, 1967, p. 21). Liberation is earth-bound:

Far from leading human beings away from earth to heaven, Christian hope leads them to the kingdom of God which comes on earth. Human beings have come from the earth and belong on earth and do so both in time and eternity. If heaven opens for them, it is heaven on earth. On earth Christ was born; on earth stands the cross of Christ; and it is on earth that we may expect the deliverance of evil. It is this transitory life which will be transformed into eternal life; it is this earthly life which will be raised to eternal life. (Moltmann, 2007, p. 148)■

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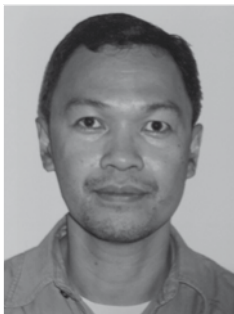
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