

“...our modern societies, which claim to be secular, are, on the contrary, governed by secularised theological concepts, which act all the more powerfully because we are not conscious of their existence. We will never grasp what is going on today unless we understand that capitalism is, in reality, a religion...”

-Interview with Giorgio Agamben, July 2014

Part I

SECULARISATIONS: THEOLOGY

No one is perfect, but Agamben seems to be one of the very few thinkers capable of piercing through the post-modern haze. Recently, as in the remarks above, he notes that most of our theoretical problems stem from secularized theology. In passing, I would slightly add something to Agamben's remark, before beginning on a longer disquisition. It is not theology in a general sense that has been secularized, but rather *Judeo-Christian theology*. And not only are our concepts secularized Judeo-Christian theology, but as a parallel our lived history has *secularized Judeo-Christian eschatological events*. This was quite common previously, for example with the eruption of the French Revolution in 1789, to view Bonaparte as either the Antichrist (the reactionary view of the Tsar) or the Messiah (Hegel's view).

Along these lines it has become quite popular today to treat of messianic themes. However in truth this is quite a prosaic theme in our historical moment: real messianism

is now a dead letter, since the messianic moment has *already* arrived. Not only in the undeniable literal sense, as there is once again a Jewish state, but in the metaphorical sense, as the Kingdom of the Poor that entered into phenomenal reality in the October Revolution, those workers who stormed heaven and brought it down to earth. It becomes quite strange, *we live after the millennium*. We are not living at the end of the world, but certainly living at the end of the Judeo-Christian hold on the imagination, since all the teleological goals have been fulfilled, to the extent possible. Now the real question is what to do with the gaping void left by the insufficiencies of this tradition? If the world today seems defective, it is not the lack of fulfillment of tradition, but rather a tradition fulfilled, with its unsightly and all-too obvious shortcomings rendered visible. Societies become decadent only when they achieve their ideals and this is, I think, the primary reason for the general lack of imagination today which is everywhere visible.

With that said, I suppose we should try to find what other remnants of Judeo-Christian monotheism remain as relics in our own time, and see how they are creating our problems, both in the world, and in terms of changing that world. Since we are radicals, we can start with the problems that monotheistic worship and its state have left us with. For example, most radicalism is still busy trying to find the expressions of the one god: the one party, the one leader, the correct theory. Or, in their older theological terms: the elect few who must sort out the good from the bad and rule a dying world, the regent of god on earth, the literal word of god that weighs and judges an era, etc. These ideas are all too common. But in truth and as we know, no one party ever made a revolution, rather one party *has taken over* a revolution. Similarly the idea is to take over the state and to use it for purposes of global moral reform, in which the Christians of the Roman Empire, the Protestants, the Jacobins and later Bolsheviks all have essentially the same operating methods. This



Jan van Leiden, the messiah of Munster.

might confirm Spengler's witticism, to the effect that Christianity was the grandmother of Bolshevism.

This shows itself too in the comportment of the monotheistic state: the state with no dissidents, no other cults, no regional autonomy, no conspiracies. Yet this is completely contrary to the situation in which the modern state was formed, as seen in the early modern history of England or France. The monotheistic state can't tolerate any other religions, because it itself is an ethical religious community: Leviathan digests everything inside it. Even the attempted stamping out of Christianity by the Marxist state (an admirable Enlightenment goal) only showed that it itself was as jealous a religion, as the prior forms of the divine state could not admit either the Protestant heresy or Popish domination. The need is to annihilate the Other that threatens the ultimate truth of salvation. The horrific wars of religion stem from the hatred and intolerance of this tradition, its assertion on the

enforcement of the pure truth, as is well known. One god, one state, one leader, one people, one big error.

Moreover, Christianity is a governmental religion adopted by a dying Empire upon which its structure was modeled. So the confessions of faith and even the book itself were not given by god or even a primitive patriarch, but rather included or excluded depending on the various intrigues of emperors, eunuchs, and courtesans. Thus the entire history is unedifying, and rather than critiquing the supposed idealism of Christianity, I think the most lucid critique is rather to critique *the materialism* of this ignorant tradition. Even the philosophic doctrine of the soul, which Christianity took from Greek speculation, they don't actually support but have to attach it to a decomposing body that will be resurrected one day, and later a heavenly body, like a normal body but slightly more ethereal. There is nothing idealistic at all about that, but a gross worship of the corporeal.

God has not merely to become man (and not a demi-god briefly appearing in human form, as in many other traditions) but the lone deity has to become a man, and also people have to be made to believe this. As a result of this materialism, and an over focus on this material world, the religion is completely predicated on repression and control, since the divine truth has to exist by being fully observed at all times and, if not, it is in serious danger. "Then he brought me to the door of the gate of the Lord's house which was toward the north; and, behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz" (weeping for the dying god, that is to say, Adonis). But it is far too materialistic to think that ultimate truth depends upon the majority or consensus, and in

this way personal choices of faith (and even those of sexual preference or diet) have become issues of cosmic importance. And the well-known: "Thou shalt have no Gods other than me". The jealous God admits the power and existence of the other gods, but one can worship only him. After all, he never says, "I am the only God" but rather, I must be your exclusive god. In the later more radical versions of Islam and Christianity, what was initially even seen as one god amidst other local gods, often defeated by them, has become the only real god. The difference in intellectual culture also reflects itself, because here we have simply "the book" as if all of human wisdom could be contained in one book, however long. The result is the overly long, repetitive and contradictory Holy Writ.

Also, because of this inherited materialism the cult of the Christians invented the collective practice of the *Noble Lie*. This in its short-sighted, secularized form we recognize today as the cult of expediency, greed, realpolitik deceit, "private vices into public virtues" through the absolution of this curious contradictory thought. Before the radical crisis of values of Late Antiquity, it was quite logically assumed that only good could come from good, and that little good could be expected of the bad. Whereas in our modern world it is common to focus on this unrealistic alchemy of changing bad into good, neo-liberal avarice into social benefits, Stalinism advancing to classless paradise. I remark that even the most perceptive thinkers of 20th century totalitarianism make little or no parallel to the Christian Church. But the first totalitarian bureaucracy is quite obviously the Christian Church- trying to control what others think and feel, trying

to annihilate history and deform language, replacing concepts and denying reason. And the later experiences of Stalinism or modern neo-liberalism, for instance, only reveal the hideousness of this doctrine of apparently justified lying, sacrificialism, and exulting in unhappiness.

This I find the strange emptiness of the Christian faith, its basically "dis-enchanting" character, as it was called by Weber. They themselves know their lies and glosses best of all, and these certainly call into question the supposedly divine origin of their truth. The Christian faith itself is, of all the religions in the world, the most essentially a completely materialistic, bureaucratic, secular and mundane experience. In passing I think this goes a long way to explaining the horrors the monks subjected themselves to, which drove many of them insane. They are lacking actually any real poetical experience rooted in natural life, that of the sacred grove or the friendly spring, the countryside cavern or the majesty of the sea: they simply live cramped together with all comers in a bureaucratically funded and planned building. This is why many of the dreams and visions are inescapably delirious, and to my mind explains the great desire of Christians always to return to the primitive Church, to the Holy Land, etc. Obviously, they prefer the historic time of speaking in tongues and miracles (the free caprice of delusion) rather than organized insanity.

For practical and well-known examples along this theme, we might examine the difference between Jesus and Socrates, a common contrast which basically represents the Judeo-Christian tradition contrasted to philosophy. Not only in regards

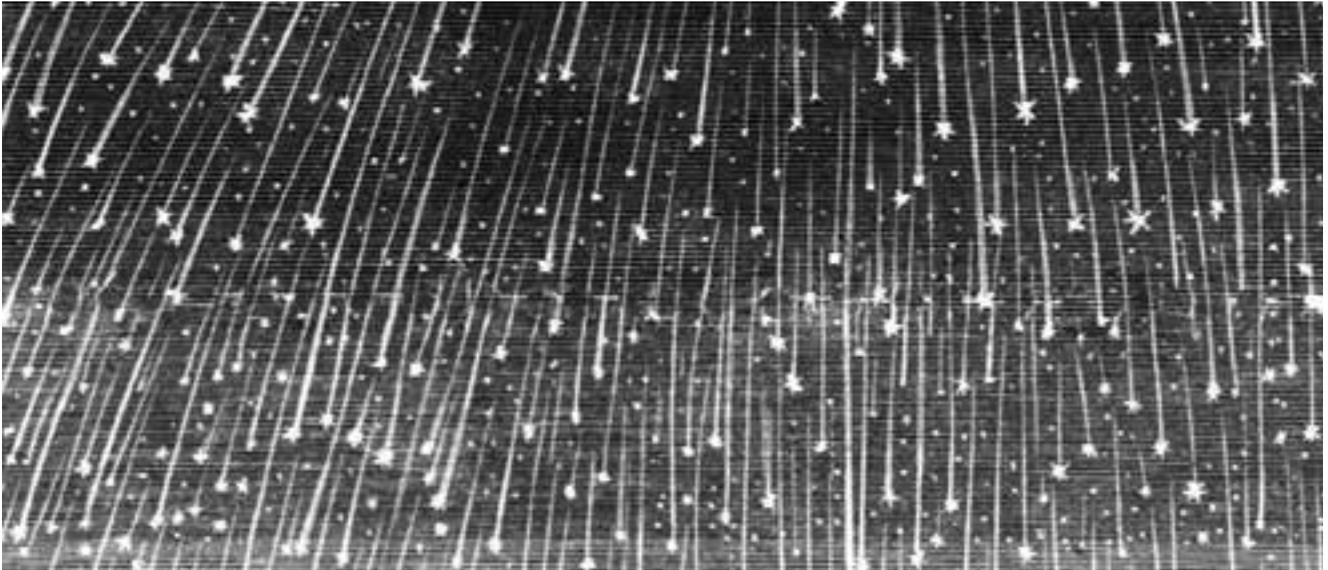
to their external culture is the comparison advantageous to Socrates, but also in the practical results of their teaching. Socrates inspires his pupils to go on their own path, and also to engage with and question their



Servetus burned by Calvin. The end of Protestant toleration.

society in the way they see fit. Out of his company come not only generally cultured men, but playwrights like Aristophanes and Agathon, adventurous figures like Xenophon, and also Plato, Antisthenes, and Aristippus, founders of various philosophic schools. Whereas Jesus, so far as we are presented with his picture in the gospels, presents his moral commonplaces (in some cases, contradictions) as the only possible divine wisdom, and in a real way asks his followers to cut themselves off from society. The one tradition is conducive to intellectual and personal ventures, or brings-out, the other radically denies them on the basis of a personal claim to be divine. Finally I think it of the utmost import to note that the philosophic tradition is also situated amongst friends, *the affinity group*, whereas the messianic view is a radical overriding of personal preferences and differences in light of a divine historical mission.

This again seems abstract but I contend you will find much the same behaviour in the differences of tradition. Christianity especially is focused not on bringing-out but on cutting-off, and as a result is basically sterile recitation having crippled its students. This all takes place on the basis of the abstract negation of the ego which can never really be done away with. I think this is also why the one tradition for us represents the necessary diversity of life and joy in it, the other death with its focus on tomb and catacomb; the one strives for contentment, the other for unhappiness. Accordingly the medieval monasteries don't engage with the world in the manner of the Academy or Lyceum even though they are forced in some way to relate to the world, but generally attempt to draw learning and spiritual cultivation away from their proper place. This makes them all the poorer, as intellectual culture evidently belongs to the society out of which it springs. The tragic result is that a defective, impoverished version of the world has been created; a copy that is supposed to be better than the original- just as Christian Rome is an enfeebled Rome and the Soviet Bloc a shabbier West. The philosophic teacher guides and explains but the monastic Father Superior, for example, is concerned with only passing down a tradition, a canon of approved wisdom, and blunting any efforts at independence. The one tradition is basically libertarian, in the sense of allowing others to do what they want, but the defective Christian one is radically tyrannical, taking as its basis a theocracy. The philosophic view teaches us to participate in the life of our times, however many shortcomings it has, the other teaches us to abandon the world, however many educative experiences might be awaiting us there. We can find this difference



of the messianic and philosophic view expressed in Hegel's maxim, "*Be not better than your time, but the best of your time*".

In fact these same problems of monotheism still continue in the realm of radical theory, where the one leader is dispensing absolute truth and any competition is not a less clear emanation of the same superessential truth but rather deliberate distortions motivated by ill-will. This is quite clear in the poor behaviour of Marx directed against Bakunin and other rivals, Bruno Bauer, Proudhon, Stirner, etc. I suppose this is rather abstruse—but this monotheistic culture of the one and total cause of all things continues in Marx, where this monotheistic god is renamed the economy. Of course, Marx is the most famous exponent of this view, but it continues in the whole past era, for example for Foucault this god is Power, for Deleuze it is Desire, or for Heidegger the metaphysical errors of the West, etc. From this basic structure arrive all the contradictions and problems of these various thinkers

and indeed the general problems of the passing age. But to return to Marx, Agamben, in his *Infancy and History*, laments the purely causal relationship of the economy and all other manifestations of human life, as this forces the theory of Marx into an all-too-obvious crudity. Nothing can save Marxism from a vulgar materialism, because materialism is an inherently vulgar intellectual position:

“. . .the fear of vulgarity betrays the vulgarity of fear, and so the suspicion of a vulgar interpretation is a suspicion whose formulator has reason to nurture most of all about himself. It is a fear of this kind which inspired in Engels his famous theory of the 'final instance', which is, it must be admitted, a masterpiece of hypocrisy."

Once we have conceived the economy as the cause of all things, we have simply replaced traditional Christian metaphysics, an idealized materiality (the belief in a divine man) with a materialized ideality (the belief in something called the economy). But we have not left the

sphere of tyrannical over-focus on the one determining cause. As anarchists, we have the more realistic vision of Bakunin:

"Likewise Marx completely ignores a most important element in the historic development of humanity, that is, the temperament and particular character of each race and each people, a temperament and character which are naturally themselves the product of a multitude of ethnographical, climatological, economic, as well as historic causes, but which, once produced, exercise, even apart from and independent of the economic conditions of each country, a considerable influence on its destinies, and even on the development of its economic forces."

One would no doubt recognize a superior analysis dealing with the multitude of various and interrelating causes in the real world, than the exclusive and ignorant Victorian prejudice in favour of the economic, which is just as quickly abandoned when it is attempted to apply it to reality (with the famous unhappy proviso, "in the final



instance. . .”). As before, the point is not to deny economic factors in life, but to remove them to their properly lower place. Actually the old philosophic view (and Bakunin’s) that all things are emanations of a specific spiritual and material condition of the time would be much more realistic and true. This would allow us to explain Marxism, for instance, as the productions of Marxism are in no way explicable through its own calculus (the theory of the proletariat is formed by Marx and Engels, a German intellectual and a German capitalist). Rather, *Marxism embodied this world-spirit of the past age*, it was itself the product of a specific historical milieu and meaning. But with an unreflective view that the economy causes all things we cannot really explain much (for example art or philosophy or elective affinities) and we cannot explain how this economic view itself became adopted with such religious (not at all rational) fervour. Only if we realize the ground out of which this sprung, Protestantism for the economy, and Hegelianism for the historical view, do we come some way to explaining it.

For a brief digression worth observing: Marxism did to the whole world what Protestantism did to the Catholic World. It split the world by proposing a slightly more radical version of the prevailing religion. In truth, Marx was the “Luther of political economy”, or perhaps more appropriately the Calvin, because to the economic Liberal religion of the 19th century he proposed a different interpretation, always situated within the lines of a critique of political economy, a reform of economic projects. Just as a Catholicism become worldly was critiqued by Protestantism, so a Protestantism become worldly (e.g. secularized as what we call capitalism) was critiqued by Marxism. But this is not a pointless repetition: just as the Protestant state unwittingly destroyed the halo of Christianity, so too largely-Marxist revolution has unwittingly destroyed the halo of the state. This leads us to the world of today, where the global states seem little more than decomposing and fractious bands of robbers, and this depiction runs the whole gamut, from Marxist China to the USA, ISIS to austerity Europe.

If we shift back to more recent examples, we find this same problematic continued in official Marxism and its various periodicals, this lack of critical independence which is too obvious to belabour further. In practice this manifests in the well-known critique of any radical thought or event not pre-approved by the party bureaucracy. Even such contemporary and more libertarian characters as Breton and Debord present themselves in this rabbinical or monastic light, because rivals in thought become not less clear versions of a moment in time but dishonest plagiarists, sell-outs or lackwits. The chief theorist is always imposing his view as the collective view but this is a confused situation as everyone always has their own opinion, or they have renounced their own opinion, which is a far from ideal intellectual state. And collaborative intellectual efforts I find partially misguided, since thought is inherently *mon-archic*, in the sense of its singularity. All thinkers are isolated figures, while the groups all follow the same development, as the initial dynamic energy is reduced to

static tutelage. Collaborators with independence are slowly dispensed with in ritualized purges, and at the end repeated stale orthodoxy has replaced the creative ferment that is necessary in all intellectual endeavours. Historical insights have ossified into eternal truths, and all non-adherents to the theory have been denounced as children of darkness. At the end, most tellingly in Situationism, the review dissolves into its chief theorist, Debord. But how much more logical to have unique thoughts in an isolated medium, and collective thoughts in a collective one! Finally, this raises

the question of the proper medium of the book for the highest level of thought, and thought encapsulated in a necessarily-reduced popular form. Wouldn't a truly sensible person either dispense with the fiction of collective participation, in which case the review becomes a cult or else everyone bitterly goes their own way (which are common developments in today's world)? Or better, would they not allow the collective participation to be a part of life itself, as the banter of a group of friends, the affinity group rendered in intellectual expression?

Where does this lead us, practically, in today's world? And why is *The Barbarian* precisely so strange and so unique, with its discordant voices and multifarious intellectual projects and interests? It's nothing more than the tumultuous old spirit of the forum, the ἀγορά, coming back into the world in theoretical form.

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