Love Your Enemy: Theology, Identity and Antagonism

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In the beginning, God created the world. According to classical Christian theology, God did not need to create the world. God was not bored or lonely. God did not have anything to learn, or any undeveloped capacities that could take shape along with God's formation of the earth. God did not need anything that God did not already possess within Godself. God was not changed by the act of creation, was not diminished, nor enhanced, nor otherwise altered. The answer that Christians have traditionally given to the question, 'why did God create the world?' is essentially, because God chose to do so—which is to say, for no reason at all. God created not by necessity but out of freedom, a freedom which would have been no less real had God chosen not to create.

Sometimes, as the philosopher Giorgio Agamben points out, theologians would prefer to avoid the question of God's free act of creation rather than struggle too much with how to make sense out of this answer. In response to the question, 'What was God doing before He made heaven

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and earth? … Why did he not continue to do nothing forever as He did before', Augustine "mentions the ironic reply that in truth betrays incredible embarrassment: 'He was getting hell ready for people who pry too deep'. Eleven centuries later, as a testimony to the persistence of the problem, Luther takes it up again in the following form: 'He sat in the forest, cutting rods to beat those who ask impertinent questions.'"[1] For all their ironic tone, however, neither Luther nor Augustine was joking: for both, the fate of those who refused to simply accept that God could do whatever God wanted, for whatever reason God chose so to do was eternal punishment in hell.

It is interesting—and, curiously, little remarked upon—that the classical theological assertion of the absolute contingency of creation—its needlessness, its freedom, and its inexplicability—is that this divine act of creation, of dividing between light and dark, earth and sea, male and female 'just because' is precisely paralleled by the inexplicable moment of decision which constituted the fall of Satan and introduced sin, evil, and death into the world. Why did Lucifer reject God? There was neither need nor reason for Lucifer to do so. God was already offering everything that Lucifer could possibly desire or need. In fact, Lucifer was created with desires and capacities that could only be perfectly satisfied or expressed within the proper ordering of the universe that God had made. The classical solution to the problem of Satan's fall is the doctrine of evil as privation—an inexplicable lack or absence of goodness that cannot be explained or justified. Yet this lack that brings evil into the world is structurally homologous to the excess by which God creates the world: a break in the circle of cause and effect, an inexplicable, unjustifiable moment of decision. God made the world because God made the world; Satan rejected God because Satan rejected God. Both are 'without a why.'

This structural homology occurs because both the problem of creation and the problem of evil are problems of freedom.[2] If we—or God—are to be truly free, then the decisions we make cannot be reduced to our reasons for making them. If I decide to eat an apple solely because I am hungry and there is an apple in my kitchen, then this decision is not truly free. If my eating of an apple is necessitated by the twin facts of my hunger and the presence of an apple in my kitchen then this outcome is inevitable, predictable, determined. To be free there must be something in excess of the mere calculation of pros and cons, something more than the mechanical unfolding of cause and effect such that even given every fact about me,

my hunger, and the apple in my kitchen it is still possible that I might decide to do something else instead.

One name for this freedom is sovereignty. For the Nazi jurist and political theologian Carl Schmitt, the essence of sovereignty is this inexplicable, unjustifiable decision to act in excess of law and reason. Someone has to be the first to make a law and someone has decide when the law is to be suspended. For Schmitt, too, the function of this sovereign power is political, which for Schmitt means that it has essentially to do with the division of human beings into friends and enemies.

For Schmitt this distinction into friends and enemies is specifically not a moral distinctio. "The political enemy", he writes, "need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need not appear as an economic competitor … but he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger."[3] This understanding of sovereignty is deeply Calvinist insofar as it relies on a logic of double predestination. The sovereign decides on the division of the world into friend and enemy on the basis of nothing but that decision. Enemies are not enemies because of good or bad things they have done, and even their rebellious actions may still prove to be useful within the sovereign's providential, economic management of the world. Where Schmitt diverges from Calvin is in his affirmation of the proper legitimacy of more than one site of sovereignty. In seeking to separate the political from the ethical Schmitt is attempting, in part, to stave off the possibility of the absolute desire for annihilation which can result from the attempt to conflate the political division between friend and enemy with the moral judgment between good and evil. Schmitt's example of the disasters that may follow from this conflation is the endless violence unleashed in the twentieth century by wars in the name of absolute moral principles such as 'democracy', 'human rights' and 'freedom'. But we can also see in the background the wars that erupted across Europe in the wake of the Reformation, and which played a central role in the eventual separation of church and state (such as it is) and, crucially, the transition from the absolute and single sovereignty of medieval Christian empire to the multiple sovereignties of the modern European system of nation-states.

For all that Europeans like to extol the virtues of religious tolerance, however, it is difficult to argue that the settlement that emerged in the wake of the wars of religion was any less violent than what preceded it. What changed was not so much the violence of medieval sovereign power as its locus. Peace emerged between European nations precisely as the genocidal violence of colonialism and racial chattel slavery began. The

distinction between friend and enemy came to be drawn less centrally at the line that distinguished Christians from non-Christians than at the line that distinguished white from non-white, persons from non-persons, and civilized from savage. This inability to tell the difference between the lessening of violence and its movement from one place in the social order to another is perhaps one way we can make sense of Schmitt's alliance with fascism; in which, as Adam Kotsko puts it, "desperation to stave off the worst at any cost turned out to be the path toward the very worst."[4]

The structure of this sovereign decision to draw a line between friend and enemy goes back—at least—to the very origins of Christianity: to the border between orthodoxy and heresy which, as Daniel Boyarin argues, brought Christianity into being. For Boyarin, Paul's claim that "there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free"—so appealing to those of us who desire a form of Christianity that overcomes unjust social divisions—announces not the end of division but the supersession of multiple existing divisions by one single division: the division between Christian and non-Christian. Christianity, Boyarin argues, brought into being not just a new religion but a new understanding of religion as such. To become a Christian was to be transformed, to gain a new kind of identity that was not just an expression of where you were born, the language you spoke, or the networks of family and culture to which you belonged. To become a Christian was to convert into a new community defined not by language, ritual, culture, history, ethnicity, but by belief: by faith in Jesus Christ. In this way, the difference between orthodoxy (right belief) and heresy (wrong belief) came to take a central place in the construction of Christianity. If Christianity was defined by the difference between right belief and wrong belief, then the distinction between believing rightly and believing wrongly was not the distinction between being a good Christian or a bad Christian, but the difference between Christians and non-Christians; the difference between those who belonged to the new people of God begun in Jesus and those who did not, the distinction between those who were friends, sons, and slaves of God, and those who were not; the distinction between friends and enemies.[5]

This fundamental distinction which brings Christianity into being as such is, according to Denise Kimber Buell, at the heart of early Christian universalism and the "ethnic reasoning" which accompanied it. Early Christian universalism, Buell argues, consisted of three core claims: that everyone could become a Christian; that everyone should become a Christian; and that "Christianity" was one thing, "a unified set of beliefs

and practices."[6] Christian universalism relies both on the fantasy of its own wholeness—the illusory image of Christianity itself as simple and complete, unfractured by dissent—and on the fantasy of a world made whole by bringing everyone into Christianity so that the distinction between the inside and the outside of Christianity disappears. It is the desire for wholeness as it gives rise to these three components of universalism which brings forth the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy which is so important to Boyarin. It is this distinction in turn which ultimately undergirds the distinction between friend and enemy which for Schmitt is the essence of the political. A Christianity which sees itself as one thing into which everyone can and should be brought is a Christianity which cannot reckon with the possibility or the reality of internal disagreement and dissent, and which cannot see the failure to convert as an indication of anything other than an indication of corruption. It is this fantasy of wholeness, of oneness, which has tended to make Christianity so dangerous to both internal dissenters and external others, and which has rendered it so unable to reckon with the conflicts, disagreements and inconsistencies that run throughout its institutions, texts, and practices.

As I have argued elsewhere, it is also this fantasy of wholeness that suggests the usefulness of psychoanalysis for understanding Christianity and thinking about how we might relate differently to these fractures, inconsistencies and multiplicities that make up its actually existing history.[7] For Lacan, the psychoanalytic homologue of the problem of creation—how multiplicity emerges from unity—is the birth of the subject. The central problematic of Lacanian psychoanalysis is the question of how we might let go of the fantasy of oneness and wholeness in order to come to terms with the fact of our own incompleteness—the fractures that divide us from ourselves and from those around us even as they bring us into being. In contrast to classical theology, Lacan insists on the homology of creation and fall. We can never return to the Eden of perfect union from which we were eternally cast out by the cutting of the umbilical cord. To return to oneness would be to die—to cease to exist—because it is only by difference that we exist at all. To undo the separation of light from darkness, earth from land, day from night would be to unmake us.[8]

We want to be one. We think that oneness is necessarily implied by core Christian doctrines, if we are speaking theologically; or we long for the oneness whose lack seems to lie at the heart of our dissatisfactions, if we are speaking psychoanalytically. But we are not one. Christians disagree with one another; non-Christians refuse to convert into Christianity; our

hearts are restless and we cannot find the happy ending promised to us by romantic comedies; or, worse, we get the happy ending only to find that it does not satisfy us. For Lacan, we have four options for reckoning with this incompleteness and inconsistency, four ways that we can explain and relate to these imperfections and conflicts: the master's discourse, the university discourse, the hysteric's discourse and the analyst's discourse. I will briefly run through these in turn, with an eye to how we might see them as different ways for Christians to relate to the reality of dissent and disagreement, before returning to the problem of politics.

The Master's discourse is the discourse of unquestionable authority; the discourse of strong leaders and traditional values. It says that the solution to what ails us is a reaffirmation of authority (biblical, encyclical, or political), and a return to hierarchies of race, gender, class, or church governance. It tends to see dissent as a threat, and to use whatever means are necessary to silence and exclude dissenters, even as the lack of space for difference and disagreement intensifies the pleasures of transgression, producing the forms of hypocrisy that are so familiar now as to be clichés—the charismatic church leader who preaches marriage whilst carrying on affairs; the politician who rails against gay marriage whilst paying for male escorts; or the pious priest who abuses his parishioners. For Lacan, what is crucial here is to understand the role that *enjoyment* plays in sustaining this discourse. What keeps people attached to a model so obviously built on repression and hypocrisy are the pleasures of hating those who are excluded by this discourse's legalistic order and the transgressive pleasures of breaking the law.

The second of Lacan's four discourses is the University discourse, which says that the solution to our conflicts—the way to resolve our disagreements—is simply to produce more knowledge. If we just write another report, create another policy or procedure, conduct more research, run more training sessions, track more data, or add another layer of paperwork then we will arrive at a resolution. This is the discourse of bureaucracy, of 'equality and diversity' committees, and of 'post–political' pragmatic government. It functions both to evade the real questions and conflicts that characterize institutions and also to disempower and deflate any attempts to confront these real problems by ensuring that people are kept so bored and alienated by endless busy-work that they become cynical and disengaged.

The next of Lacan's discourse is the hysteric's discourse, the discourse of protest, of complaint. For Lacan, this is where real change, real

confrontation with conflict, can begin. But there is a danger: we can get stuck here. The hysteric's discourse can function not as a way to confront conflict and antagonism in order to transform them, but as a way to reaffirm our own sense of goodness within a world that is built on violence. Protest, resistance and critique are often addressed to power, and can function to uphold power precisely by this address. To write a letter to a member of parliament, to criticize the gendered language of an official theological document, to join a union, can be ways not to struggle for the end of a world built on violence but to make ourselves feel better about our participation in this world, or to demand that the world be slightly improved so that we can continue to affirm its legitimacy. The hysteric's discourse can function not to challenge the violent, hypocritical discourse of the Master but to uphold it. Responding to the demands of protestors can function not to undermine the violent rule of the Master but to reinvigorate it. To demand the jubilee forgiveness of some part of the debts owed by the Global South to the Global North can function to legitimate the creditors, who seem generous even as they continue to extract wealth from those nations. To critique the racist or patriarchal theology of the church can function to relegitimize a racist and patriarchal church by teaching it how to speak differently even as its structures of power remain substantially unchanged. The hysteric's discourse, Lacan says, continues to be invested in the fantasy of wholeness, the idea that we can arrive at a place where difference and disagreement are left behind. Only if we can move beyond the hysteric's discourse can we continue the difficult, precarious work of working through the conflicts and disagreements that the hysteric's discourse identifies.

This brings us to the analyst's discourse. For Lacan, the attempt to relate to ourselves and those around us according to the analyst's discourse is the work of love. Here we embark upon the difficult and painstaking task of letting go of the fantasy of wholeness, of completion, and facing up instead to the incompleteness and imperfection that characterize the people and the institutions we belong to. One aspect of this work is letting go of the desire for something or someone else to play the role of making us whole and completing us so that we become able to allow those around us to exist in their own right, rather than simply as resources for making us happy and meeting our needs. Another aspect is letting go of the need for someone or something outside of us to act as the guarantee that the decisions we are making and the risks we are taking as we do so are correct. We cannot absolve ourselves of the responsibility for what we

do and how we live by relying on the authority of a church, an institution, a theological position, a psychoanalyst, or a leader. We have to let go of the fantasy of perfection, and work instead to confront the complicated, messy, ambiguous and imperfect situations that we find ourselves in. This difficult work—which Slavoj Žižek describes as the work of *agape*—might be slow, precarious and painful, but it also offers the possibility of coming to know the world around us in ways that are not possible when we reduce everything to its role in our fantasy of perfection. This work of love also brings with it its own kinds of pleasures and enjoyments—the possibility of new creation, of transformation, and of life liberated from the tyrannical, impossible desire for completeness. If we can let go of our investment in the fantasy of a systematic theology in which every piece slots neatly into place; in which the world can be neatly divided into good and bad, night and day, friend and enemy, then perhaps we can begin to enjoy our conflicts, disagreements and contradictions.

To let go of the fantasy of a single, unified Christianity, however, demands also that we let go of the clear line that distinguishes Christian from not-Christian. The line of development I have traced from the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy (which Boyarin sees as central to Christianity's early constitution) to the distinction between friend and enemy (which, for Schmitt, determines contemporary politics) makes up a central strand of the historical development of actually existing Christianity. But to claim that there is no single coherent thing called Christianity is also to affirm that Christianity's possibilities cannot be exhausted by what Christianity has so far been and done in the world, or by the traditions and structures that have come to predominate in actually existing Christianity. As Daniel Colucciello Barber argues, there is a connection between the "thesis that Christianity is inconsistent from the beginning" and the thesis that "the choice between imagining oneself as either within or without Christianity is a false one."[9] This is not, for Barber, to say that there is no difference between the Christian and the non-Christian, but to refuse the configuration of this division as the division between friend of God and enemy of God. Instead, Barber argues, we might imagine "the possibility of traditions that would be able to take seriously their groundlessness— that is, to see their integrity and their groundlessness in a non-competitive manner."

What classically distinguishes God's act of creation from the generativity of the created world is precisely its groundlessness—its *ex nihilo* character. But groundless decision is not in itself sovereignty. What constitutes

sovereignty is decision plus the kind of universalism that Buell locates in early Christian understandings of Christian identity: decision plus judgment, the idea that what is divided is not day from night or earth from sea but sheep from goats, Christians from non-Christians, saved from unsaved, friends from enemies. Theology according to the analyst's discourse, I am suggesting, might be theology without heresiology; theology without enemies; theology without judgment.

Here though, we run into a problem, which in Schmittian terms is the problem of the inability of liberalism to resist fascism. It is all very well to desire the abolition of the political and to refuse the division of the world into friends and enemies. But we cannot simply opt out of the political. As Schmitt puts it, liberalism's attempt to "transform the enemy into … a debating adversary" will always fail as long as the enemy refuses to accept these new terms of struggle—and a debating team will never stand much of a chance against an army.[10]

The world that Christian theology has helped to create is a world founded on political divisions—not just the national divisions that Schmitt describes but, as Thomas Lynch argues in his recent *Apocalyptic Political Theology: Hegel, Taubes and Malabou*, the antagonisms of nature, capital, gender and race.[11] Here 'antagonism' designates a specifically political division, which is organized as the division between friend and enemy, a division which works at the level of collective human identity rather than at the level of the individual. Whatever the quality of individual relationships between men and women their relations are inescapably structured by the fact that, at the level of the political, they confront one another as antagonists. We do not create *ex nihilo*. To recognize that there was nothing necessary about the production of a world along these lines, to hold that it could be made differently does not mean that we can pretend that it is other than it is.

To decide in a world whose existence precedes ours is always, inescapably, an act of refusal. The only act of creation available to Lucifer, brought into being within an economy of cause and effect, of creation and redemption, was to say no. Something like this refusal is the subject of Walter Benjamin's short essay, 'Critique of Violence', which takes as its focus the question of the relationship between the sovereign decision that founds the law, which Benjamin describes as "mythic violence"; the political violence which maintains it; and the absolute refusal of the world thus made and maintained, which for Benjamin is "divine violence".[12] The exemplary form of this divine violence, for Benjamin, is what he calls "the proletarian

general strike"—not an armed uprising or revolution, not the demand for better treatment within a world founded on political violence, but an absolute refusal, "pure means", which "sets itself the sole task of destroying state power."[13] There is no positive demand made in and by this divine violence, because it does not set out to create a new political settlement, but to destroy the political as such. For Benjamin it is nonviolent not because it does not involve killing or war but because it seeks to destroy a world founded on coercion, antagonism, and sovereignty. To refuse the fantasy of wholeness, then, brings us into conflict with the world; it demands a kind of apocalyptic commitment to refusing the proper authority of the structures of violence which are brought forth by sovereignty. What this demands of us, I think, is a commitment to the abolition not of difference but of borders—those distinctions drawn up and maintained by violence which, as Schmitt argues, lie at the heart of the law and which, as Boyarin notes, have characterized Christianity's attempts to distinguish itself from those outside of it.

In the book of Genesis, the first thing we learn after Adam and Eve are cast out of the garden of Eden is the story of their sons, Cain and Abel. The narrative is a strange one. God accepts the bloody sacrifice of the shepherd, Abel, and rejects the offering of fruit from Cain, the tiller of the land. Rejected, Cain murders Abel in a rage. His punishment is to be driven from the earth, a fugitive and a wanderer—condemned, it seems, to precisely the nomadic life led by his favored brother. Terrified of losing the security of his settled agricultural life, Cain flees from the presence of the Lord only to settle down elsewhere, east of Eden. This, Schmitt writes, "is how the history of humanity begins. Thus appears the father of all things"—war.[14]

In *The Nomos of the Earth*, Schmitt writes that the earth becomes the mother of the law in three ways: because human labor brings forth from the earth just compensation for that labor; because "soil that is cleared and worked by human hands, manifests firm lines" and "definite divisions"; because "the solid ground of the earth is delineated by fences, enclosures" and "boundaries", by which "forms of ownership and … forms of power and domination, became visible."[15] Perhaps what Cain was offered was not just a curse but a blessing, the possibility of divine violence in Benjamin's sense: the capacity to begin again, create anew without the violence of property, the law, and borders; for no reason, without why, without guarantee: decision without sovereignty.

Notes

1. Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 161.
2. As I discuss at greater length in Marika Rose, *A Theology of Failure: Žižek Against Christian Innocence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).
3. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 26.
4. Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 28.
5. Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 1–33.
6. Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race?: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 140.
7. See Rose, *Theology of Failure*.
8. Lurking in the background of Lacan's assertion is another problem which theologians have been loath to confront—the problem of what will happen to all of us once the promised redemption of all things has taken place, the problem whose proper systematic theological framing goes something like, 'Why does heaven sound so boring?' While I don't have much space to talk about this question here, it is worth briefly noting that, like the problematic structural homology between creation and fall, it is a problem that arises from Christianity's tendency to conflate difference with disunity.
9. Daniel Colucciello Barber, *On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion and Secularity* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 127.
10. Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 28.
11. Thomas Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology: Hegel, Taubes and Malabou* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).
12. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Selected Writings, Volume 11913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 236–252.
13. Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 246.
14. A letter of Schmitt's, written from prison in 1947, translated and quoted in Jean Claude Monot, "Hostility, Politics, Brotherhood: Abel and Cain as Seen by Carl Schmitt and Jacques Derrida" in Sanja Bahu and Dušan Radunović (eds), Language, Ideology, and the Human: New Interventions (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012). 95.
15. Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press, 2006), 42.